

Good Trouble

“So I say to each and every one of you, especially you young people . . . Go out there. Speak up. Speak out. Get in the way. Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.”
—John Lewis at the Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, March 2020

With these words, US congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis invited us all to shift the way we understand civic engagement. As a young adult, Lewis learned from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. He helped to lead the Nashville Student Movement and was also the youngest speaker at the March on Washington. Throughout his lifetime, Lewis spoke about the need for engaging in “good trouble” — his shorthand for activities that would bring about greater justice and equality in the United States.

For this year’s Promising Young Writers prompt, we invite you to consider this concept of good trouble. What does it mean, what does it require, what does it cost, and how do we benefit from it? John Lewis engaged in good trouble as it related to racial injustice, but your response does not need to focus on that. We invite you to think about times when you have faced a moment where you could speak up for what is right, regardless of what a majority of your friends and peers may have thought. This action could range from standing up to a bully to speaking out against gun violence to protesting unjust laws.

Possible questions that you might explore are provided in the following list. You are not expected to respond to all (or any) of these questions. Rather, they may inspire you and your writing. Additionally, your response can be in whatever style or genre of writing you prefer—expository, persuasive, narrative, descriptive, or creative.

We invite you to think about what it means to engage in “good trouble”:

- How have you benefited from the good trouble that others before and around you have engaged in? What laws have been passed or battles won that have made life better for you?
- What is an issue in your world that inspires you to engage in good trouble?
- Do you agree that it is okay to disobey unjust laws? If not, what might youth do to bring about needed change?
- What does it mean to create good trouble in your community?

- Was there a time you regretted not interrupting injustice? What were the circumstances? If you could go back in time, would you respond differently, and if so, how?
- What do you risk by getting into good trouble?

To support you in thinking more about the prompt, we recommend exploring the following resources:

- Encyclopedia entry about [John Lewis](#) (Wikipedia)
- [Video of John Lewis speaking](#) (National Constitution Center)
- ["We Lived Happily During the War" by Ilya Kaminsky](#) (The Poetry Foundation)
- ["Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes](#) (Academy of American Poets)
- ["Civil Disobedience" by Henry David Thoreau](#) (Columbia Law School)
- ["15 Examples of Civil Disobedience \(Which Have Made a Difference\)"](#) (Extinction Rebellion)