



LAS 189 Sample IM

Handout courtesy of Rich Morris

**Note: In order to save paper, this document has been single spaced.
However, the document should be double-spaced**

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IM for "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Elements. After reading Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," I have found three important elements. The first element is King's use of the non-violent, direct action approach by African-Americans in order to attain equality with whites. King's direct action program is set up to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. After years of injustice, King decided to start the non-violent campaign. There are four steps that are very important for every non-violent campaign to be a success. First is the collection of facts to see if there is an injustice, then negotiations, self-purification, and finally direct-action. The timing of this campaign was ridiculed because it was after an election and the city of Birmingham actually had two city governments. King actually postponed it several times even though African-Americans have waited for over 340 years to receive their constitutional rights, and they cannot wait any longer. But now he is using non-violent, direct action to force the Birmingham white community to address the issues of segregation and discrimination.

Another element of King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, is his idea of just and unjust laws, which differentiate between humans based on race. King defines a just law as a man-made code that squares with the moral law or law of God. He defines a just law as a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. King believes that an unjust law degrades and damages the personality of people who are to follow the law. Also, an unjust law is a law that is used on a minority that has no choice in deciding the law because they are not given the right to vote. King is in Birmingham jail because he was arrested for not having a permit for parading, but he believes that he was arrested because the law is used to maintain the status quo of segregation and denies citizens their first amendment right of freedom of assembly and protest. Also, King believes that someone who willingly breaks an unjust law and accepts the penalty to raise concern within the community is actually showing the highest admiration of the law. He is calling on the white community to face the injustice of laws on segregation.

Along with being upset with unjust laws, King was also upset with the inaction of white church and its leaders to join him in ending segregation, which is the third element. King thought that the white church would be supportive of his movement and some leaders were, but others did not seem to care. He compares his movement to that of the early Christians because people thought the Christians were causing trouble, but King like the early Christians, urges his people to stay true to their cause because they are right. Although he is upset that a majority of the white church is not supporting his movement, he does not frown upon the church but hopes that they will eventually change their minds and support him in ending the evils of segregation and discrimination.

Form.

The **genre** King uses to express his frustrations with segregation in his artifact “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a letter about resistance to segregation in the South in the 1960s to a newspaper and is informative and very persuasive.

The **primary audiences** for this artifact are the clergymen, the white moderates, and his own supporters.

The **secondary audience** is Northern white, middle-class Americans who may not know what is happening in the South.

In deploying various **types of evidence**, King uses several biblical figures to show the clergymen that what is being done in the south goes against God: Paul, Jesus, and Nebuchadnezzar. He also cites philosophers such as Socrates and Biblical scholars such as St. Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Burber. He uses current historical figures and events in the South—Police Chief Bull Connor, Mayor Albert Boutwell, James Meredith, and the Klan—but also incorporates other historical figures such as Lincoln, Jefferson, and even Hitler—and events such as the Boston Tea Party and Hungarian Revolution. At one point he also quotes a 72 year old black woman—using her ungrammatical, but dignified response to her struggle against segregation: “My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest” and also tells a story about his daughter not being allowed to go to Funtown.

His **tone** in this artifact seems very restrained most times and passionate about tending the injustices done unto blacks throughout the southern United States, but at times it sounds angry and frustrated.

Maker. Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15th, 1929 in Atlanta Georgia to Rev. Martin Luther Sr. and Alberta Williams King, and he was the oldest of their three children. He attended public schools in the Atlanta area, all of which were segregated. His grandfather was the pastor at the Ebenezer Baptist Church until 1931 when his father took over until the 1960s and then King took over. While King was a junior in High School, he took the college entrance exams and scored very well on them. Since he scored so well on the exams, he was able to start attending Morehouse College at the age of fifteen. Then, at the age of nineteen, King was ordained a minister at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and in 1951 he was awarded a bachelors degree in Divinity from the Crozer Theological Seminary. Shortly after attending Crozer, King married Coretta Scott and they had four children. Then in 1955 he received his doctorate in Systematic Theology from Boston University. In 1956, King led the Bus Boycott in Montgomery which lasted 381 days and after that he founded the SCLC and was president until 1968. He was assassinated in April of 1968 in Memphis, where he was marching in support of a garbage workers strike.

sources: MartinLutherKingCenter.org/biography; SouthernPovertyLawCenter.org/king.life; HistoryChannel.org/MLK

Maker, Part B. After reading Letter from Birmingham Jail, I feel that King is a very determined and passionate man. He is very polite in his letter the clergymen—even though he has a right to be angry and disappointed; this shows a kind of fortitude supported by love and understanding. From the many sources used in this letter, you can tell he is a very intelligent, well-read man. He also seems to be very forgiving; King does express some disappointments throughout the letter, but he never places the blame on one single person. Even if he disagreed with you, he would be patient and polite. King comes off here as a very caring, loving individual. He seems to be the type of man who practices what he preaches.

Historical Context. Ever since the end of slavery after the Civil War, former slaves and African-Americans have been fighting for their god given and constitutional rights. Segregation was ruled legal after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that whites and blacks are separate but equal. African-Americans were given the right to vote, but state laws continuously made it more difficult for them to get in the voting booth. In 1941, the U.S. decided to enter WWII and about 1 million blacks fought in the war. Those who did not go abroad were sometimes able to take federal service jobs that gave them benefits. Also with the help of the GI Bill many former soldiers were able to go to college and get an education. Once the war was over, like women

working in the factories, African-American s jobs were taken away and everything went back to the status quo. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal has no place in public education, so schools then became desegregated, but not without a fight. Then in 1957 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) is organized which was aimed at ending segregation. The SCLC started non-violent protests such as sit-ins, boycotts, and marches. One popular movement was the Freedom Riders which was a large group of people who rode buses to test the new law that ruled segregation on interstate buses illegal. They were often met with resistance, but in the end they helped persuade the Kennedy administration to take a stand for civil rights.

Sources: NAACP.org/history.reconstructiontoWWII; HistoryChannel.org/StruggleforFreedom; [From Many to One](#) (HIS 105 text); [Eyes on the Prize](#) (videotape)

Purpose. The overt purpose of King s Letter from the Birmingham Jail, was a reply to the eight Alabama clergymen who wrote a letter asking people to stop participating in the demonstrations led by Dr. King. First of all, he wants the clergymen to know that his approach to fighting the injustices done onto his people is justified because the city of Birmingham left no other alternative. Since the city has broken promises from past negotiations and are unwilling to negotiate anymore that there is nothing else, they can do except for taking direct action, which will continue. King wants the clergymen to know that what he is doing is not illegal because he is standing against unjust laws, is willing to accept any penalty for breaking them, and he will keep on with his crusade. Also, King wants to express many of his disappointments with the white moderates because they wanted order instead of justice. He also chides the white church and its leaders because it is not following the moral law of God that everyone is equal. Finally, King wants the clergymen to know that he will not stop his push for civil rights until everyone of every color receives their God given rights. This is a call for the clergy, the white moderates, and all good Christians to stand up against segregation, to join his campaign, and put an end to discrimination and prejudice once and for all.

Implications/Effect, Part A. The Letter from Birmingham Jail affects me because my people are the ones who fought for segregation. Although I do not consider myself racist, I could understand if African-Americans might have a hard time trusting me because I am white. Even after the passage of the many civil rights acts, African-Americans still struggle to become equal with whites because some whites refused and still refuse to give up their more privileged rights. I have seen this in the small town I come from. Some still use racist language and make jokes. Because of all the injustices that whites have done to African-American, and all of the broken promises, I understand why some African-Americans might be bitter. Also after reading this artifact, I have more of an understanding of what African-Americans have had to go through to receive their constitutional and God given rights. First they were slaves, then they were segregated, and now there are still instances of discrimination. Racism is still present in Champaign county.

Implications/Effect, Part B. The ideas that King expresses in Letter form Birmingham Jail had a major impact on society. First of all, the letter was a major part of the civil rights movement, which was successful in giving African-Americans their constitutional and God given rights. Once segregation was over, whites had to finally accept that African-Americans were people too. Everything from school, transportation, restaurants, bathrooms, and water fountains had a black side and a white side, but after 1965, they were all available equally for blacks and whites. Also, since African-Americans finally received their rights, they were given a chance to move up in society. Although blacks have equal rights, they are still sometimes discriminated against, and are still fighting for equal opportunities at schooling, occupations, and business. Overall, many of the ideas that King expressed in his letter are still very useful in today s society where some African-Americans still struggle with feeling equal to their white counterparts. Nonetheless, progress has been made. More African-Americans have made it into the middle class, more are in positions of success and business and politics; one has even become president.

Questions

Since the death of MLK, have African-Americans made much progress towards equality? Why or why not? Explain your answer.

Do you think what King did would still be considered extreme if he were around today? Explain why you think so.

If he were alive, what would King think about the women's movement? Explain why he would take this position?

Would King support gay rights? Gay marriage? Explain why or why not.

Would King have supported the war in Iraq or not? Defend your answer.

Vocabulary

Abyss-an immeasurable deep chasm, depth or void (page 79)

Paternalistically-a policy of treating or governing people in a fatherly manner by providing for their needs without giving them rights. (page 82)

Sanctimonious-hypocritically devout (page 82)

Trivialities-of little significance or value (page 84)

Inextricably-too involved or complicated to solve (page 87)