

Welcome

If you're reading this guide, it's probably because you are (1) new to actions that have a high likelihood of police brutality, or (2) you want to support someone in your life who is new to such actions, or (3) you are my friend. Whatever brought you to this corner of the internet, I'm so glad you're here.

My goal is to cultivate an "I'm so glad you're here!" message rather than a "you're late to the party" message. This doc started out as an email to a friend who wanted to support her daughter who's just getting started, and it has blossomed into a longer project because lots of friends said they really needed something like this. If you really need something like this, I'm genuinely thrilled to connect with you here.

I've been organizing with social justice movements for 10ish years and I have been part of actions where police and protesters behaved in a huge range of ways. I want to share what I've learned in the most accessible format I can. If I can do better at this goal, I hope you'll tell me.

That being said, this is in no way definitive, authoritative, or the final word on how to protest.

There's no one, right way to take action.

There's no litmus test that I can apply to tell you what to do - and even if I could, I wouldn't!

And I'm damn not here to say people are doing it wrong! (Yes, that includes so-called rioters).

But what I can offer are:

- *My stories and experiences*
- *Questions you can ask yourself and your pals*
- *Tips and resources that have been helpful/transformational for me*

Here's my high level advice, my TL;DR so to speak...

1. **Join a group that you trust.** *One-off actions, coalitions, temporary action pods, etc are good, too, but my experience is that nothing compares with the impact and sustainability of joining a long term group and building deep relationships there*
2. **Always go to actions with friends - and don't get separated!**
3. **Be humble, be curious, don't be a hero.**
4. **Plan for the long haul.**

Thank you to my mentors, teachers, and social justice ancestors who have brought us to this moment, many of whom are Black, im/migrant, Jewish, indigenous, trans*, and/or otherwise targeted by state violence. The success of this document is a testament to their generosity; the oversights are my responsibility alone.

A note on nomenclature and my bias

I wasn't sure what to call this guide or how to describe the kinds of protests I'm writing about here. After a couple of drafts, I settled on **"actions with a high likelihood of police brutality."** It's not the most elegant thing ever, but I think it conveys what I'm going for.

Later in this guide, I'm going to compare actions with a **high** likelihood of police brutality with actions that have a **low** likelihood of police brutality. This binary is built on faulty assumptions, like all binaries are. Especially because likelihood of violence has as much to do with police attitude as bias, racism, and bad training.

So, I'm going to lay my cards on the table...

The single best explanation/predictor of police brutality is - simply - police, the toxic culture that supports their cruelty, seemingly legal impunity, and stark, unconscionable racism.

State violence and police aggression are not protesters' fault, full stop.

Police use excessive force in Black, Latinx, im/migrant and Native communities and other communities of color on a daily basis. Protests or no protests.

Contemporary police are literally the continuation of slave patrols. ([This](#) is among the best publicly available and substantiated articles that I could find tying the history of police forces to the present political moment). Another *highly* recommended resource is [Enough is Enough: A 150 year performance review of the Minneapolis Police Department](#) by mpd150. (Thank you to my twin sister for sharing).

There is an absolute imbalance in weapons, violence, and power between police and protesters. If protesters engage in property destruction, or even throw things at police, there is no excuse or justification to warrant rubber bullets, tear gas, LRADs, pepper spray, and a host of weapons that police use and are using.

Police-escalated violence is a distraction from social justice demands.

If you are accustomed to protesting at actions with a low likelihood of police brutality, this will feel and be very different. There will be chaos and beauty and unfettered expressions of rage. There will be a diversity of tactics. You might not agree with everything. I encourage you to make choices that are right for you without condemning the choices other people make. We'll get more into that later.

A story

In 2012, I schlepped my tush from my suburban college campus in Philadelphia's outskirts to Manhattan to join in May Day protests with tens of thousands of people. Earlier that year, I had a transformative experience of staying up all night at a spontaneous protest with Occupy Philadelphia. I made a zine about it, which unfortunately isn't available online.

I didn't really have a lot of friends in NYC or a clear plan, so I decided to meet up with my mentor J, who said there was a good protest in Union Square. When I arrived, everyone was wearing black, some people had bandanas, and most were rushing around. I assumed that they were busy and hip and ~experienced~ unlike me, a lost puppy. As for me, I was wearing a floor length stretchy yellow skirt. I stuck out like a sore, um, sunflower. I was shocked when protesters started throwing trashcans and running in every direction, and police chased after them with motorcycles. Caught up in the crowd, and still looking for my friend J, I started running, too. After a while, I ducked away and caught my breath in a grocery store.

By that point in my life, I had planned and shown up at LOTS of protests, from big marches to blockades to union picket lines to smaller, disruptive actions and even civil disobedience. This wasn't only outside of my comfort zone, but also *outside of my imagination* of what a protest could be like. I think there are people in my communities who are experiencing this now!

Fast forward to today: **I have a sincere appreciation for types of actions and the ways that multiple theories of change complement each other in a healthy social justice movement ecosystem.**

I have trusted mentors, communities, and social media sources to learn about important actions, and personal practices that help me prepare for unpredictable scenarios. That's what I want to help you develop, too!

My action checklist

- A buddy
- Phone and charged extra battery pack and cord (*depending on risk, I sometimes turn off location services on my phone*)
- Water bottle (*I also like these [gatorade powder sticks](#), especially in the summer*)
- Winter: hand/foot warmers (*this product/pack size works well for me*)
- Ziplock bag for phone in case it rains. Some people like to stash rain ponchos, but usually I just expect to get wet.
- Bandana (different from face mask) - for sweat or teargas, plus just comes in handy
- Medical documentation (like those bracelets - depending on if you have certain conditions) and 1-2 doses of prescription medication (in case I'm out longer than I thought or I can't get home)
- Photo ID (*some people do not carry ID in solidarity with undocumented people - that's a choice you should make for yourself*)
- Sunglasses / baseball cap / sunscreen
- Menstrual supplies (optional)
- Granola bars, apples, or easy, nutritious snacks
- Hair ties (if you have long hair)
- Ear plugs (shit can get LOUD)
- Cough drops (take care of your voice!)
- If you can wear glasses instead of contacts, do it
- If you keep a multitool or a Swiss army knife in your backpack, plan to leave it at home
- Also, leave your valuable jewelry at home
- A trusty protest sign with a simple, positive message (for example, Black Lives Matter!)
- Paint marker (I like [this kind](#)) for making quick signs
- A few dollars in quarters (*some people recommend bringing quarters in case you are arrested and you need to use a pay phone to call family; also useful for taking public transit home if your phone dies*), \$40 or so in cash is helpful if you have it.
- A jail support hotline (different cities/groups have different numbers) - usually I write it on my arm with a pen.
 - Philadelphia: Up Against the Law Legal Collective (learn more [here](#)); hotline is (484) 758-0388
 - Philadelphia: To report police misconduct, call the District Attorney's Special Investigations Unit (215) 686-9608
- Tell someone who's home that you're at a protest. Then tell them that you got home safe and sound. Make a plan for what they should do if they don't hear from you
- Something to ground yourself (*a family picture, a stone, a soft piece of fabric, a ritual object*)

Protest buddy

I ALWAYS go to protests with a buddy. There are so many reasons for this, like (1) keeping me safe (2) spending time together (3) bringing new people into the movement with a more experienced person (4) making decisions together (5) debriefing together etc !

Heads up - some protests are not organized in public channels (like facebook/twitter) for good reasons - so, if you're attending one like that, you shouldn't use those channels to invite your friends. Most people use an app called Signal for secure messaging.

Before you go, I recommend talking with your friend about action risks and boundaries.

Here are some prompts that you can use as a starting point **(thank you to my friend Lina for generously contributing to this section)**

- **What are your schedule parameters?** *(I know I have to be home by ...)*
- **What do we know about the protest organizers? How did we find out about the action?**
- **Do we trust those groups?** *If not, why not? Is it reasonable to push beyond your comfort zone in this situation?*
- **What are you afraid of?** *(These are some of my fears/concerns...)*
- **How can I tell if you are at your limit?** *(This is how you can tell if I am at my limit...)*
- **What scenarios would require that we leave immediately?** *(My boundaries are ...)*
- **Who should I contact if you get hurt or arrested?** *(Here is the phone number for... and they know that I am attending a protest/action today)*
- **If you get arrested, do you want me to organize/post bail?** *(This is a deeply personal decision, best to be worked out ahead of time)*
- **Do you have medical conditions that I might need to know about?**
- **Let's try to arrive and leave together.**
- **Talk through some specific scenarios and think about your bodies, for example:**
 - How close do you want to be to police?
 - How quickly are you comfortable moving?
 - *Example: "If the crowd begins to run, it is important to me to breathe first; I would prefer to walk whenever possible, how does that sound to you?"*
- **How would you like to make decisions together in the moment when things change?**
- **What do you think we can offer to this particular crowd, what experience or knowledge do you have about how crowds move, about bodies that could be helpful? How do you want to step up/step back physically in this group in different scenarios?**

Do everything possible to avoid getting separated from your buddy!

Action roles

My organizing home is the Earth Quaker Action Team. We plan a [LOT of actions](#) and we like to plan them with very specific roles.

Roles you might encounter at an EQAT action

or another org that likes to have centrally planned actions

(lower likelihood of police brutality - in my experience, police like hierarchical, predictable groups... surprising, right?)

Role	Description
Action lead	Keeps the group coordinated, on schedule, and makes quick strategic decisions if necessary
Song/chant leader	Megaphone, here I come!
Spiritual anchor	Tends to the emotional/spiritual needs of the group, including shifting in tone and comforting people who may be distressed
Marshalls	Look out for safety issues and safely get the group from Point A to Point B. Also, minimize interactions with police.
Media liaison	Gives quotes to journalists.
Police/security liaison	Negotiates with police and security.
Flyer-ers	Hand out info/engage passersby/explain the action.
Welcomer	Ask protesters to sign in (optional) or just greet them.
Inside team(s)	Usually organized ahead of time to complete a higher-risk aspect of the action (like delivering a petition or having a sit-in)
Outside team(s)	Usually lower-risk groups that do singing/chanting/other activities outside of the venue. [Most people!]
Kids team(s)	Kids can do sidewalk chalk, public speaking, welcoming, and more!
Photographer	Say cheese!
Social media	Manages "official" social media accounts and messaging
Live stream	Holds the live-stream device and interviews people
Jail support	(Planned ahead of time for higher-risk/civil disobedience actions)

	collects identifying information, contacts lawyers and family, arranges bail, and more! Often a team of people.
Props	Someone has to organize/carry the action materials!
Drivers	Transport people and props to the action location.
Scouts	Get to the action location early and make sure the coast is clear.
Medic	First aid support for protesters (usually visible with a grey or red “plus” sign on jacket or backpack)
Legal observers	From the National Lawyers Guild; tend to wear neon baseball caps and witness protests, sympathetic to protesters
Supporters from home	Amplify the message, phone bank, pray, call decision makers, re-direct unhelpful social media commentators (trolls, UGH), donate, research, hang signs in your windows, and more!

Some things to pay attention to at centrally planned actions:

1. Stay in your role, and allow other people to stay in their roles
2. Many of these roles require some training and practice - if you find yourself gravitating towards a role, find out how you can learn the skills and sign up next time!
3. Stick to the messaging of the group, if possible (especially in signs and chants)
4. Police generally WILL give warnings before they escalate (in contrast to decentralized actions). Be clear about moving out of the way if individuals are doing civil disobedience and you are NOT part of the group that has prepared to risk arrest.
5. It’s helpful to share photos that were posted on the organization’s social media feed - it bumps their visibility and helps your friends be able to connect with organizers

Roles you might encounter at a decentralized action

Higher likelihood of police brutality

I’m drawing on my experiences with #BlackLivesMatter actions, anti militarization actions, Occupy Wall Street actions, and friendships over the years with punks, anarchists, rural survivalists, and more.

Writer’s aside: I have less experience with these actions (you can probably tell by my lack of detail) but I think they’re valid and essential parts of movement culture. Also, there are decentralized groups that plan highly targeted, centralized actions (like a banner drop!) and there are centralized groups that plan highly decentralized actions (like a call-in day!). So, these categories are fleeting and inconclusive. I don’t want us to get stuck in them.

Role	Explanation
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Chant leaders	Expect to see people take turns with a megaphone.
Pods	Pods are small groups of people who already have trust and rapport will come to protests together and make independent decisions.
Medics	First aid support for protesters (usually visible with a grey or red “plus” sign on jacket or backpack)
Agent provocateurs	<p>I don’t want to dwell on this, but watch out for people who are there to incite violence or entrap people into taking on more risk than they had originally planned.</p> <p>Learn more about COINTELPRO here, warning: upsetting/disturbing themes, mention of self harm)</p>

Since these actions generally avoid strict role definition and hierarchy, spontaneous actions can be creative, emotive, unpredictable, chaotic, and multitudinous. There’s often no “official” narrative or talking points, outside of the big, umbrella movement - which can feel really liberating. They can pivot quickly in terms of tone, location, tactics, etc.

If you’re joining a bit late, usually the best way to find out what’s going on is to find a live stream on social media or follow along on Twitter.

Some things to pay attention to at spontaneous actions:

1. Look behind you and around you often! You don’t want to be accidentally surrounded by police (some people call this “kettling”) unless you do... in which case... carry on!
 - a. If you’re worried about getting kettled, be careful when the group is turning corners, marching on one-way streets, and entering narrow passage-ways
2. Police generally won’t give warning before they escalate. Pay attention to your surroundings, your heartbeat, and their body language. It’s ok to move away from the center of the action if you want to support but cannot risk arrest.
3. Don’t get separated from your buddy! Check in early and often. It’s hard to stay close in a big crowd, but try to make it a big priority.
4. The media narrative will never capture what it was really like, who instigated whom, etc. It’s your job to tell the story (without compromising anyone’s privacy) to your friends and fam.
5. As an ally, try, REALLY try, to not be the center of attention. If you are still getting acclimated, don’t hold the banner in the front, appear in pictures, or take the megaphone. Make space for others to lead.
6. Film the police - especially if they are being rough. Try to get an image of their badge number if possible.

Diversity of tactics

One of the big ideas that I'm exploring here is how to embrace a diversity of tactics, especially for activists who are new to the movement or new to higher-risk protest styles. Here are a few mini-guides that help put this into a broader context.

I encourage you all to engage with these and hopefully foster a more supportive activist environment for all of us. If there are some things you personally don't feel comfortable with, it's ok to stay home and let other people do their thing!

This comes up a lot with the debate around property destruction and/or vandalism. I want to support folks to come to their own conclusion, and then return to the bigger issues at stake, rather than beating the dead horse about, ahem, broken windows. #PunIntended



By @unityandstrug (via twitter)

Image description: Light green background with blue text: “Diversity of Tactics: Everyone is free to support the cause as they see fit. We don’t police each other’s actions, or snitch on each other to the pigs or the media. At the same time, we take care not to endanger others with our actions.” Below, there are an array of small illustrations, including: a protester hopping a subway turnstile, a bike lock, an umbrella, a protester mooning the police, two protesters carrying a trash can, and a few others.

My friend L recently shared “St. Paul Principles” with me, and they’ve been resonating in my mind ever since. I’m including them below:

1. Our solidarity will be based on respect for a diversity of tactics and the plans of other groups
2. The actions and tactics used will be organized to maintain a separation of time or space

3. Any debates or criticisms will stay internal to the movement, avoiding any public or media denunciations of fellow activists and events.
4. We oppose any state repression of dissent, including surveillance, infiltration, disruption, and violence. We agree not to assist law enforcement actions against activists and others.

Protesting during COVID19

We're all doing the best we can to make ethical, practical, safe decisions during this apocalyptic time. I don't have anything new to say except keep it up - and be honest with your loved ones if your social distancing practices have shifted to create space for you to participate in Black Lives Matter protests.

I love this resource on [Harm Reduction for Protesting Amidst COVID-19](#) by fellow Philadelphian Karen Orrick. Check it out!

Recovering from tear gas

Tear gas seems to be the police weapon of choice these days. Here are some resources about how to heal if you come into contact with it. This really isn't my area of expertise, so I'm relying on resources from reputable sources.

- In-depth [article](#) from Popular Science
- Print and computer friendly versions of a [foldable pocket-zine](#) from Boston's Digital Street Medic

What to do if you get arrested

Like the last section, this isn't my biggest area of expertise but I have some resources to share, especially for folks in Philadelphia.

My biggest pieces of advice:

- Make a plan ahead of time
- Research the jails/police stations and processing steps in your area
- Know the legal support hotline
- Know your rights and don't talk to the police

To learn more, explore the [Up Against the Law Legal Collective](#). So many good resources, too many to post!

Resources for learning

As I have more time, I'll continue to expand this section.

- (movie) Selma
- (movie) This is What Democracy Looks Like - ([link](#)) *a film shot by 100 amateur camera operators of street protests in Seattle in 1999 that resulted in shutting down the World Trade Organization summit*
- (book) Walking with the Wind by John Lewis - *a memoir about the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of Congressman Lewis... some say it's a bit sensationalized but aren't all memoirs guilty of that?*
- (resource) White Supremacy Culture ([link](#)) - *some good opportunities for self reflection here; I use this regularly in my work life and volunteer life*
- (resource) 198 methods of nonviolent action ([link](#)) *includes an amazing database where you can learn about all kinds of tactics, across movements and history*
- (podcast) Irresistible ([link](#)) *fka Healing Justice Podcast*
- (podcast) Fortification ([link](#)) *some of the best social justice interviews I've ever heard!*
- Mariame Kaba - *everything !* ([link](#)) *she is an incredibly prolific movement leader and cutting edge liberation visionary*
- (artist) Ricardo Levins Morales ([link](#))
- (artist) Molly Costello ([link](#))
- (book) Parting the Waters by Taylor Branch (3 volumes) (DEEP history of the civil rights movement)
- (book) I've Got the Light of Freedom by Charles Payne (DEEP history of the civil rights movement, specifically in Mississippi)
- (book) The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements (*there's really never been a better time to study repression, and my friends are both editors and contributors to this volume*) ([link](#))
- (zine) Accomplices, Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex ([link](#))

Lessons

*I've made a lot of mistakes, usually due to my own **ignorance, impatience, and ego**. I'll spare you the gory details and spare myself feeling ashamed. Here's a list of lessons and conclusions that I learned the hard way.*

- **Don't be a hero or a martyr.** If you're getting burned out or exhausted, take a break!
- **Don't let anyone guilt trip you into proving your dedication on issues.** You don't have to be clobbered by police to be committed to racial justice. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone except you! Some allies/accomplices have concluded that it is our responsibility to form a barrier between police and protesters. I've participated in

that tactic! Like all tactics, I believe it has pros and cons and only you can make an informed decision based on your unique circumstances. Since I expect this struggle to be long, I think we'll have many opportunities to reflect, reevaluate, and keep growing our movement. It's not all on your shoulders.

- **Don't take pictures of people's faces at protests** unless you have their permission (signs are fair game in my opinion). Also fair game - public officials speaking on stage.
- **Don't talk to police (at all)** ([learn more](#))
- **Don't talk to journalists/the media** (*instead, tell journalists to engage with designated spokespeople, if they are available. If random volunteers who aren't trained give quotes, it can accidentally dilute the message!*)
- Be discreet on social media about protest tactics to protect you and other activists
- **Honor your experience without making it all about you.** This is a hard balance, and like all balancing acts, you might get out of whack and then re-calibrate. I like to redirect to social justice demands and moral urgency whenever possible. In this moment of protests in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, I would rather talk about ending police brutality against innocent Black people rather than police brutality that impacts me personally, no matter how outrageous. If I'm given a platform, I want to bring it back to the issues at hand, while speaking from my personal experience.
- **Anticipate the long haul**, recognizing that you will show up differently at different times. What you do in the next 52 weeks is arguably more important than the next 52 hours. As someone in my late 20's, I'm compelled to think about the next 52 YEARS. So, be patient with yourself. Learn as you go. Find a sustainable cadence, and keep showing up.
- **Be a joiner, not a starter.** 95% of the time, there's already a group working on an issue that's important to you. I believe you can have more impact by joining/amplifying/volunteering than starting from scratch. If you are looking to get connected with activists in your area, feel free to get in touch with me or other people in your life and start doing research.
- **Foster curiosity, not judgement.** Other people and groups will come to different conclusions about what to do given the same circumstances. That's ok (as long as they aren't white supremacists). If you are not feeling safe, you can skedaddle. You don't have to make a big stink about it ;)
- **Don't commit to more than what you can realistically do.** A smaller commitment that you can actually follow through on is better for the movement!
- **Protesting isn't a spectator sport.** I always stop to ask myself if I am (1) doing more good than harm; (2) expressing my values; (3) adding to the chorus of voices; (4) have a clear sense of purpose and boundaries. I don't want to go to protests out of curiosity. There's a fine line between being a spiritually-grounded witness and a gawker. I want to be the former, not the latter!

Debrief

I find it enormously helpful to make a plan with someone to debrief after an action or a protest. That person can be a mentor, a friend, a protest companion, or someone who is not involved in this moment. A sign that I might want to join a group in their actions (over time) is if they have a culture of debriefing and learning together.

Mindfulness prompts:

- I feel...
- I see...
- I hear...
- I know...
- I wonder...
- I hope...
- A color in my environment is...
- My breathing is...

Reflection prompts:

- A pattern I recognize is...
- I see us using power to...
- I am confused because...
- The deeper call I hear is...
- My personal stake in this struggle is...
- A value that is important to me is... and this is how I expressed it...
- One thing I would do differently is...
- I am learning ...

Resource to support young folks of all ages (developed by teachers) ([link](#))

Decompress

After actions, I can feel exhilarated, exhausted, confused, nervous, jittery, empowered, guilty, judgemental, ambivalent, and more! If you have the privilege/time available to be proactive in this regard, I think it's helpful to prepare ahead of time to decompress.

Some ideas:

- Journal
- Sing/dance
- **Stretch**
- Order takeout
- Zone out on my phone with impunity !
- Take a bath (if you are lucky enough to have a bathtub)

- Doing research on social justice activists who came before me
- Spiritual practices (if you're into that kind of thing)

My friend recently told me that he budgets takeout in his budget for art classes, and I was like THAT IS BRILLIANT! I usually get takeout after a big protest - so I should just allow myself to do it and plan accordingly.

Stretching is so, so important! Protesting can fuel adrenaline for many people (definitely true for me) and if I don't make some time for stretching, my muscles will get lactic acid-y and very sore (there's a technical explanation for this, but I'm not going to include it here).

About me

My name is Samantha Shain. I inhabit occupied Lenape territory, stolen by violence and broken treaties, in a city now known as Philadelphia, close to the same river that I grew up seeing from my family's kitchen table. I have a full time job, a small business, and volunteer with Kol Tzedek Synagogue and the Earth Quaker Action Team as a board member. These two anchor communities inform the perspectives that I bring to this resource.

I'm in my late 20's and I am white, queer, cisgender, Jewish and of Ashkenazi descent. I have access to savings and class privilege which has a tangible impact on how I show up in protests, how I evaluate my own risks, and how police interact with me. I'm a network weaver and I've always thrived when code-switching between non-profit, activist, and tech communities. I strongly identify with my paternal grandparents' love of journalism and my maternal grandparents' love of working with my hands. When I'm not writing and working, I'm usually cross-stitching or knitting. Lately, I've been heavily influenced by Grace Lee Boggs, James Baldwin, adrienne maree brown, and Rosa Luxemburg.



Image description: Me, holding a megaphone and a protest sign. In the background, a brick wall and a hand painted, cardboard sign that says "Appalachia deserves a bright future too." I'm wearing a knit winter hat, magenta wool peacoat, white sweater tights, boots and legwarmers.

You can follow me on social media by visiting my [blog](#) (nerd alert - it's about spreadsheets and social justice) or twitter [@whysamanthawhy](#). I have a couple of other public guides out there including [Great Food for Busy People](#) (how I batch-cook a week's worth of food every Sunday for my household) and [Reverse Wedding Registry](#) (kitchen supplies and reviews from yours truly).