



The PBS documentary, *Freedom Riders*, follows the path of young civil rights activists in their struggle to desegregate the South. The young people involved in this interstate bus journey risked their lives to bring about justice and equality in the depths of the Jim Crow South. Watch the film (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>) and answer the questions for a deeper understanding of this courageous event. Answers must be in complete sentences. **40 Points Extra Credit.**

Who were the Freedom Riders?

1. As you watch, listen to the stories of the Freedom Riders. Why did they join the cause? What qualities do they share?
2. Why do you think James Farmer wanted to make sure that the Freedom Riders who were selected were a diverse group?
3. How does Joan Mulholland explain why she joined the Freedom Riders? Why do you think she felt like it was particularly important for her, as a white southerner, to join the cause?

Race, Custom, and the Law

4. What role did segregation play in maintaining the racial order of the South?
5. Based on the film, how do you think ideas about race shaped the way people lived their lives in the 1960s?
6. Why did the activists decide to focus their desegregation efforts on interstate buses? Why were buses important? What did they represent? How would you explain why interstate buses were still not desegregated after two Supreme Court rulings calling for it?

Nonviolence

7. How would you describe the philosophy of nonviolence? What do you think the advocates of nonviolence believe about human behavior? What conditions do you think are necessary for a strategy of nonviolent action to have an impact?
8. Henry David Thoreau believed there are times for civil disobedience – when behaving justly requires people to break the law. James Farmer says the Freedom Rides were “not civil disobedience, really, because we would be merely doing what the Supreme Court said we had a right to do.” Do you think this action was an instance of civil disobedience? Why or why not?

The Media and the Freedom Rides

9. What role did nonviolent activists hope the media would play in the freedom movement? To what extent were they successful in using the media spotlight during the Freedom Rides? Do you think this protest would have been as successful before the popularity of television? Why or why not?
10. How did the Freedom Riders try to shape the story that the press would tell about their efforts? In the film, how did the Freedom Riders explain their story to the press?
11. How do you explain the impact of the images from Anniston and Birmingham on the American public? Why do you think the Kennedy administration was concerned about the use of those same images abroad?

Making Choices

12. Despite warnings both from family members and other civil rights supporters, the Freedom Riders decided to go ahead with their journey. How do you explain their decision to carry out their plans despite the very real danger?
13. How does H. Bryant Ayers, publisher of the *Anniston Star*, explain why otherwise law-abiding citizens participated in the violence against the activists? What factors do you think had the greatest effect on the way people responded to the Riders?
14. What can we learn from Janie Forsyth McKinney’s story? Why do you think she was able, at 12 years old, to reach out to help the Freedom Riders? How was her age a blessing in disguise?
15. What do you think the Birmingham police chief hoped to accomplish by allowing the KKK time to attack the Riders? Do you think he was successful? Why or why not?
16. Why did Diane Nash and John Lewis feel it was so important to continue the Freedom Rides after the riots in Anniston and Birmingham?

Politics of Civil Rights

17. What political risks did the civil rights movement present for the Kennedy administration? How did civil rights activists hope to change the Kennedy’s political calculations?
18. Why do you think the Kennedy administration preferred to delay the Freedom Rides rather than offer direct support? What do you think changed the leaders’ minds? What do you think the Kennedys learned from their experience with the Freedom Riders?

Legacy of the Freedom Riders

19. How do you assess the impact of the Freedom Rides? How do people in the film describe the impact that this campaign had on them personally and on the country as a whole?
20. What do you see as the civil rights struggles of today? How might these issues be addressed? What roles might the courts, individuals, and groups play? To what extent is the use of nonviolence a useful way to address today’s challenges?