

### Rosa Parks biography and comprehension

Rosa Parks was an American civil rights activist, whose courageous actions had a long-term impact on the lives of millions of African Americans. She is known as ‘the mother of the freedom movement’.

#### Early life

Rosa was born Rosa Louise McCauley on 4 December 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her mother was a teacher, her father was a carpenter and she had one younger brother, Sylvester.

Her parents separated while Rosa was still young and she went, along with her mother and brother, to live on her grandparents’ farm in Pine Level. She attended the nearby school for African American children, where her mother worked. Unfortunately, her mother became ill and Rosa had to leave school to look after her, which meant that she did not receive her high school diploma and could not become a teacher, as she had originally planned.

Rosa met and married her husband, Raymond Parks, in 1932. She worked part-time as a seamstress (making and mending clothes) and, with Raymond’s support, went back to school to earn her diploma.

#### Activism

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in some states in the US, a set of laws, known as the Jim Crow laws were passed. These laws aimed to make sure that the lives of black and white Americans were kept ‘separate but equal’ and all areas of public life were segregated, such as schools, churches, shops and even lifts and drinking fountains. In reality, the facilities were far from equal and African Americans suffered dreadful discrimination due to segregation.

Many people recognised the unfairness of this and organisations were set up to work towards equal treatment for all. One organisation was the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) which Raymond and Rosa Parks joined. This movement towards freedom and equality for all became known as the **civil rights movement**.

Public transport was one of the areas of segregation. Black men, women and children had to sit at the back of buses and were expected to give up their seats if white passengers wanted to sit down. On 1 December 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was travelling home from work on a busy bus. When some white passengers boarded the bus, the bus driver told Rosa and three other people to give up their seats. The other passengers moved. Rosa refused. Although it was later said that it was



because she was tired from working all day, Rosa Parks said she was not tired from work but that she was 'tired of giving in'. Rosa was arrested and told to pay a \$10 fine but she refused to pay, saying that the law itself was wrong.

Other civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., realised that this was an important opportunity. They called for all African Americans to boycott the Montgomery bus service in support of Rosa and in protest at the unfairness of segregation. This was a real challenge for the bus company as around 70% of the bus users were black and it was even more of a challenge for the passengers themselves - some people had to walk more than 20 miles to work and back each day and some white people reacted to the boycott with aggression and violence. However, the boycott held and lasted for more than a year, until the US Supreme Court ruled that segregation laws were against the constitution on 20 December 1956.

### Later life

Life was not easy for Rosa Parks after she began the bus boycott. She had to move to a different city after she was fired from her job and she even had people threatening her life. She spent her later life working for the rights of political prisoners (people who are imprisoned for their beliefs) and was invited to speak all around the world. Although she became very famous, she was never rich as she donated most of her money to charity.



Rosa Parks was eventually awarded both a Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in honour of her extraordinary actions, standing up for herself and for others.

She died on 24 October, 2005, aged 92.

### Did you know?

- In 1992, Rosa Parks wrote an autobiography for young people, called *My Story*.
- The bus driver who had Rosa arrested had a reputation for treating black passengers unfairly and she had previously refused to board the bus if he was driving.
- After her death, more than 30,000 people filed past her coffin as a mark of respect.
- On the 50th anniversary of Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat, bus companies all over America left an empty seat behind the driver, to remember her courageous stand against injustice.

Name: ..... Date:.....

**Rosa Parks comprehension**

Read the biography of Rosa Parks carefully and answer the following questions.

1. Use information from the text to complete the timeline below.

Date	Event
4 December 1913	
1932	
	Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.
20 December 1956	
	Rosa Parks published an autobiography for young people, with the title <i>My Story</i> .
24 October 2005	

2. Why is Rosa Parks sometimes referred to as the ‘mother of the freedom movement’?  
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 .....  
 .....

3. Why did Rosa Parks leave school before completing her high school diploma?  
 .....  
 .....  
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4. Complete the vocabulary table below, using a dictionary to help you.

	Definition
segregation	
discrimination	
boycott	
reputation	

5. 'Rosa refused.' Why has the writer chosen to use a short sentence here?

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6. Why did some white people react to the bus boycott with 'aggression and violence'?

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7. Rosa Parks is referred to as 'courageous' in the text. Which other adjectives would you use to describe her?

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8. Do you think Rosa Parks was right to break the law? Explain your answer.

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Rosa Parks comprehension - answers

1. Use information from the text to complete the timeline below.

Date	Event
4 December 1913	Rosa Louise McCauley is born.
1932	Rosa marries Raymond Parks.
1 December 1955	Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.
20 December 1956	U.S. Supreme Court rules that the segregation of public buses is unconstitutional.
1992	Rosa Parks published an autobiography for young people, with the title <i>My Story</i> .
24 October 2005	Rosa Parks dies, aged 92.

2. Why is Rosa Parks sometimes referred to as the ‘mother of the freedom movement’?

She helped to create the civil rights movement, ensuring freedom for *all* Americans.

3. Why did Rosa Parks leave school before completing her high school diploma?

She needed to take care of her ill mother.

4. Complete the vocabulary table below, using a dictionary to help you.

	Definition
segregation	Keeping groups of people apart e.g. because of race or gender.
discrimination	Treating one group of people unfairly.
boycott	Refusing to use or to take part in something because you disapprove of it.
reputation	To be known for something.

5. ‘Rosa refused.’ Why has the writer chosen to use a short sentence here?

To have a powerful impact, showing the importance of this act.

6. Why did some white people react to the bus boycott with ‘aggression and violence’?

They were unhappy about changes to a system which benefitted them, at the expense of others.

7. Rosa Parks is referred to as ‘courageous’ in the text. Which other adjectives would you use to describe her?

Accept suitable synonyms such as brave, fearless, bold and gutsy.

8. Do you think Rosa Parks was right to break the law? Explain your answer.

Personal response.

Name: ..... Date:.....

**Rosa Parks - role-play task**

This activity is for a group of four. Each member of the group should take on a role. Choose from:

- the bus driver
- a white passenger who is expecting to sit down
- Rosa Parks
- the police officer who comes to arrest Rosa.

Work in your group to devise a short drama (lasting no more than three minutes), showing how Rosa Parks made a stand for civil rights ... by sitting down!

Share and evaluate each role-play.

**Evaluation**

How well did you work together to create your role-play?

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How can you improve your teamwork next time?

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What role did you play and how did it feel to be this character? Why?

My role .....

How I felt .....

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Name: ..... Date:.....

**Rosa Parks - writing task**

Rosa Parks is a hero to millions of people, due to the way she bravely stood up for what she believed in against a system that she knew was not fair.

Who is your hero? Why do you admire them?

My hero is .....  
because .....  
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Draw a portrait of your hero.

