

## Rosa Parks: Student Work

*Some books say something like this: “Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a White man. African Americans heard this and decided to boycott the buses.” But this is a brief description of a complex event. Write a more complete answer to the question: Why did the boycott of Montgomery’s buses succeed?*

### Student A

It is very common to hear that the incident, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man, is what started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, this is not the case.[1] Though Rosa Parks’ arrest was the crowning incident in the history of civil rights and may have been what got the boycott started, the plans for a bus boycott had been talked about months earlier.[2] This event was a highly organized and determined effort and planned through very carefully.[3]

A year before the boycott, discussions of changing the bus laws were proposed to the Montgomery City Council. These propositions were addressed, but only some of the laws were slightly changed. “Busses have begun stopping on more corners where negroes live than previously. However, the same practices in seating and boarding continue.” (letter from JoAnn Robinson, President of the Women’s Political Council)[4]

[1] The word “however” immediately distinguishes Hannah from the many other students. Here, Hannah challenges the classic narrative that Rosa Parks’s act started the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

[2] Here, we see that Hannah has sourced the document and noted its date. This knowledge allows her to reconsider the chronology of the boycott.

# READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

[3] Here, Hannah presents her new narrative of the boycott, noting that its planning had begun long before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.

[4] Hannah successfully uses the evidence to support her argument. She is sensitive to the chronological development of events.

## Student B

A quaint African-American woman seated herself on a Montgomery public bus one winter day in 1955.[1] When she refused to abdicate her seat to a white citizen, Rosa Parks unknowingly initiated one of history's largest and longest public boycotts.[2] Ms. Parks was incarcerated for not subjecting her seat. This created community-wide rage through the African-Americans. The solution the oppressed people developed was public boycott of all Montgomery city buses until the abiding laws were changed to suit people of either race.

This strike took much strategy, and coordination throughout the African-American populace.[3] Coordinating the boycott presented a task within itself. Different methods were mapped out for people to use to attend work, school or other outings. The whole of the population bonded with their neighbors to find a way to rise above the issue at hand. "More and more of our people are arranging with neighbors and friends to ride to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers." (Letter from Robinson to Mayor).[4]

[1] Here, Joanna recapitulates the classic narrative about Rosa Parks. Nowhere in the documents is Rosa Parks described as "quaint."

[2] Here, too, Joanna insists that Rosa Parks "initiated" the boycott. Many of the documents in the inquiry (i.e., "Abernathy," "Durr," "leaflet" documents) directly contradict this claim.

[3] Here, Joanna adds detail and new information about the extensive behind-the-scenes planning and coordination to the classic narrative of the boycott.

# READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

[4] Here, Joanna misuses the Robinson letter. She suggests that the letter describes what happened during the boycott, when, in fact, the letter describes what had been happening a year earlier. Joanna has not “sourced” the letter, noting its date.

## Commentary

The Rosa Parks inquiry asks students “Why did the Montgomery Bus Boycott succeed?” The document set challenges the classic narrative whereby Rosa Parks’ solitary act of defiance single-handedly triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott. With careful reading, some students will fundamentally shift their narrative of the boycott; they will come to understand that a boycott that communicated with and organized alternative transportation for over 40,000 people was not thrown together spontaneously over a weekend. They will also understand that Rosa Parks was an activist committed to civil rights, rather than a “tired old seamstress.”

Some students, however, will not fundamentally shift their narratives. Rather, they will accommodate the new information by adding it to the classic story of Rosa Parks.

Above is one of two examples of student work that use the same document—the “Letter from Robinson to the Mayor”—to answer the inquiry question. This document directly challenges the classic narrative because it is dated May 1954, and therefore shifts the existence of the idea of a boycott to over a year before Rosa Parks’ action. In order for students to recognize the significance of the letter, they must source the document, note its date, and recognize that plans for a potential bus boycott had been considered long before Rosa Parks’ act of defiance.

Student B, in the essay excerpt above, misuses the document by simply adding new (and incorrect) detail to the classic narrative. See Student A’s paper for a more accurate use of the document.