Embodied Expertise through Activist Toolkits

Risa Applegarth

Abstract: Scholars studying young activists need to attend closely to how they experience growth and gain the literacies they put to use in their public writing and speaking. The concept of uptake from rhetorical genre studies offers insight into how activist toolkits organize rhetorical resources that scaffold and support young activists' embodied performances. Beyond merely gathering resources, menstrual activism toolkits operate as a site for rhetorical training, enabling novice activists (regardless of age) to transform their experiences into embodied expertise.

Keywords: age, activism, youth, genre, uptake, embodiment

Doi: 10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.4.05

How do young people learn and practice activist literacies? How do they gain experience, comfort, and fluency with the range of literate practices that they may employ as individuals or collectives engaging in advocacy work? Feminist scholars who aim to consider young people's activism through situated analysis—avoiding the dismissiveness of concepts such as "digital natives" or "slacktivism"[1] should attend closely to how young people experience growth and how they develop activist literacies over time. Earlier this year, I attended a public webinar offered by Zainab, a student in my undergraduate rhetoric course, who offered advice to other students across North Carolina about how to take up community engagement and advocacy in ways that align with their values, skills, and goals. Responding to a question about how those in the audience could try unfamiliar or uncomfortable forms of outreach, such as calling a congressional representative or speaking publicly about an issue of concern, Zainab advised her audience to compose or find a script they could use to feel more comfortable and prepared. Her response bears on the questions I take up in this essay, as it emphasizes how embodied practice can ease feelings of discomfort, and how materials that seem directive, such as scripts and templates, can in fact scaffold and support embodied practices, enabling significant and even transformative bodily experiences for those who use them.

1 "Slacktivism" is a term of disapprobation often lobbied at those engaging in social media discourse—which is not limited to young people, of course. See Nish, *Activist Literacies* pp. 9-12 for a discussion of the reductive and ableist implications of the term.

Risa Applegarth is a professor of English, Director of the College Writing Program, and cross-appointed faculty in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at UNC Greensboro. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses focused on rhetoric, gender, embodiment, disability, genre, and pedagogy. Her latest book, *Just Kids: Youth Activism and Rhetorical Agency* (Ohio State University Press, 2024), investigates how age impacts the rhetorical strategies of child, teen, and youth activists and argues that retrospective reflection generates opportunities for exercising rhetorical agency. She has served on the Advisory Board for the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition since 2010 and currently serves as Coalition Secretary.

In what follows I draw on the concept of *uptake* from rhetorical genre studies to query how a particular genre—the activist toolkit—fosters forms of uptake that help menstrual activists cultivate embodied expertise. As I show, by providing readers with scripts and language to be taken up in performance, toolkits cultivate young people's development of activist literacies. The scripts, templates, and other rhetorical resources that toolkits organize make them an especially valuable site for both study and practice, allowing inexperienced advocates, whatever their age, to take up activist practices and take on activist identities and dispositions. Toolkit materials can foster activists' rhetorical capacities, making toolkits not only tools for use but also spaces for practice and avenues for embodied rhetorical training.

Age, Expertise, and Advocacy

Young people face challenging rhetorical circumstances as advocates, in part because "expertise" is a concept closely related to age. For instance, the popular, widely-circulated (though inaccurate) idea that it takes 10,000 hours of practice in a given domain to become an expert is one indication of the close association between age and expertise.[2] Many audiences more easily acknowledge older rhetors as "experts," even as some specific forms of knowledge and skill (with technology, for instance) are commonly characterized as the expert purview of the young. Age bears on attributions of expertise not only in vernacular uses, but in rhetorical scholarship as well. Johanna Hartelius has demonstrated that expertise is relational, negotiated between a rhetor and audience. Hartelius defines expertise as "a special relationship between a subject matter, a public, and one who masters and manipulates the former for the latter's benefit or need" (1). Her case studies reveal repeated practices through which rhetors establish expertise: they position themselves within networks of other experts; they showcase their authenticity and legitimacy through their skillful use of language; they adopt a pedagogical stance relative to their audience; they employ identification to show how their expertise is relevant and beneficial to their audience; and they situate their expertise in relation to an exigence that the audience recognizes.[3] In Hartelius's useful formulation, expertise is *negotiated*—it is neither fully autonomous, based entirely in credentials or knowledge, nor fully symbolic, based entirely in attributions of expert status made by others.[4] This negotiated quality of expertise helps to explain why young people face significant constraints in their efforts to persuade audiences of their expertise: their age-related identifications, like other embodied markers of difference, may work against audience recognition of their expert knowledge in particular domains. Related to but distinct from the broader concept of *ethos*, expertise is both a performed status and a learned competency. If expertise takes time to develop, how can an expert role be performed successfully by a young person?[5]

2 This figure was included in Malcolm Gladwell's bestselling book *Outliers*; it's been both disputed and recirculated many times since that book's publication in 2008.

3 Hartelius, 18-29.

4 Hartelius, 3-4.

5 For rhetorical treatments of expertise, see Hartelius; Condit; Moriarty and Mehlenbacher.

The emergent space of menstrual activism offers an especially fruitful opportunity for young people to develop activist capacities. As the essays in this special issue attest, menstruation is an embodied experience that is deeply age-inflected, instigating an array of emotional, social, familial, religious, financial—and even political—shifts for many who experience it. There is growing awareness that period activism is needed to address myriad inequities that attend menstruation. Lack of access to period products causes hardship for many menstruators. Students report missing school when they lack period supplies. Incarcerated people often pay steep prices for menstrual products or lack access to menstrual products entirely. In the U.S. and many other countries, period products are subject to rather than exempted from sales tax, exacerbating poverty-related inequities for those securing period supplies. The use of plastics and harmful chemicals in many period products have prompted advocacy efforts focused on sustainable and reusable period products. Underlying most of these efforts is an acknowledgement that menstruation remains a stigmatized experience. Widely-circulating stigmas and cultural messages of shame based in misogynistic beliefs about female bodies intensify the unequal burden menstruators experience and heighten the impacts of lack of access to period supplies.[6] Period activism around these issues is often grounded in embodied experiences. In other words, embodied experiences of menstruation, of stigma, of lack of access to period products, and of the educational and financial consequences of lack of access: all of these generate opportunities for activism. Menstrual activism toolkits, as I argue below, operate as scaffolds for young activists to transform these experiences into expertise.

Because young people face constrained rhetorical circumstances, shaped by pervasive beliefs about *youth* and *childhood* that circumscribe their available means,[7] cultivating and demonstrating forms of expertise that transform their age from a liability to a rhetorical resource is a key tactic employed by young activists. As sociologist Barrie Thorne explains, "like gender, racial ethnicity[,] and sexuality, age is an embodied form of difference that is both materially and discursively produced and embedded in relations of power and authority" (150). Expertise among young activists is cultivated and performed through repetition of and familiarity with advocacy-related genres, situations, and literacy practices. The literacies that activists use to garner attention, communicate with audiences, stage events, frame or define a problem, and marshal collectives toward shared goals are—like all literacies—learned and embodied. Activist literacies encompass not only technical skills, such as how to navigate a city website to request a permit to hold an event, but also broader dispositions and embodied attitudes, such as a willingness to risk failure in pursuit of a collective accomplishment, or an attitude of openness to undergoing change through engaging with others in discourse. Learning to adopt embodied dispositions toward productive discomfort and vulnerability are vital experiences that enable young people to both acquire and perform activist expertise.

The remainder of this essay first provides an overview of the scope and variety of discursive "tools" in-

6 Menstrual advocacy is undertaken generally on behalf of all who experience the embodied event of menstruation, regardless of the gender identities of menstruators. Menstrual advocacy toolkits typically adopt gender-inclusive language, using phrases such as "girls, women, and people with periods" and "all those who menstruate."

7 See Applegarth, *Just Kids*, 10-15.

corporated into menstrual activism toolkits. These tools indicate the varied embodiments and purposes that toolkit authors imagine for users of these materials. Through this overview, I underscore the extent to which toolkit authors imagine an audience that does not only *take in* information about menstruation and menstrual advocacy, but an audience that *takes up* the toolkit to *take on* unfamiliar roles as activists, educators, and advocates.

The range and variety of rhetorical materials that toolkit authors create—encompassing instruction, narration, technical information, strategy guidance, samples, templates, and so on—call for an analytical approach that centers *uptake*, a key concept from rhetorical genre studies. Uptake names an embodied form of recognition and strategic selection, a capacity for intertextual response that is embedded in sociocultural learning, often implicit rather than explicit, and deeply habituated. Scholars have grappled for decades with the concept of uptake, elaborating on its theorization by Anne Freadman and expanding scholarly attention to a dimension of communicative activity that often evades scrutiny. I use Dylan Dryer's formulation of *uptake affordances* to investigate the way that menstrual activism toolkits offer samples, resources, lists, guidelines, and so on as scaffolds for embodied performance, scaffolds that ultimately help users develop a bodily habitus of expertise.

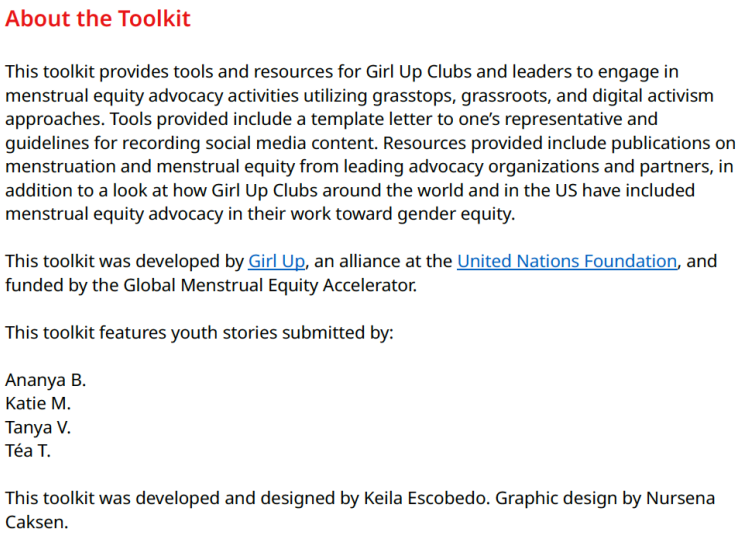
The final section of this essay considers how these uptake affordances elicit users' expertise. In what ways do the materials in activist toolkits offer users the opportunity to enact expertise maneuvers? Ultimately, my analysis demonstrates how textual affordances can scaffold embodied performance, making it easier for would-be activists to take on unfamiliar bodily roles. Toolkits offer not only resources and templates, but learning opportunities—opportunities to enact, to practice translation and transformation, to perform and embody a stance of expert relative to a range of audiences. This analysis makes menstrual toolkits legible as scaffolds for performance and as spaces of rhetorical training for young activists. Toolkit users practice drawing their embodied experiences into claims of knowledge and expertise. As Zainab asserted when she advised young advocates to manage their nerves by speaking from a script, such scaffolds can alleviate discomfort with new tasks and, over time, enable performances that work as demonstrations of an advocate's expertise.

Toolkits: Assembled Materials, Varied Uses

The term "toolkit" identifies a capacious genre in which an array of discursive "tools" are assembled for the varied potential uses imagined by toolkit authors. A toolkit is typically a digital compilation, often a downloadable PDF, Word document, or slide deck, available through a website and explicitly inviting users to take up the toolkit for a range of purposes. The audience and purpose of a toolkit is often identified on the cover page and sometimes articulated more fully on an interior "About this toolkit" or "Overview" page. For instance, the *Period Supply Drive Toolkit* offered through the Alliance for Period Supplies explains on the cover page that "This toolkit includes helpful tips, handouts, flyers and more!" (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Detail from cover page of the Alliance for Period Supplies' Period Supply Drive Toolkit.

Other toolkits articulate in their titles the audience and purpose for which they were designed, such as *The Menstrual Equity for All Act: A Toolkit for California K-12 Students*, or the *Toolkit for Marking 5th International Dignified Menstruation Day*. The "Advocacy Toolkit" offered by the organization *Period for Change* carries on the title page the subhead, "How Girl Up USA Clubs and Leaders can Advocate for Menstrual Equity," specifying an audience and purpose that are articulated more fully inside the toolkit (Figure 2):



About the Toolkit

This toolkit provides tools and resources for Girl Up Clubs and leaders to engage in menstrual equity advocacy activities utilizing grasstops, grassroots, and digital activism approaches. Tools provided include a template letter to one's representative and guidelines for recording social media content. Resources provided include publications on menstruation and menstrual equity from leading advocacy organizations and partners, in addition to a look at how Girl Up Clubs around the world and in the US have included menstrual equity advocacy in their work toward gender equity.

This toolkit was developed by Girl Up, an alliance at the United Nations Foundation, and funded by the Global Menstrual Equity Accelerator.

This toolkit features youth stories submitted by:

Ananya B.
Katie M.
Tanya V.
Téa T.

This toolkit was developed and designed by Keila Escobedo. Graphic design by Nursena Caksen.

Figure 2: Screenshot from internal page of Period for Change's Advocacy Toolkit.

The "tools provided" in this toolkit are discursive ones: "a template letter" and "guidelines for recording social media content," in this case. Some toolkits identify authors and contributors explicitly, as in the example above, but many omit information identifying their compilers by name.

Announcing their audience and purpose as they do helps to underscore the way in which toolkits function as "sociotechnical artifacts … containing translation resources" (Wilner et al) – that is, resources for translating knowledge and experience across varied local contexts. Toolkits are "made to travel," as Christopher Kelty has argued: "by taking what works at a local level, attempting to quasi-formalize it, and inserting it into a briefcase so that it can be carried to the next site to repeat its context-specific success." Because toolkits

are a discursive mechanism for transferring knowledge and bridging gaps between local and broader contexts, toolkits "are a frequently chosen output by individuals and organizations for a range of educational and activist activities" (Wilner et al, np). For the analysis in this essay, I assembled a folder of 17 digital toolkits focused on menstrual equity. The full list of these toolkits can be found in Appendix 1.

The toolkits analyzed in this sample offer an array of discursive resources: **template** emails, letters, flyers, slides, and social media posts with blanks for the user to fill in; **scripts** for phone calls or public presentations; **facts, data,** and links to **information** imagined to be relevant for the toolkit reader to have at hand when engaging in advocacy activities; **advice** oriented toward the toolkit reader such as language to use in particular circumstances or **tips** and **guidelines** for how to approach unfamiliar advocacy situations; **narratives** shared by specific individuals relating their successes or challenges in relation to advocacy; **definitions** of relevant terms that might be needed by the toolkit reader; **bibliographies**, **links**, and **lists** of additional resources for further reading; and epideictic **examples**, actions taken by other advocates that are singled out for praise. As this extensive variety of "tools" indicates, "what it means to 'use' a toolkit can be ambiguous and highly contextual" (Wilner et al np). Across the menstrual advocacy toolkits I collected, discursive tools are offered in support of a range of initiatives. All seventeen toolkits provide their readers with informational resources related to period equity. Sixteen—nearly all—suggest actions to promote public awareness of period poverty as an issue; and eleven target stigma around menstruation through campaigns to normalize the sharing of period stories. Seven toolkits provide resources for advocates to hold a period supply drive; ten offer tools for advocates to support efforts to enact legislation that either eliminates taxes on period products or mandates access to period supplies for students. Two focus on the need for more sustainable period products and two suggest partnerships with less common institutions such as public libraries.

Attending to embodiment, and drawing on the insights of rhetorical genre scholars, we can see that toolkits enable not only translation from context to context or from local site to local site, but also a translation *into* embodied performance as an crucial uptake. "Uptake" is a way of perceiving the interactivity of utterances: every utterance responds to a previous utterance and in doing so affirms some dimension of that previous utterance, selecting a dimension for response. A rhetor takes *up* an email template from an advocacy toolkit, for instance, and uses it to structure an email to a legislator; taking it up in this way affirms the generic status of the template *as* a template, and involves the rhetor's bodily enactment: by typing, erasing, copying, pasting, using thumbs and fingers to fill in blanks and press send, the rhetor transforms the template into an embodied utterance.

Genre awareness is a key dimension of literacy learning, whether that awareness is explicitly noted or implicitly deployed by a writer or speaker in the act of performance. Genre here refers to the communication forms, situated practices, and conventional and routine ways of engaging with others that take place within a specific community. As Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff explain, "the ability to know how to negotiate genres and how to apply and turn genre strategies (rules for play) into textual practices (actual performances) involves knowledge of what Freadman refers to as uptake. […] What we choose to take up and how we do so

is the result of learned recognitions of significance that over time and in particular contexts become habitual" (85-86). This habitual, habituated quality accumulates from repeated engagement with particular texts and genres; focusing the analysis below on uptake helps us to see some of the complex literacy learning involved when young people take up activist genres, literacies, and practices. Uptake is a mechanism for learning—for transitioning from Bawarshi and Reiff's "rules for play" into "actual performances." In fact, attention to uptake can support efforts to take young people's activist development as akin to, rather than radically different from, that of adults and older people. By taking up, through performance, the embodied practices of advocacy, any would-be activist, regardless of age, can foster and cultivate embodied expertise. A young person who has repeatedly taken up bodily practices associated with community organizing, for instance, develops through uptake the dispositions that enable expert performance; an older person who has not taken up that practice might have gained marginally relevant experience from other contexts, such as workplace performances, or they may be precisely as unfamiliar and unpracticed as someone much younger. This is to say that age is a factor that shapes but does not determine literacy learning; keeping this in mind, we can guard against assuming that "novice" and "expert" will always map neatly onto "young" and "old."

To discern the way that users of menstrual activism toolkits might become habituated into embodied activist practices, I employ the expanded formulation of uptake developed by genre scholar Dylan Dryer. Dryer argues that any single utterance engages with uptake in several different ways, through what he identifies as uptake *affordances*, uptake *artifacts*, uptake *enactments*, uptake *captures*, and uptake *residues*.[8] Uptake affordances are textually-embedded qualities that shape, constrain, or solicit response, and I focus my analysis here because these are visible within the design of the toolkits I analyze. Affordances are conditions, constraints, and textual mechanisms that solicit an audience's response. For example, the "Period Supply Drive Checklist" (Figure 3) included in the Alliance for Period Supplies' toolkit conditions and solicits a particular uptake: using this as a checklist affirms its status *as a checklist*.

8 All these fruitful concepts are examined in Dryer's elaboration in "Disambiguating Uptake"; because I only focus on affordances in this essay, I omit expanded discussion of the other dimensions of uptake he identifies.


ALLIANCE FOR PERIOD SUPPLIES PERIOD SUPPLY DRIVE TOOLKIT

Period Supply Drive Checklist

Follow and mark this 10 point checklist to ensure you have a successful drive. #EndPeriodPoverty!

Partner with an organization
First visit allianceforperiodsupplies.org to find an allied program in your area. If there isn't one, reach out to agencies such as women's shelters, food pantries, faith based organizations, or health clinics.

Choose your location(s)
Pick one or more locations that are centrally located and willing to help, like a local business, bank, library, etc. Be sure to label your collection bin (flyer included in this toolkit.)

Recruit volunteers
Ask friends, family, colleagues, or neighbors to help out!

Select a start and end date
Typically, period supply drives run for one week to a month.

Set your goals
How many donations would you like to raise? Ask the organization you're donating to what products they need most. Develop a way to track your progress. (Use our goal chart!)

Decide on your theme
Whether it's a themed party, a competition, or a simple period supply drive in your office, choose what works for you!

Spread the word
Announce your period supply drive via social media, emails, local news outlets, and notices throughout your community. Be active before AND during the drive!

Set up transportation
Depending on how many products are donated, consider what type of vehicle you will need to transport them.

Collect and deliver
Rally the volunteers and deliver your donated period products to your partner organization. Don't forget to take photos- you'll need them later!

Share your results!
Post pictures on social media and let everyone know (including Alliance for Period Supplies) your results! Don't forget to thank donors and volunteers too!

Figure 3: Alliance for Period Supplies' Period Supply Drive Checklist.

Such a use is afforded by the design of the checklist, which shapes what a user is more or less likely to do with the document. The design—with open boxes next to each item—solicits its uptake as a checklist, inviting a user to fill each empty box with a checkmark as each task is completed. Uptake affordances of this document include sequencing tasks in particular ways and completing each task before moving on to the next one. Marking off tasks one by one is an uptake affordance that shapes the embodied performance solicited by this toolkit. Of course, affordances *shape* or *constrain* but do not *determine* user uptakes, and other uses of the "Period Supply Drive Checklist" remain possible; for instance, a user of this toolkit could conceivably read this checklist aloud at a meeting, using it to inform other participants of tasks that will need to be planned and accomplished; that user might write, next to each item, the name of a person responsible, rather than a checkmark, and so use the affordances of this "Checklist" as a to-do list or a list of duties to be parceled out among volunteers—taking up the document as a *list* but not quite as a *checklist*.

Although taking up a checklist in this way may not matter a great deal to the embodied dispositions that a young would-be activist gains, other distinctions among the discursive tools taken up may shape more significantly the way that a toolkit user becomes habituated into advocacy. For instance, if a young person seeking to engage in menstrual advocacy takes up a toolkit that provides significant guidance and support toward holding a period supply drive, those discursive tools would scaffold a different set of embodied practices than one that promotes school-based policy advocacy, or one that promotes a more legislative advocacy approach. Engaging with different toolkit resources, and thus with different kinds of advocacy events, a toolkit user will be guided to adopt particular language practices and activist genres, smoothing the way for that user to undertake similar embodied practices in the future. Because practice makes what we have done often easier

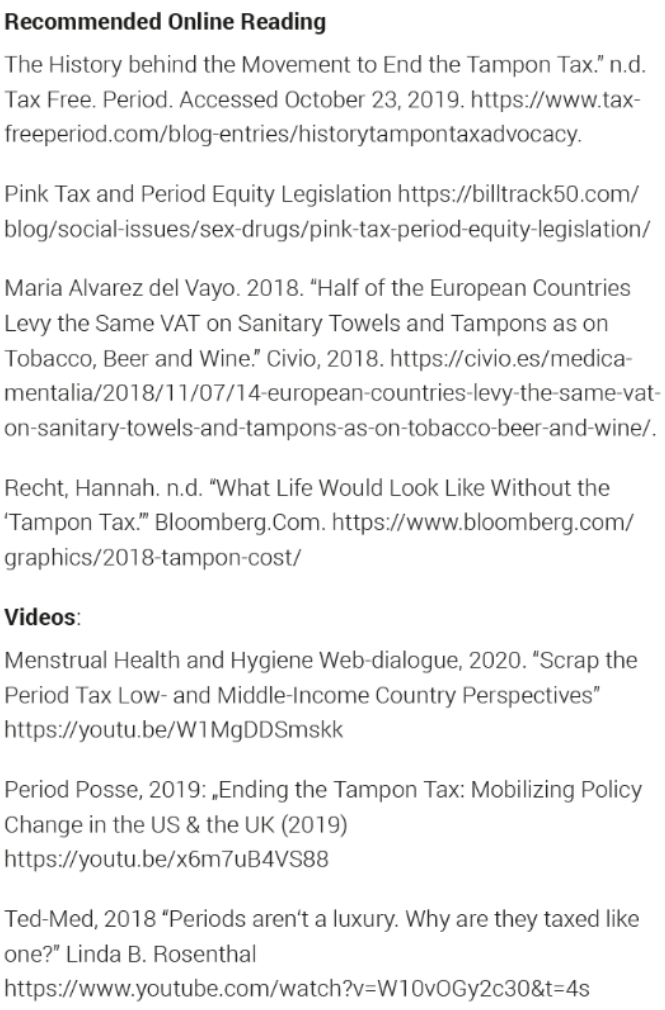
to do again, toolkits can thus shape the direction of activist literacy learning through the uptakes they invite. That is, if we learn from genre not only how to accomplish our ends but, more significantly, "what ends we may have," as Carolyn Miller famously explained, then taking up activist toolkits shapes the activism users enact, the actions they embody, and the dispositions they develop.

Toolkit Affordances for Expertise

How, then, do toolkits enable users' activist learning, supporting their practice toward and cultivation of embodied dispositions *as* menstrual activists? If toolkits provide users with an array of discursive tools, how much direction do these materials provide to govern or shape how they should be used? My analysis of the affordances for uptake across menstrual activist toolkits suggests that some toolkit components are designed strongly to support or scaffold performance, while other components offer only minimal support for users to develop embodied dispositions toward activism.

Least Scaffolded: Informative Tools

Among the least scaffolded texts assembled within toolkits are those designed to provide the toolkit user with information. These include bibliographies and lists of additional resources that the user can locate and consult, as well as fact sheets, FAQs, and talking points. Bibliographies and resource lists frequently appear at the end of toolkits or as sidebars directing toolkit readers toward additional resources they might locate to learn more about menstrual equity, period poverty, period stigma, or policy efforts to address menstrual inequities. The Period Tax Advocacy Guide, for instance, includes a References page that lists academic and popular publications and directs readers toward "Recommended Online Reading," "Videos," and additional "Advocacy Toolkits." (Figure 4)



Recommended Online Reading

The History behind the Movement to End the Tampon Tax." n.d. Tax Free. Period. Accessed October 23, 2019. https://www.tax-freeperiod.com/blog-entries/historytampontaxadvocacy.

Pink Tax and Period Equity Legislation https://billtrack50.com/blog/social-issues/sex-drugs/pink-tax-period-equity-legislation/

Maria Alvarez del Vayo. 2018. "Half of the European Countries Levy the Same VAT on Sanitary Towels and Tampons as on Tobacco, Beer and Wine." Civio, 2018. https://civio.es/medica-mentalia/2018/11/07/14-european-countries-levy-the-same-vat-on-sanitary-towels-and-tampons-as-on-tobacco-beer-and-wine/.

Recht, Hannah. n.d. "What Life Would Look Like Without the 'Tampon Tax.'" Bloomberg.Com. https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-tampon-cost/

Videos:

Menstrual Health and Hygiene Web-dialogue, 2020. "Scrap the Period Tax Low- and Middle-Income Country Perspectives" https://youtu.be/W1MgDDSmskk

Period Posse, 2019: „Ending the Tampon Tax: Mobilizing Policy Change in the US & the UK (2019) https://youtu.be/x6m7uB4VS88

Ted-Med, 2018 "Periods aren't a luxury. Why are they taxed like one?" Linda B. Rosenthal https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W10vOGy2c30&t=4s

Figure 4: Recommended Online Reading from Period Tax Advocacy Guide.

The resources appended to many toolkits are often presented without guidance; sometimes these are not even formatted as bibliographies, but as lists of links with minimal introductory information, as in the UCC's Menstrual Health Toolkit. (Figure 5)

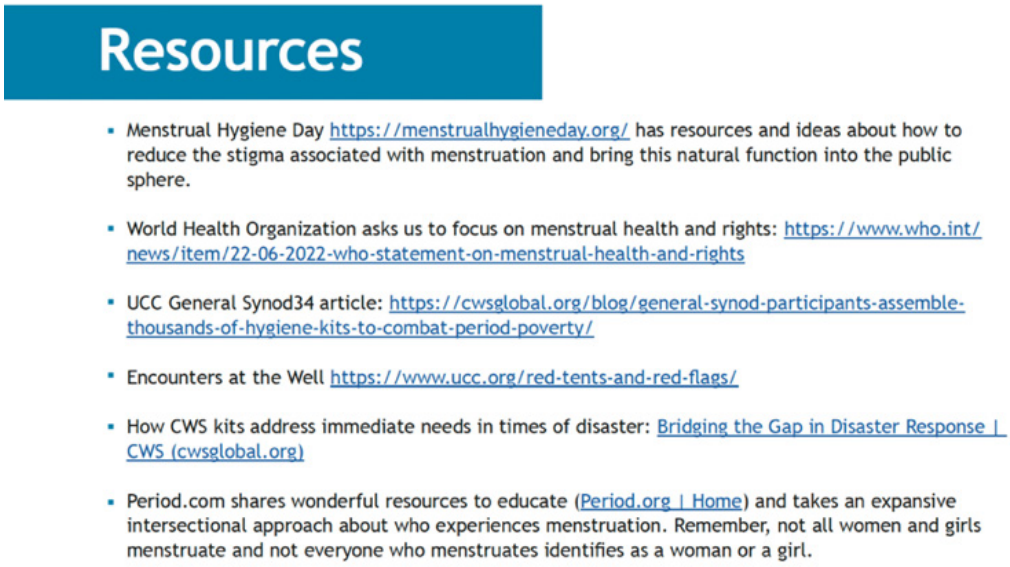
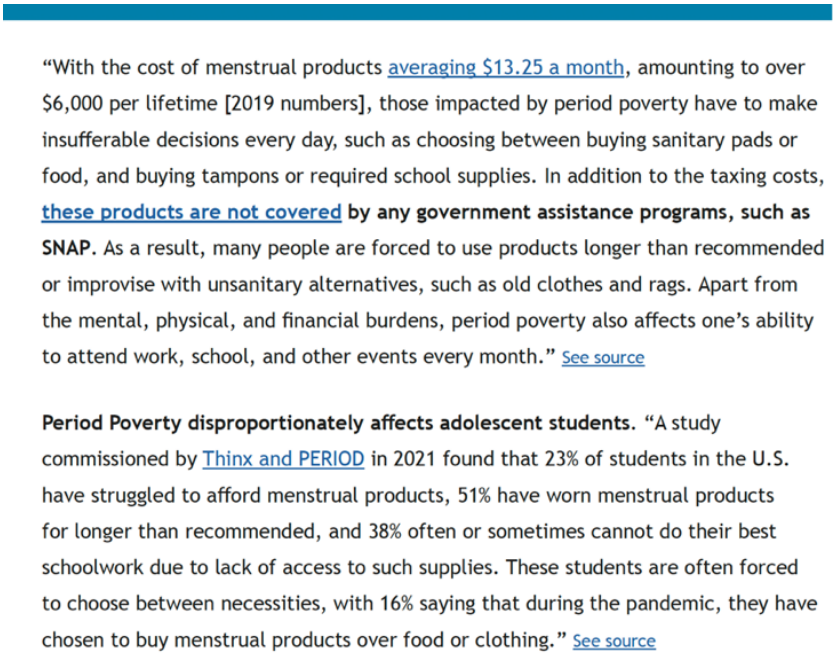


Figure 5: Resources shared in UCC Menstrual Health Toolkit.

These and many similar lists of resources are offered in an open-ended, nondirective manner. Readers *may* read the assembled websites, view the linked videos, and make themselves more informed as potential advocates—but these materials are not clearly designed to elicit particular uptakes. The uptake affordances they make available, then, are fairly open; links invite users to click on them, but otherwise the embodied encounters that bibliographies and resource lists solicit may vary widely. Reading and viewing the assembled resources may impact a toolkit users' performance of expertise—by increasing their familiarity with a range of policy issues related to menstruation, providing them with knowledge that indicates their presence within a network of experts, for instance—but such a performance of expertise is not specifically scaffolded by the design of a bibliography or a resource list.

Toolkits also draw into their pages more specific pieces of information, which makes that information more ready-to-hand for advocacy purposes than a bibliography does. Sharing information is a way toolkit creators can inform not only the toolkit user but future audiences that user might address: a group of potential allies at school, a congregation considering undertaking a period-related ministry project, a school principal entertaining a request from a student group lobbying to have period supplies made available in school facilities, and so on. Many toolkits include fact lists, such as a "Period Poverty Fact Sheet" in the St. Louis Alliance for Period Supplies Toolkit, or "Period Poverty By the Numbers" in the Ending Period Poverty in Your Community toolkit. By isolating and reproducing specific pieces of information, toolkits provide a marginal amount of scaffolding for toolkit users engaging in an array of conversations, both online and off, as seen in Figure 6.



"With the cost of menstrual products averaging $13.25 a month, amounting to over $6,000 per lifetime [2019 numbers], those impacted by period poverty have to make insufferable decisions every day, such as choosing between buying sanitary pads or food, and buying tampons or required school supplies. In addition to the taxing costs, these products are not covered **by any government assistance programs, such as SNAP.** As a result, many people are forced to use products longer than recommended or improvise with unsanitary alternatives, such as old clothes and rags. Apart from the mental, physical, and financial burdens, period poverty also affects one's ability to attend work, school, and other events every month." See source

Period Poverty disproportionately affects adolescent students. "A study commissioned by Thinx and PERIOD in 2021 found that 23% of students in the U.S. have struggled to afford menstrual products, 51% have worn menstrual products for longer than recommended, and 38% often or sometimes cannot do their best schoolwork due to lack of access to such supplies. These students are often forced to choose between necessities, with 16% saying that during the pandemic, they have chosen to buy menstrual products over food or clothing." See source

Figure 6: Long informational passages shared in UCC Menstrual Justice in Action Toolkit.

Some additional scaffolding toward performance surrounds pieces of information that are contextualized within a toolkit in a way that more directly supports the toolkit user's acquisition of knowledge and performance of expertise. For instance, information may be shared through a Frequently Asked Questions format, or in a way that anticipates an audience interaction with a speaker who can benefit from having knowledge ready-to-hand to address challenges or concerns, as in the examples in Figure 7 and Figure 8.

II. KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: THE MENSTRUAL EQUITY FOR ALL ACT

7

Does my school have to provide free menstrual products in school restrooms?

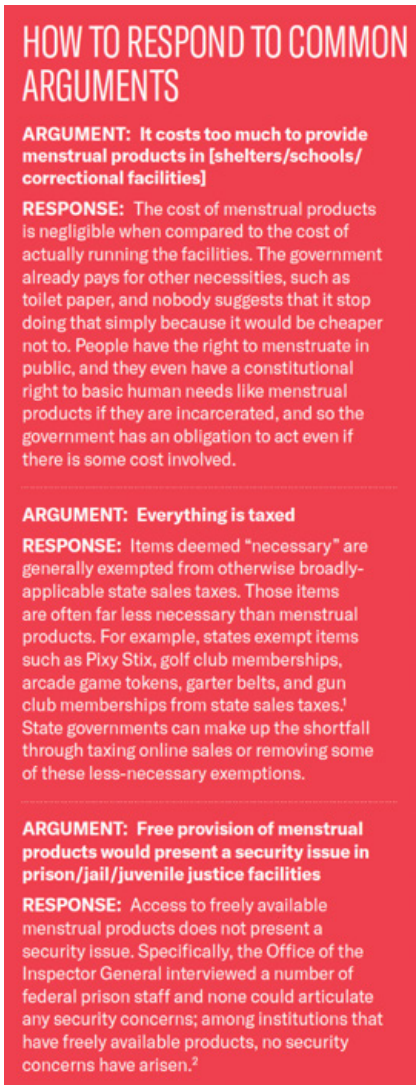
YES. The Menstrual Equity for All Act, passed in 2021, says that starting with the 2022-2023 school year, California public schools serving students in any grade between 6 through 12 must provide free pads *and* tampons in all women's restrooms and all-gender restrooms, and in at least one men's restroom. California public schools include schools operated by a school district or the county office of education, or a charter school. The Menstrual Equity for All Act is codified at California Education Code § 35292.6.

Does my school have to tell me about my right to free menstrual products?

YES. Schools must post notices in restrooms letting students know about their right to access free menstrual products.

Notices must be visibly posted in every restroom where free menstrual products are required, which includes all women's restrooms and all-gender restrooms, and at least one men's restroom. The notice must also provide a phone number and email information for the school staff member responsible for making sure the restrooms are stocked with free menstrual products. (See California Education Code § 35292.6(c)).

Figure 7: "Know Your Rights" information in a menstrual equity toolkit.



HOW TO RESPOND TO COMMON ARGUMENTS

ARGUMENT: It costs too much to provide menstrual products in [shelters/schools/correctional facilities]

RESPONSE: The cost of menstrual products is negligible when compared to the cost of actually running the facilities. The government already pays for other necessities, such as toilet paper, and nobody suggests that it stop doing that simply because it would be cheaper not to. People have the right to menstruate in public, and they even have a constitutional right to basic human needs like menstrual products if they are incarcerated, and so the government has an obligation to act even if there is some cost involved.

ARGUMENT: Everything is taxed

RESPONSE: Items deemed "necessary" are generally exempted from otherwise broadly-applicable state sales taxes. Those items are often far less necessary than menstrual products. For example, states exempt items such as Pixy Stix, golf club memberships, arcade game tokens, garter belts, and gun club memberships from state sales taxes.[1] State governments can make up the shortfall through taxing online sales or removing some of these less-necessary exemptions.

ARGUMENT: Free provision of menstrual products would present a security issue in prison/jail/juvenile justice facilities

RESPONSE: Access to freely available menstrual products does not present a security issue. Specifically, the Office of the Inspector General interviewed a number of federal prison staff and none could articulate any security concerns; among institutions that have freely available products, no security concerns have arisen.[2]

Figure 8: ACLU Sidebar, "How to Respond to Common Arguments."

The question and answer format of the information shared in Figure 7 scaffolds the use of that information in conversation by providing questions to which each answer may be relevant; the straightforward and bolded **YES** after each question is followed by details that anticipate further questioning, even including the statute number of the Menstrual Equity legislation, lending users further confidence in the information's accuracy. Likewise, the ACLU's sidebar "How to Respond to Common Arguments" (Figure 8) provides users with counterarguments and detailed examples, using footnotes to substantiate some pieces of the information shared. Identifying and organizing pieces of information that menstrual equity advocates can deploy in conversational situations represents an uptake affordance that guides toolkit users toward performing expertise through conversations and responses.

Marginally Scaffolded: Directive Tools

Toolkit material in this category includes texts that are devoted to offering users advice, tips, guidance, and steps to follow to achieve a particular end. Directive language abounds across the toolkits in my sample.

Users of the toolkit Ending Period Poverty in Your Community are advised, for instance, "Do not take it personally if someone has questions – look at this as an opportunity to gain an ally instead of battling an opponent." The Period Talk toolkit notes that, after leading a Period Talk workshop in the user's school, "It's always a good idea to take some pictures throughout as well as at the end of the workshop and post them on social media," followed by a list of hashtags to use to connect the event with broader online conversations, such as #periods, #YouthActivism, and #MenstrualEquity. The Period for Change Advocacy Toolkit advises users, "Throughout any advocacy activities, remember to not only identify the problem, but also propose a solution. What exactly are you asking them to do? … As a Girl Up advocate, you should always include a call-to-action when you engage in advocacy!" As one Period Supply Drive Toolkit explains, following any event, "Be sure to promote your results to all those who participated and others as well. Use terms like 'this time we collected' or 'this time we raised…' so people understand there is an ongoing need." These examples indicate the range of directives issued to toolkit users, who receive from toolkits advice about steps to take, arguments to offer, best practices for advocacy activities, language to use, even how to feel when facing questions from an interlocutor. Toolkit authors generally refer to users directly, as "you," which further supports the advice and guidance-giving role of toolkits. The pervasive nature of directives across the toolkits suggests that guidance is a key function users look for in their interactions with toolkit materials.

Guidance in the form of lists or steps to follow is also common, sometimes structuring significant portions of a toolkit. For example, the Student Advocacy Toolkit from the Alliance for Period Supplies provides guidance to direct users toward various goals, including organizing a petition, contacting a superintendent, advocating for period supplies (in a state that *does* or in a state that *does not* have legislation that mandates schools provide period products to students), advocating for legislation at the state level, calling or emailing state legislators, and promoting menstrual equity on social media. Detailed guidelines (Figure 9) include direction for intermediate actions users should undertake as part of a longer-term initiative:

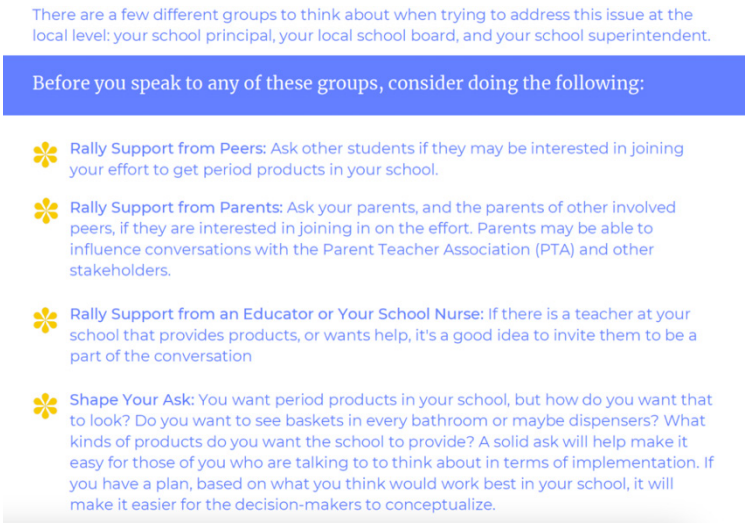


Figure 9: Steps to take before speaking with principal, school board, or superintendent.

The guidelines in Figure 9 do not simply prompt the reader to speak with a school principal or superintendent about the issue but offers four steps to take *before* speaking to officials, to strengthen the advocate's position through strategic alliances and by formulating a clear ask. Other toolkits offer step-by-step guides for creating and circulating a petition, soliciting corporate donations, drafting and placing op-eds in local newspapers, and employing social media to increase visibility. For instance, a toolkit from the ACLU offers readers advice for "Harnessing Viral Moments in the Fight for Menstrual Equity," with advice about making use of *kairotic* or timely events to amplify social media messages about period stigma and period poverty. The Girl Up! Period for Change Advocacy Toolkit outlines several steps for toolkit readers to take when engaging in "Grasstops" (Figure 10), "Grassroots," or "Digital Activism for Menstrual Equity."

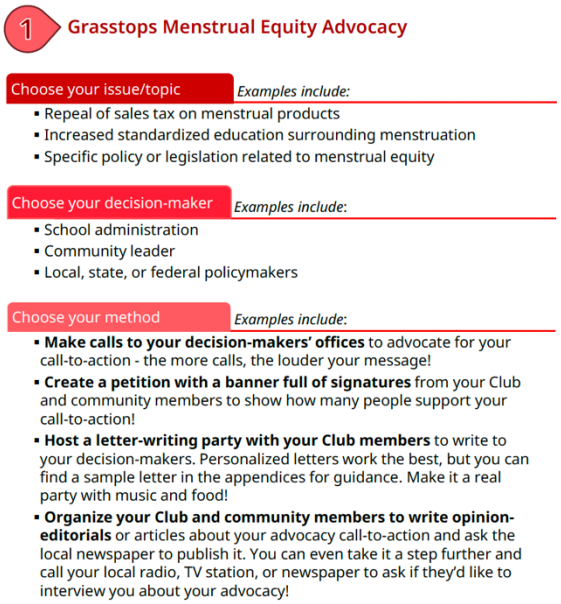


Figure 10: Girl Up Period for Change Advocacy Toolkit's Step-by-step guide for "Grasstops" advocacy.

In addition to directives that offer step-by-step guidance, many toolkits provide lists of "Tips" that are similarly directive, guiding toolkit users in a range of activities they might take up, including contacting public officials, planning and holding events, forming supportive teams, attracting allies, promoting events, and more. (Figure 11)

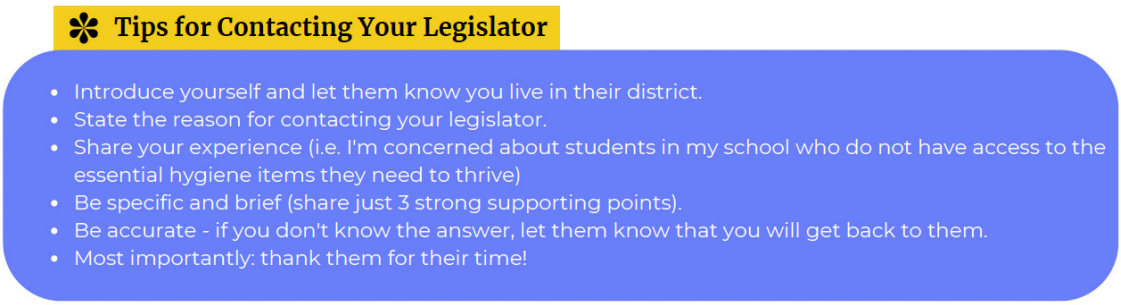


Figure 11: One of several "Tips" offered by Alliance for Period Supplies Student Advocacy Toolkit.

These directive statements more firmly orient toolkit users toward actions they should take as they develop advocacy expertise and employ that expertise through action. Tools such as tips, guidelines, and step-by-step instructions provide firmer scaffolding toward performance than toolkit components that are largely informative. Uptake affordances of step-by-step guidelines, for instance, include prompting toolkit users to sequence their actions in a particular way—such as by forming a group of student and parent allies before approaching the school board about instituting a policy; these affordances shape the way toolkit users come to understand and enact the advocacy they perform.

Strongly Scaffolded: Performative Tools

Distinct from the "you"-directed language that characterizes the directives and guidelines above, a significant portion of the toolkits is composed of discursive materials designed to be *voiced* with an "I" by the toolkit user toward their own audience. I understand these as "performative" tools because they are strongly designed toward the user's performance, fostering uptakes through which the toolkit reader becomes the speaker or writer who inhabits the templates, samples, scripts, and activities included.

Many toolkits include templates, which offer scaffolded guidance and ready-made language, with places identified where users should insert their own information. (Figure 12). Menstrual toolkits include template emails to libraries to propose partnering to offer free period supplies; emails to legislators asking for support for a particular bill with brackets indicating places where the letter writer should insert their own personal story; and petition templates for gathering support before approaching a principal or superintendent about placing supplies in schools.

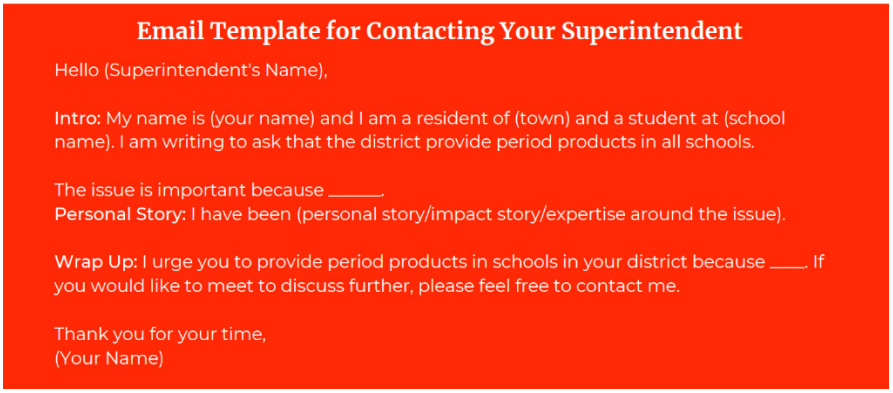
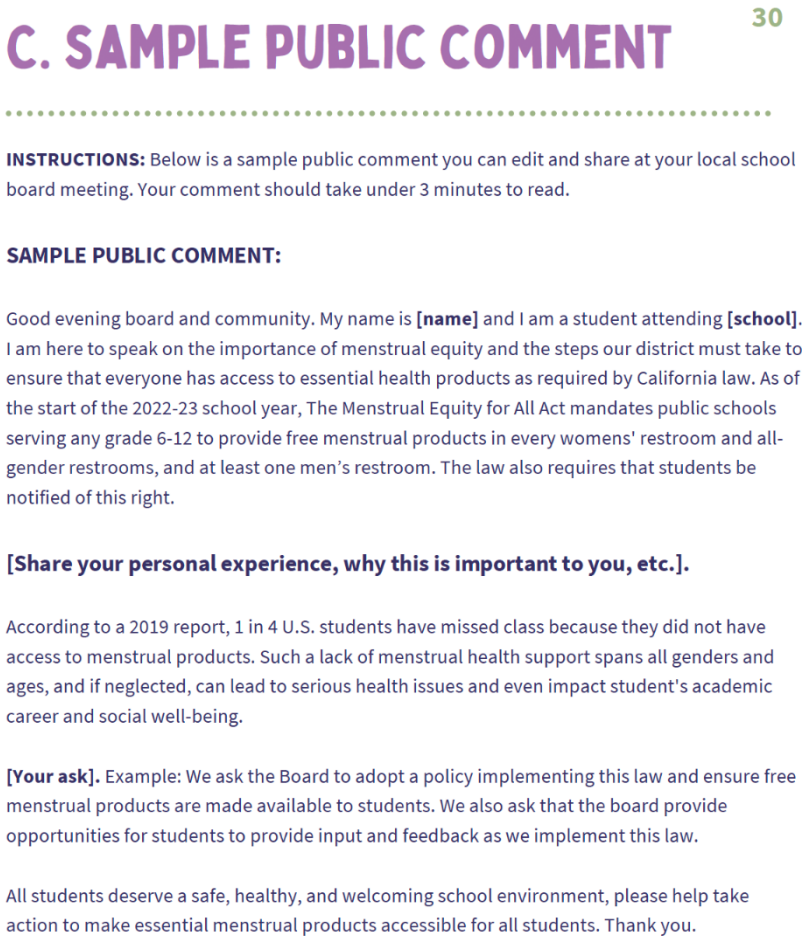


Figure 12: Email Template from Student Advocacy Toolkit.

Additionally, menstrual advocacy toolkits often offer samples, which are similar to templates in providing language that the toolkit user can both adopt and modify. For instance, the Menstrual Equity for All Toolkit provides a sample public comment (Figure 13) the toolkit user can modify during a public school board meeting:



C. SAMPLE PUBLIC COMMENT

30

INSTRUCTIONS: Below is a sample public comment you can edit and share at your local school board meeting. Your comment should take under 3 minutes to read.

SAMPLE PUBLIC COMMENT:

Good evening board and community. My name is **[name]** and I am a student attending **[school]**. I am here to speak on the importance of menstrual equity and the steps our district must take to ensure that everyone has access to essential health products as required by California law. As of the start of the 2022-23 school year, The Menstrual Equity for All Act mandates public schools serving any grade 6-12 to provide free menstrual products in every womens' restroom and all-gender restrooms, and at least one men's restroom. The law also requires that students be notified of this right.

[Share your personal experience, why this is important to you, etc.].

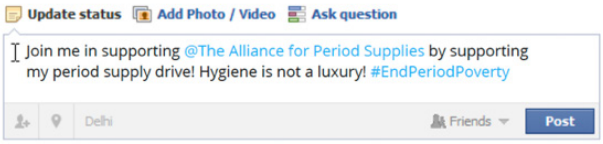
According to a 2019 report, 1 in 4 U.S. students have missed class because they did not have access to menstrual products. Such a lack of menstrual health support spans all genders and ages, and if neglected, can lead to serious health issues and even impact student's academic career and social well-being.

[Your ask]. Example: We ask the Board to adopt a policy implementing this law and ensure free menstrual products are made available to students. We also ask that the board provide opportunities for students to provide input and feedback as we implement this law.

All students deserve a safe, healthy, and welcoming school environment, please help take action to make essential menstrual products accessible for all students. Thank you.

Figure 13: Sample Public Comment from Menstrual Equity for All Toolkit.

Other samples include timelines for developing menstrual product partnerships with community organizations and sample scripts that can be read when contacting legislators by phone. Sample social media captions are offered in many toolkits, providing information about the prevalence of period poverty, about bills related to menstrual equity, and calling for donations to period supply drives, as in the example social media posts shared in Figure 14:



- I believe everyone has the right to feel comfortable and clean. Please show support by donating to my period supply drive! *(insert graphic with details on period supply drive)*
- Did you know 2 in 5 people with periods have struggled with #periodpoverty? Please donate to my period supply drive to help change that.
- Small things impact big things. That is why I'm holding a period supply drive on behalf of @PeriodSupplies. Please consider giving today *(add time + location details)*
- Lack of period products is a hidden consequence of poverty. Help me reach my goal today and donate to my period supply drive! Every bit counts. #EndPeriodPoverty
- Help make a difference in an individual's life today. Donate to my period supply drive that will be taking place in *(location)*
- #PeriodPoverty Fact: School aged girls cannot participate in educational actives without access to fundamental resources. Please consider donating to my period supply drive!
- Individuals require an average of 6 period products per day, and period supplies aren't covered by safety net programs. #EndPeriodPoverty *(insert drive flyer)*

Figure 14: Alliance for Period Supplies Social Media Samples.

Alongside such sample language, several toolkits provide users with links to downloadable image files to enable users to load pre-designed flyers and images into their social media posts, ensuring that such posts can be easily uploaded and circulated. Similarly, many toolkits offer pre-designed flyers for posting physically around a building or community to generate support for period supply drives, enabling users to simply print and post them with minimal modification, as seen in Figure 15.

Figure 15: Printable Wall Flyer from St. Louis Alliance for Period Supplies.

Perhaps even more fully designed to secure performative uptakes are the scripts and presentation slides some toolkits make available to users. Scripts typically include bracketed sections that invite users to include personalized stories or details, and some even include disclaimers for the user to read aloud or offer advice for delivery, anticipating audience questions that the script-reader may encounter. The Period Talk toolkit, for instance, invites the reader to take on a position "as a facilitator and workshop leader" who will "foster community in a safe and supportive space and empower advocates through conversation." This guide reassures readers that "You do not have to be a medical expert to be the expert in your own experience." This toolkit includes a full lesson plan (Figure 16) for the toolkit user to employ while running a Period Talk workshop:

Figure 16: Lesson Plan for a Period Talk Workshop.

Each part of this four-step lesson is scaffolded further with additional materials included in the toolkit, including a full script to read during the Introduction phase (Figure 17):

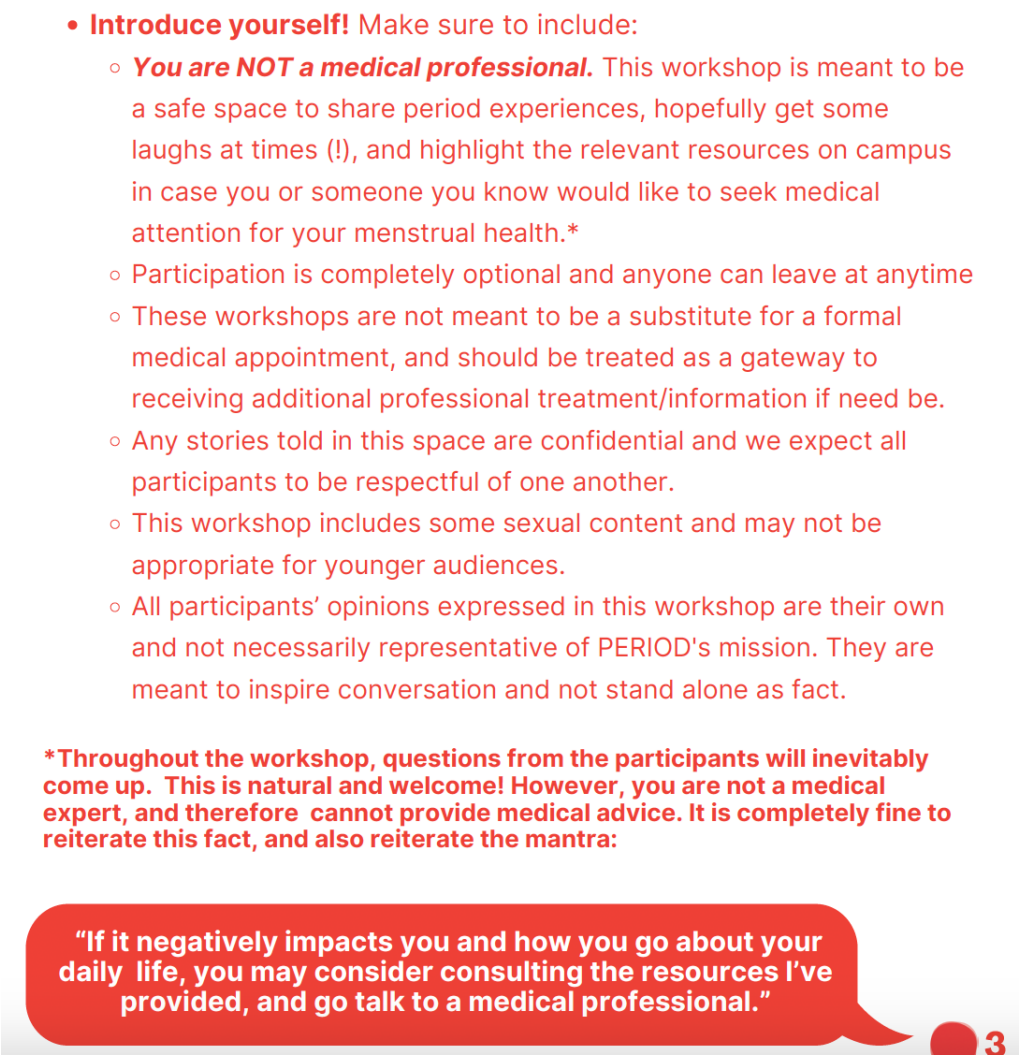


Figure 17: Period Talk Introduction Script with Disclaimer Language.

This toolkit offers users ideas for icebreaker activities, advice on how to use PollEverywhere to solicit the workshop attendees' responses to questions, downloadable and editable slides to accompany each possible presentation topic, a full script to accompany each of the slide decks available, and extended instructions and questions to support the user in facilitating the "Engagement Exercise" (Figure 18), in which workshop participants talk in small groups about their responses to a broad set of period-related questions:

Figure 18: List of questions for discussion during a Period Talk Engagement Exercise.

The samples, scripts, slides, and activities above essentially transform the reader of the toolkit into an expert facilitator, capable of guiding others through a shared experience. One can imagine uptakes of these materials that are halting or awkward, that are more or less successful at soliciting conversation among workshop participants and sharing information meant to address period stigma. Nevertheless, the uptake affordances evident in these materials are incredibly rich, scaffolding an embodied performance that includes presenting, facilitating, offering advice, soliciting multiple perspectives, promoting an event both before and afterward. The users who take up these scripts, who adopt these templates to give voice to their own experiences, are taking on activist roles through their embodied action, making toolkit materials a potent support for acquiring activist literacies and expertise.

Scaffolding Expertise

As they invite toolkit users to take up their guidance and engage in menstrual advocacy, the toolkits discussed in this essay also provide users with opportunities to demonstrate and develop embodied expertise as advocates. The implications of such scaffolding for the activist learning and growth of young people are considerable.

The rhetorical maneuvers for establishing expertise that Hartelius identifies are evident in the uptake affordances of advocacy toolkits. By inviting potential advocates to insert their personal stories into template letters, for instance, toolkit authors prompt advocates to cultivate identification with an audience and foster a sense of exigence toward menstrual equity efforts. As the toolkit *Ending Period Poverty in Your Community* reminds users, after directing readers to a census database that can be used to search for poverty information about their own local community, "It's important to have evidence that there is a need for this project, so ensure that you have data ready and available for discussion." Furthermore, by providing toolkit users with

talking points for engaging others in conversation, toolkit authors invite users to adopt a pedagogical stance toward those they interact with, while tempering that stance with guidance around strategy. And recognizing that expertise emerges in part through participation within networks that affirm one's status, toolkits provide users with agreed-upon definitions, ready-made argumentative talking points, gender-inclusive language, and other linguistic tools that allow menstrual advocates to show their alignment with broader activist networks. Ready-made flyers and sample slides that include names and logos of credible institutions—for instance, the "Drop Period Supplies Here" flyer in Figure 15, emblazoned with two organizational logos—likewise affirm an advocate's expertise through association. As one *Period Supply Drive Toolkit* explains, "Partnering with an area coordinator gives donors confidence that their donations are going to the right place."

Perhaps most significant are the ways toolkits scaffold performance and in so doing support users' demonstrations of *techne*, of skillful language use. Such skillful use is enabled by scripts that provide reasoned and informed language calling for action; through templates that circulate measured phrases and invite advocates to personalize otherwise routine argumentative formulas; and even through step-by-step guides and advice, which direct advocates to follow protocol, assemble teams, be planful and strategic in forming partnerships and promoting equity efforts, and so on. In these ways toolkits provide advocates with skillful language and guide users toward audience awareness and effective strategy. These expertise maneuvers are among the embodied practices that toolkit users take on when they take up the tools assembled within these documents.

My analysis of menstrual activist toolkits suggests that not only is expertise negotiated, but that negotiation is mediated by genre. Performing genre knowledge can help a novice—whatever their age—operate more quickly to perform expertise. Genre is a variable in the negotiation of expertise. That is, expertise is not (exclusively or fully) a situation-by-situation negotiation, but one where genre (both in the genre selected and the skillfulness with which it is performed) does some of the lifting, helping to settle some pieces of the negotiation in advance. This analysis thus helps us to see how expertise involves *habitus*, a learned bodily disposition and orientation. For people who are regularly dismissed because of their age-related embodiment, by audiences disinclined to affirm young people as capable of holding expertise, genre may be an especially significant route toward achieving expert performance. Activist toolkits become legible through this analysis as textual scaffolds for performance, supporting users as they take up genres and take on—enact—an expert role. Through informational as well as directive materials, menstrual advocacy toolkits operate as sites of rhetorical training, scaffolding performances that can become, over time, embodied capacities for intervening in public and instigating change.

Works Cited

Applegarth, Risa. *Just kids: Youth activism and rhetorical agency*. The Ohio State University Press, 2024.

Bawarshi, Anis S. and Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2010.

Bobel, Chris. *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. Rutgers UP, 2010.

Bobel, Chris and Breanne Fahs. "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 45, no. 4, 2020: pp. 955-983.

Condit, Celeste M., "Public Health Experts, Expertise, and Ebola: A Relational Theory of Ethos." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs,* vol. 22, no. 2, 2019: pp. 177-215.

Dryer, Dylan. "Disambiguating Uptake: Toward a Tactical Research Agenda on Citizens' Writing." Reiff and Bawarshi 2016, pp. 60-79.

Emmons, Kimberly K. "Uptake and the Biomedical Subject." In *Genre in a Changing World*, edited by Charles Bazerman, Adair Bonini, and Débora Figueiredo, pp.134-157. WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press.

Fahs, Breanne. "Menstrual Activism." *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

Freadman, Anne. "Uptake." *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*, edited by Richard Coe, Lorelei Lingard, and Tatiana Teslenko. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. 2002, pp. 39-53.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers*. Little Brown, 2008.

Hartelius, E. Johanna. *The Rhetoric of Expertise*. Lexington, 2011.

Kelty, Christopher M. "The Participatory Development Toolkit." *Limn* Little Development Devices / Humanitarian Goods, vol. 9, 2017.

Koskienniemi, Aino. "*Say No to Shame, Waste, Inequality—and Leaks!* Menstrual Activism in the Market for Alternative Period Products." *Feminist Media Studies,* vol. 23, no. 1, 2023: pp. 19-36.

Miller, Carolyn R. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* vol. 70, 1984: pp. 151-167.

Moriarty, Devon and Ashley Rose Mehlenbacher. "The Coaxing Architecture of Reddit's r/science: Adopting *Ethos*-Assessment Heuristics to Evaluate Science Experts on the Internet." *Social Epistemology,* vol. 33, no. 6, 2019: pp. 514-24.

Nish, Jennifer. *Activist literacies: Transnational Feminisms and Social Media Rhetorics*. U. of South Carolina Press, 2022.

Thorne, Barrie. "Crafting the Interdisciplinary Field of Childhood Studies." *Childhood,* vol. 14, no. 2, 2007: pp. 147-52.

Wilner, Tamar, Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi, Sreehana Mandava, Ayesha Bhimdiwala, Hana Frluckaj, Jennifer Turns, and Ahmer Arif. "From Concept to Community: Unpacking the Work of Designing Educational and Activist Toolkits." *CHI '24*. 2024. doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642681

Appendix of Menstrual Advocacy-Related Toolkits:

Ending Period Poverty in Your Community: Lessons Learned from Project Local Access. The Flow Initiative.

The Ho'ohanohano Initiative Implementation Toolkit. 2022.

Menstrual Dignity for Students Toolkit. Oregon Department of Education. 2022.

Menstrual Equity: A Legislative Toolkit. ACLU. December 2019.

The Menstrual Equity for All Act: A Toolkit for California K-12 Students. August 2023.

Menstrual Hygiene Management. The Pad Project.

Menstrual Justice in Action Period Packs. United Church of Christ.

Period for Change Advocacy Toolkit. How Girl Up USA Clubs and Leaders Can Advocate for Menstrual Equity. October 2023.

Period ~~Tax~~ Advocacy Guide. October 2020.

Period Supply Drive Toolkit. Alliance for Period Supplies. Version 1.

Period Supply Drive Toolkit. Alliance for Period Supplies. Version 2.

Period Supply Drive Toolkit. St. Louis Alliance for Period Supplies. 2022.

Period Talk Toolkit: Engage, Empower, and Educate Your Community on Period Health and Menstrual Equity. April 2021. Version 2.0.

Planet-Positive Periods: A Toolkit for Sustainable Menstruation. April 2022.

Plastic Free Periods Campaign Overview. City to Sea.

Student Advocacy Toolkit. Alliance for Period Supplies. olkit for Marking 5th International Dignified Menstruation Day. Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation. 2023.