

# Activism Builds Power: Design an Activist T-shirt

Clothing can be an important tool for activism, enabling us to make powerful sociopolitical statements. During the 1960s and 1970s, the hippie counterculture established a sense of unity in part through a style of dress. This projected a rejection of mainstream society's values, while promoting the hippie social and political beliefs.

Activism builds power.

The ubiquitous T-shirt has served as a potent tool to convey poignant messages and raise social consciousness. Emblazoned with powerful statements and imagery, T-shirts are a form of visual communication and a strong tool for activism. Worn on the body, they command attention and can be used to profess group membership and allegiance.

Fashion designer Katharine Hamnett, known for her politically charged T-shirts, has said, "T-shirts are some of the strongest messaging tools for consciousness raising, you can't not read them, and once you've read them, they stay in your brain, churning around, hopefully making you think and act."

Below are some activist T-shirts that have made far-reaching statements.



*SILENCE=DEATH* ACT UP T-shirt, black cotton, 2018, United States. Collection of The Museum at FIT.

In 1987, six gay activists in New York City formed the Silence = Death Project to bring attention to sexual health and the emerging AIDS crisis. The slogan, accompanied by a pink triangle, became closely associated with the cause then and remains so today. The pink triangle is in itself a powerful symbol that references the inverted pink triangle used to identify people as gay in Nazi Germany. Aiming to eradicate homosexuality, the Nazis treated those branded with the triangle with the utmost cruelty. Overall, the SILENCE=DEATH slogan and symbol was intended to signify that “silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.” The six men who founded the project later joined the protest group ACT UP, offering the logo to the group. It is still in use by ACT UP today.



*PROGRESS* T-shirt, black cotton, 2008, United States. Collection of The Museum at FIT.

Depicting an image originally designed as a poster, the *PROGRESS* t-shirt became emblematic of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election campaign. It features a stenciled portrait of then president-elect Obama, designed by street artist Shepard Fairey, who had been recruited to design an image for the campaign. In an attempt to convey the spirit of change promoted by the Obama campaign, Fairey's graphic was designed in the vein of street art, inherently appealing to younger generations and signaling much-desired change to older voters. This graphic design went on to become one of the most widely recognized symbols of Obama's message, inspiring numerous variations and imitations.



*They Have Names* T-shirt, black cotton, 2015, United States. Collection of The Museum at FIT.

Kerby Jean-Raymond, founder and creative director of the fashion label Pyer Moss originally designed the They Have Names T-shirt as a personal statement against police brutality. The design features the names of thirteen unarmed men killed by law enforcement.

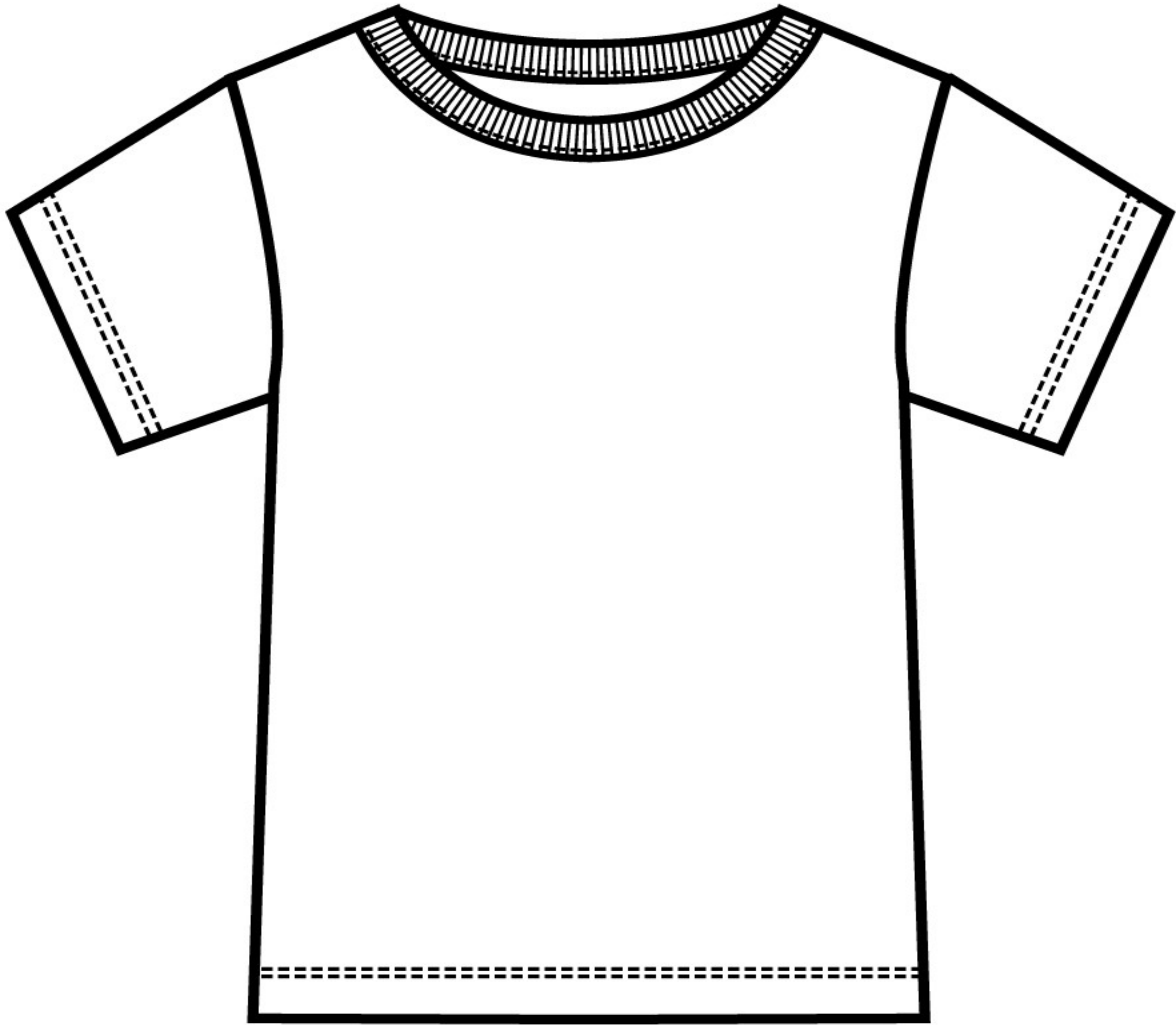
Jean-Raymond wore the T-shirt at the close of his Spring 2015 fashion presentation and soon after began to receive purchase requests. After much deliberation, he decided to produce a limited edition run of the shirt, with all proceeds going to the American Civil Liberties Union. "Fashion's reach is far and wide," Jean-Raymond explained to *Complex* magazine in 2015. "Fortunately for us, we have the opportunity to impact change due to our position in this industry, and I feel strongly about using our influence to heighten awareness for this cause."

## Design Your Own Original Activist T-Shirt

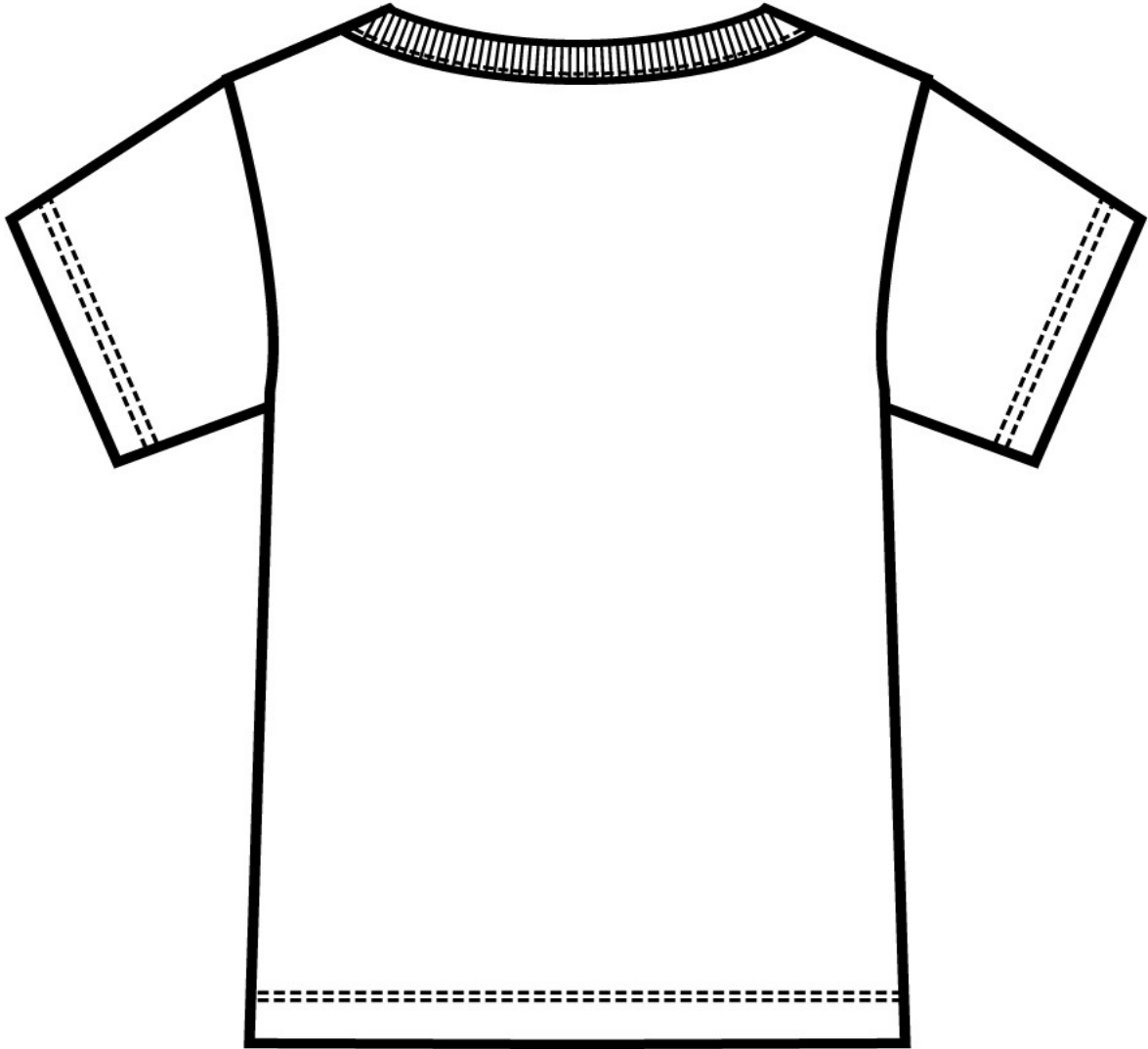
Use the attached template to design your own Activist T-shirt!

Draw or collage to create an original T-shirt design that conveys a powerful social message.

Consider the power of words, potent imagery, and even humor to draw attention to your message.



**FRONT**



**BACK**