

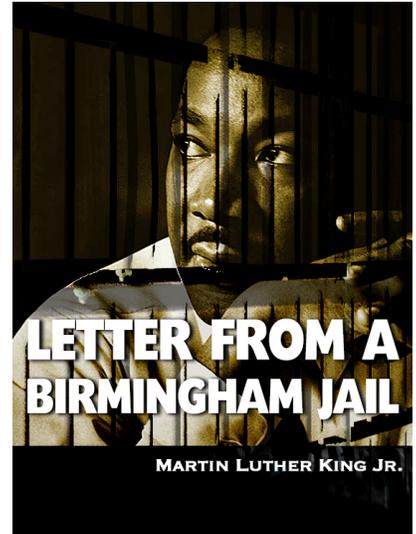


Letter From a Birmingham Jail

by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Things To Know/Things To Think About

In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King artfully explains the motivations behind his campaign of non-violent protest. The impetus behind this masterful work was a newspaper article written by eight white Alabama clergymen. In the article, the clergymen condemned King’s style of leadership and his tactful, albeit effective method of protest—non-violent resistance. In response, King wrote a brief treatise that is the distillation of his philosophical and ideological beliefs. In contrast to the “superficial social analysis” made by the clergymen, King makes a series of stark and penetrating social critiques that expose the racist power structure—and deeply entrenched systemic racism—that dominates both the Southern and Northern United States. In the process, King not only justifies non-violent protest as a mechanism of change, but holds it up as a liberating force that transmutes hatred into love. King’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” is a piece that compliments any introductory lesson on Civil Rights, with a particular focus on the life and works of Martin Luther King, Jr. This piece also works exceptionally well as part of a larger lesson that aims to contrast King’s pacifistic beliefs with the more militant side of the Civil Right’s Movement, best represented by Malcolm X, The Nation of Islam, and the notorious Black Panther Party. Furthermore, “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” is an invaluable part of any lesson on rhetoric, social injustice, the political history of the 1960’s, and the philosophy of law.



Standards Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Before Reading

1. Talk in small groups, and think about what makes a law just or unjust. Do you believe that all laws are just? Do you believe, in some circumstances, that its okay to break a law?

During Reading

1. In his open letter, King makes several mentions of the importance of maintaining “tension.” What is the overall purpose of this tension according to King? Cite examples from the text. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1)

After Reading

1. Class Discussion: Imagine the following scenario. A friend in school is being bullied by another, much larger student, and your friend employs the tactic of non-violence. What are the benefits and drawbacks of this type of action?
2. What is the rhetorical significance of King’s decision to frame his arguments in the form of a letter, rather than a traditional essay? What does this mode of writing accomplish? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5)

Connections In Text

1. Based on Martin Luther King’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” and the the Books That Grow piece, “Malcolm X: An Unforgettable Fire,” compare and contrast Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. In terms of political ideology, what do these men share, and how do they differ? Based on the readings, what life experiences do you think help explain their differences? Finally, do you believe that both men had the same Civil Rights goals in mind? Why or why not? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9)
2. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez cite Mohandas Gandhi as the inspiration for their non-violent protest movements. Interestingly, Gandhi himself was inspired by the illustrious Russian Writer, Leo Tolstoy, who in his book, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, was one of the first writers to popularize and advocate for the use of non-violent action. Research Tolstoy’s book, and describe the ways Martin Luther King, Jr. borrows from his ideas. Also, describe the ways in which King modifies and adapts Tolstoy’s ideas to suit his own particular ends, and unique historical context. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9)

Further Readings

For Teachers:

<http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/letter-from-a-birmingham-jail-summary-analysis.html#lesson>

This link provides an in depth analysis and summary of King’s “A Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” that would be invaluable for any teacher to strengthen his/her understanding of King’s arguments. In this summary, the author outlines the nine criticisms made by King’s dissenters, in the newspaper article that provoked his letter, and explains how King systematically counters each criticism.

For Students:

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/hum/mlk/srs216.html>

This link provides a short, but no less effective, timeline of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life. This piece can help students understand the events and experiences that lead up to King’s brief period of incarceration in Birmingham, Alabama.

Vocabulary

Domain-Specific Vocabulary:

Civil Rights, segregation/segregationist, desegregation, civil disobedience

G8 Challenging Vocabulary:

admonish (8), affirmative (8), agitate (8), anarchy (8), blatant (8), commend (8), concur (8), conformity (8), congregate (8), contemporary (8), elegy (8), futile (8), latent (8), monologue (8), ominous (8), paternal (8), query (8), sanctimonious (8), superficial (8), suppression (8), abyss (7), ally (7), amend (7), antidote (7), birthright (7), cite (7), confer (7), conscience (7), conscious (7), diligent (7), eloquent (7), impel (7), jeer (7), pious (7), psalm (7), signify (7), appall (6), associate (6), attain (6), basis (6), bear (6), campaign (6), century (6), charge (6), code (6), compel (6), comply (6), concern (6), concoct (6), concrete (6), conduct (6), confront (6), consider (6), deed (6), defy (6), degrade (6), despair (6), devote (6), engulf (6), forfeit (6), idle (6), indeed (6), legitimate (6), minority (6), period (6), repent (6), square (6), stagnate (6), treason (6), witness (6)

G6 Challenging Vocabulary:

appall (6), associate (6), basis (6), bear (6), campaign (6), century (6), charge (6), code (6), compel (6), concern (6), concoct (6), concrete (6), conduct (6), confront (6), consider (6), contradict (6), crave (6), defy (6), degrade (6), deliberate (6), despair (6), devote (6), engulf (6), guillotine (6), indeed (6), legitimate (6), minority (6), period (6), repent (6), square (6), stagnate (6), stimulate (6), strategy (6), systematic (6), witness (6), administer (5), assure (5), baffle (5), bitter (5), blemish (5), case (5), cause (5), challenge (5), combat (5), concern (5), condemn (5), convenient (5), convict (5), criticize (5), decree (5), dialogue (5), discipline (5), economic (5), empire (5), establish (5), expose (5), fate (5), grave (5), harass (5), method (5), nation (5), nature (5), neglect (5), negotiate (5), patient (5), permit (5), persist (5), philosophy (5), plight (5), sacred (5), tense (5), thrive (5), vary (5), visionary (5), vitality (5), weary (5), account (4), affect (4), applaud (4), assemble (4), attempt (4), aware (4), chaos (4), class (4), condition (4), confess (4), content (4), council (4), court (4), develop (4), differ (4), dignity (4), fickle (4), intimidate (4), maintain (4), margin (4), mindful (4), mock (4), nightmare (4), optimism (4), outright (4), party (4), point (4), preach (4), proper (4), rather (4), scene (4), tempt (4), unique (4), urge (4), vast (4), victim (4), view (4), vocal (4), vote (4), wage (4), will (4)

G4 Challenging Vocabulary:

absurd (4), account (4), affect (4), arena (4), assemble (4), attempt (4), aware (4), chaos (4), class (4), condition (4), confess (4), court (4), develop (4), dignity (4), effect (4), maintain (4), margin (4), mindful (4), nightmare (4), obstacle (4), optimism (4), outright (4), passion (4), preach (4), proper (4), rather (4), register (4), urge (4), victim (4), view (4), vote (4), wage (4), will (4), withstand (4), differ (4), academic (3), accomplish (3), amuse (3), ancient (3), appreciate (3), assume (3), belief (3), benefit (3), body (3), cooperate (3), encourage (3), fight (3), humiliate (3), instance (3), minister (3), mob (3), moral (3), must (3), organize (3), power (3), precious (3), pressure (3), privilege (3), progress (3),

reality (3), realize (3), rejoice (3), responsible (3), result (3), slave (3), social (3), worship (3), protest (3), solve (3), title (3), wicked (3), wonder (3), world (3), achieve (2), approve (2), arrest (2), avoid (2), beauty (2), beyond (2), break (2), comfort (2), community (2), complete (2), confuse (2), congratulate (2), demand (2), democracy (2), disappoint (2), discuss (2), disgust (2), elect (2), enemy (2), equal (2), fail (2), faith (2), false (2), free (2), future (2), goal (2), impress (2), issue (2), judge (2), kind (2), law (2), legal (2), participate (2), peace (2), popular (2), positive (2), punish (2), purpose (2), rebel (2), refuse (2), remain (2), remove (2), respect (2), series (2), soul (2), speech (2), struggle (2), suffer (2), support (2), sure (2), surrender (2), survive (2), teach (2), time (2), tire (2)

G2 Challenging Vocabulary:

arrest (2), article (2), cause (2), change (2), community (2), congratulate (2), convince (2), deal (2), demand (2), disappoint (2), discuss (2), elect (2), enemy (2), equal (2), excuse (2), faith (2), free (2), goal (2), ignore (2), kind (2), issue (2), law (2), peace (2), punish (2), rebel (2), refuse (2), reject (2), remove (2), respect (2), serve (2), spread (2), struggle (2), sudden (2), suffer (2), support (2), time (2), able (1), act (1), afraid (1), business (1), cause (1), change (1), church (1), country (1), create (1), decide (1), each (1), explain (1), few (1), hope (1), jail (1), kill (1), know (1), often (1), people (1), person (1), police (1), prepare (1), protect (1), read (1), rob (1), say (0), scare (1), stay (1), study (1), understand (1), wait (1), worry (1), obey (1), again (0), all (0), always (0), anger (0), answer (0), baby (0), bad (0), black (0), brother (0), bus (0), city (0), day (0), friend (0), good (0), human (0), hurt (0), little (0), never (0), one (0), ride (0), school (0), silly (0), sister (0), stop (0), strong (0), when (0), who (0), why (0)