

The Spectrum Line: Exploring Nonviolence

Why use this exercise?

- A spectrum line is used to get people to reflect on their personal opinions on a topic – commonly on nonviolence and violence as part of a direct action workshop.
- It can help to challenge people's preconceptions and broaden their thinking by exposing them to other opinions, or of course it can affirm their thinking.
- It can also help participants identify like-minded individuals within the group, which can be useful in building effective [affinity groups](#).

Issues to explore

There are a number of underlying issues that usually emerge in any diverse discussion about what makes a piece of direct action violent or nonviolent. Some of the common ones follow. These areas can be used to stimulate interaction and debate because in any group there is usually a range of views on these issues:

- an action being violent if it involves:
 - damage to property
 - damage to people/other living creatures
- an action being perceived as more nonviolent if it is effective (e.g. gets positive media coverage or achieves its stated aims)
- an action being violent but still being acceptable and even necessary
- an action being violent if it is illegal
- an action being more violent if it is covert or less violent if it's accountable

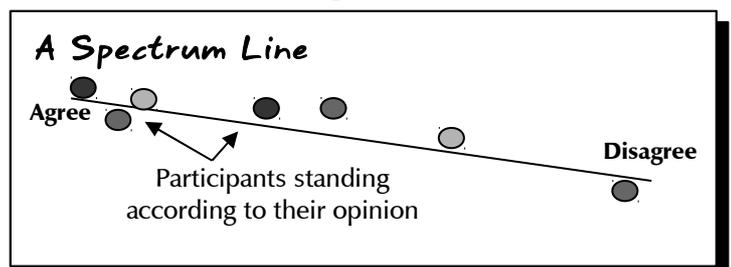
How to run the exercise:

1. Explain that this exercise is an exploration of participants' own ideas and not an attempt to teach the facilitators' viewpoint



by stealth (but only say it if this is true)!

2. Explain that the statements that you will present are brief, and that each participant will have to interpret the situation in the manner that comes naturally to them. We are trying to get out general ideas about nonviolence, and not to get bogged down in detail. So for example, if one participant assumes that one of the statements implies an action that takes place at night – so be it. Others may think differently, and the accountability or visibility of the action may emerge as an important criteria in some people's definition of nonviolence. Be aware that some participants may struggle and constantly want you to provide them with more details of the scenario conjured up by the statement.
3. Ask participants to stand and line up (standing against a wall makes life easier) and designate one end of the line/wall 'Agree' - the other end 'Disagree'. Signs may help make this even clearer. If you choose not to use signs, it can be helpful to repeat the option at the end of each statement "*...so if you agree move towards the door, if you disagree towards the window...*".
4. Explain that you will read out some statements about violence. Stress that these aren't your opinion and are just



tools to spark discussion. If participants agree with the statement they should move towards the 'Agree' end of the line. If they disagree they should move towards the 'Disagree' end of the line. The more strongly they feel, the closer to the end of the line they should move. Those with less strong or no opinion stand near, or in, the middle. It can help for you to move along the line as you explain what each position means, so that you physically map out the idea for people.

5. Make sure that people are aware that they can move at any time, should they change their mind upon reflection or after hearing other participants' opinions.
6. Take a sample of the opinions present (e.g. people at either end of the line, people who have moved a long way, or people in the middle) and facilitate a brief discussion.
 - It helps to ensure that participants know that you will not be able to hear every person on every statement, and ask for contributions to be focused and succinct.
 - It's common for the same few people to have strong opinions to express, so be selective, explaining that you are wanting to involve as many people as possible. It's usually just a case of saying "Let's hear from somebody that hasn't spoken yet...". As with all facilitation, you will need to be careful about putting people who are reluctant to speak on the spot.
7. Facilitators can use provocative questioning to highlight inconsistencies or bring out new themes.

Example Scenarios:

Here's some scenarios we've used in the past. Customise these for the group that you're working with:

- *I experience violence in my everyday life*
- *Breaking the law is an act of violence against society*
- *Hammering the nose cone of a Hawk fighter jet to prevent it being used in combat is*

violent

- *Pulling up a genetically modified crop is violent*
- *Nuclear deterrence is violent*
- *Nuclear power is violent*
- *Living an affluent lifestyle in a world where millions live in poverty is violent*

Timing:

In 20-25 minutes you can expect to cover 4 or 5 scenarios if you take just 3 or 4 brief opinions about each. Obviously you can use more statements and/or have a longer discussion if that suits the group. Extend the time allocated to the activity accordingly

Materials:

You can use signs to mark the end of your line if you like. You can also mark the line on the floor using masking tape. This works well on carpet, but can take polish/varnish off wooden floors, so test it first.

Notes:

- This is an active exercise that requires movement, and requires people being on their feet for at least 20-25 minutes. It's therefore good for more [tactile learners](#) who engage physically with their learning. The discussion element also makes it great for reflective learners who enjoy listening to the various sides of a debate.
- Be aware of mobility issues and back injuries – not all workshop participants or groups will be comfortable or able to stand for this long. If necessary put some chairs in strategic places so people can sit down during the discussion phases or keep it short and then sit down again and continue in a more conventional discussion format. See *Variations* for a seated versions of the exercise.

- This exercise requires setting up very clearly so that participants understand which end of the line to move towards, that they can move at any time etc. It's worth repeating these facts throughout the exercise to avoid confusion.
- Obviously a spectrum requires enough room for your group to spread out. If you're tight for space you may need to create a U shape spectrum, or think about using the same exercise on paper (see *Variations*).
- In larger groups less people will get heard and the majority may end up feeling like they're standing around getting bored, so think about using another tool or splitting your group into 2 (if you have a co-facilitator), or have people share their initial thought in small clusters with those standing near them before hearing a sample of views from the full line.
- Large groups and some venues (e.g. outside) can cause problems with people not being able to hear other people's contribution. You might need to repeat back contributions to the group so that everyone can hear them.
- Be careful with your language. It's easy to talk about the people at each “*extreme*” of the spectrum. It's probably best to avoid accidentally labelling people as 'extremists'.

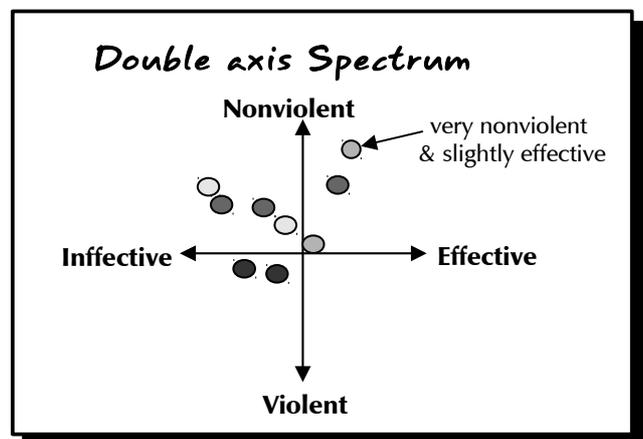
Variations:

Follow on discussion: Run the spectrum line as above but write up the main criteria of people's definitions of violence/nonviolence as they emerge (or preferably get someone else to write them up) and feed them into a brief facilitated discussion if it's going to be useful and if you've got the time.

Other issues: Whilst the spectrum line is the classic violence/ nonviolence tool, it can easily be used to explore other topics. We've used it to explore personal definitions of what is effective direct action. We've also used this exercise with groups to explore their limits and the support systems they require before they can take action. The ends of the spectrum are “*I'd never do that action*”

at one end and “*I'd find it easy to do that action*” at the other. People in the middle are saying they would do the action in the right circumstances, and you can explore what those circumstances are (an example might be “*I'd take part in this action if I was certain it would get good media attention*”, which stimulates the group to think about what they can do to ensure good media coverage).

Double Axis: Once you're feeling more confident you can create a double axis spectrum, with one axis being 'Violent' and 'Nonviolent' and the other being 'Effective' and 'Ineffective', for example. Participants would consider both criteria and move accordingly – so they might stand between the nonviolent and ineffective point for an action they felt was nonviolent but didn't achieve much.



Paper Spectrum: We use this when we don't have room for a normal spectrum. Get a large sheet of paper and draw a line on it. Hand out post-it notes. Participants can then either put their name on a post-it and move that to express their opinion, or you can pre-prepare a series of post it notes with statements on them and ask the group to place them along the line depending on how (non)violent or (in)effective they consider them. You might have post-its with a range of possible actions on them eg: *suicide bombing, signing a petition, going to see your MP, starting a housing co-op, pulling up a GM crop, taking medicines into Iraq in contravention of UN sanctions, occupying a corporate office* etc. Best done in several small groups. Ask the groups to pay attention to, and note down, the criteria they find themselves using to make their decisions.