

# Activism

## Activity

*Hannah J. Elizabeth*

This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. The session is suitable for undergraduates at different stages of study and could fit into modules on activism, or modules that explore gender, sexuality and/or health and medicine.

## Context and aim

This seminar activity focuses on queer health activism as a case study to explore the ways that health and sexuality have catalysed collaborative action and activism. Students are asked to explore queer health activism in the UK and the United States, and to think about how the specifics of regional and national context affect activist responses. This exercise also asks students to reflect on the sources historians have used to explore histories and definitions of activism and activists.

## Preparation

Students should prepare for the seminar first by jotting down some thoughts on how they define ‘activism’ and ‘activist’, in the past and present. They should then read a minimum of two of the three following texts and consider if these texts change their initial definition of ‘activist’ and ‘activism’.

Emma Day, *In Her Hands: Women’s Fight Against AIDS in the United States* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2023), pp. 97–132.

Hannah J. Elizabeth, “‘The Wild Women of the West (Midlands)’: How LesBeWell imagined queer health and its obstacles in the 1990s through the pages of *Dykenosis*”, *Contemporary British History*, 37:3 (2023), pp. 309–38.

George J. Severs, *Radical Acts: HIV/AIDS Activism in Late Twentieth-Century England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 1–42.

## Description of activity

### Introduction to the topic [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with a brief introduction to the aims of the session and how it fits into the wider module.

### Part 1: Small group work [15 minutes]

Divide the students into small groups, allowing them 10 minutes to discuss the questions below and 5 minutes to report back to the wider group. It is fine if more than one group discusses the same pair of questions. This part of the seminar aims to get students to think about how and why we define some people and activities as ‘activist’, and what evidence historians have used to label people and activities as ‘activist’.

#### Questions:

##### Group 1

- How did you define ‘activist’ and ‘activism’ before reading the assigned texts? Were your definitions the same for people and activities in the past and present?
- Did your definitions of activism/activist change or stay the same after reading the texts?

##### Group 2

- How do the readings define activism and activist identities?
- Does it matter if past actors wouldn’t see themselves and their activities as activist?

##### Group 3

- What are the benefits and pitfalls of a broader definition of activism and activist?
- Is health activism harder to define than other forms of activism?

## Part 2: Large group discussion [15 minutes]

The students should take 5 minutes to look over the readings again and make a note of the kinds of primary evidence the historians have used to build their arguments about queer health activism. It may be necessary for the tutor to explain what constitutes a primary source and to answer questions about the different sorts of sources the students locate.

Then, as a group, discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of evidence are historians using to write histories of activists and activism?
- What are the risks of using this kind of evidence?
- Who might these histories leave out?

## Part 3: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

This final discussion asks students to dig down into how identities and memories have shaped activism and how it is written about. Specifically, the discussion should tease out how context and identity shapes activism, and why some histories of activism are remembered over others. The tutor should reassure students that these are complex questions with many different possible answers.

- Why was American AIDS activism different from UK AIDS activism?
- Why do some histories of activism come to dominate the historical narrative?
- What does queer health activism reveal about the entanglement of politics, emotion and embodiment within protest movements?

## Part 4: Wrap-up [5 minutes]

Ask students to write one ‘take home’ point about activism from the session on a Post-It note and to put the Post-It notes on the wall when they leave the room. The tutor can then take a photo of the notes and circulate to the wider group.

# Archives

## Activity

*Tracey Loughran*

This is a seminar plan for a discussion-focused session lasting 50 minutes that explores the topic of ‘Archives’. The plan can be adapted to undergraduates at different stages; the recommended reading is pitched at first-year undergraduates, but the questions and task could be fruitfully explored at any point in a student’s degree programme.

## Context and aim

There are two main parts to this activity. The first part encourages students to think about how and why archives come into being, and how collections are formed, remade and made available to different publics. The second part furthers these discussions through students’ engagement with the online presence of an archive of their choice. The tutor then brings these parts together. The session aims to introduce students to the concept of ‘the archive’ while also helping students to develop practical and critical skills in negotiating online encounters with archives.

## Preparation

Students should prepare for the seminar by reading two short chapters and undertaking one task.

### Reading:

Federica Ferlanti, ‘Archives’, in Tracey Loughran (ed.), *A Practical Guide to Studying History*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2026).

Laura A. Millar, 'What are Archives?', in her *Archives: Principles and Practices*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 3–22.

### Task:

Locate an archive (if you are stuck for ideas, Ferlanti includes many examples) and analyse its web page, considering the following questions:

- How does this archive describe itself on its web page?
- How much information is given on:
  - (a) the origin of the archive;
  - (b) its collection policy;
  - (c) the availability of its materials?

## Description of activity

### Introduction [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with a brief overview of the aims of the session, and then lead a brief open discussion on the following questions:

- What is an archive? Can anything be an archive?
- Why are archives important for historians?

### Part 1: Small group discussion and report back [15 minutes]

Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions, with reference to the set reading, for 10 minutes:

- Are archival collections 'biased'?
- What part does political and historical context play in what is kept in archives and made available to historians?
- Are there any potential ways around omissions and silences within archival collections?

This should be followed by reporting back to the full group for 5 minutes.

## Part 2: Task-based small group discussion and report back [20 minutes]

In the same small groups, students should discuss the set task for 10 minutes, focusing on the following areas:

- Explain to other students what archive you selected, and why.
- How difficult (or easy) did you find it to locate information on the origin, collection policy and availability of materials of the archive?
- Having spent some time on this archive's website, are you confident that you would know what is needed to visit the archive and how to order material?
- Come up with a list of as many questions as possible about the archives under discussion that the website *doesn't* seem to answer.

Each group should nominate one person to report back answers to the main group. Allow 10 minutes for the reporting back and subsequent discussion. The discussion provides an opportunity for tutors to gauge students' ability to negotiate the websites of archives and any practical difficulties they might encounter.

## Part 3: Large group discussion and conclusion [10 minutes]

The tutor should select one of the archives that a student group has discussed, access the website of that archive on a PC in the room, and project the screen. They should ask students to help them negotiate the web page:

- What tab should I click on to find out information about the background of the archive?
- What tab should I click on to find out about its holdings?
- What tab should I click on to find out about visiting information?

This exercise should reassure students that websites can be difficult to negotiate, while also providing practical guidance on how to do so. Working through the exercise as a group enables the tutor to reinforce any aspects around using archives that students do not seem to understand, but also to demonstrate the rich potential of archives once you do get to grips with them. In conclusion, ask students to write on a Post-It note one 'takeaway point' from this session. These can be collated and shared on the module's Virtual Learning Environment.