

The following is a model response to MLK by a former student.

Student

ENG 124

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Brief: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail"

Letter From Birmingham Jail, by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)

Rhetor: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Credentials:

- Baptist minister
- Powerful orator
- Leader of the civil rights movement
- President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- B.A. in Sociology from Morehouse College
- B.Div. degree from Crozer Theological Seminary
- Ph.D in Systematic Theology from Boston University
- At least 50 honorary degrees
- Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize
- Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom

Presuppositions:

- Strongly believed in racial equality
- Upheld nonviolent activism as the means to achieving equality
- Strong Christian faith
- Denounced non-peaceful means of protest and all violence
- Faith in the institutions of the U.S. Government
- Staunchly advocated for racial equality

Audience: The letter was addressed to eight clergymen as a response to a published statement by those men condemning King's tactics in the fight for equality. The men felt that the political arena was best equipped to find a solution, while King advocated and conducted nonviolent activism. Though the letter is addressed to the clergymen, it was published as an open letter. The letter is more likely meant for the "white moderates," for white supremacists, and for politicians. The calm tone of the letter, despite his circumstances at the time he wrote it, may also be a deliberate attempt to quell the fears of the nation as a whole that has his emotions under control and intends to operate under the peaceful rules that he preaches. Finally, he may be addressing the black community, affirming those same beliefs in his peaceful practices.

Presuppositions:

- White supremacists believe themselves superior to all other races

- White moderates have a position of social order over equality. Plainly, they don't want to have to see the problems or deal with repercussions; they want things handled in a "more convenient season."
- Politicians rely on bureaucracy and its timetables, as well as popular opinion to affect change.
- The clergymen that are directly addressed side with the politicians and bureaucracy, desire equality, and hold religion in high regard.
- The black community desperately desires equality but also requires organization and leadership.

Purpose:

To respond and persuade. Dr. King's letter denounces the clergymen's beliefs that political discourse is the way to gain equality during the civil rights movement. He bases his assertion on the fact that little has been done thus far and that the wheels of government are slow-moving and biased by public opinion. He also counters their denouncement of his tactics. He points out that his tactics are not the problem, but the events that caused their necessity are. He makes a case for the cause and his tactics by highlighting the continuing problems of racial inequality and uses historical and biblical references as justification. He also uses the platform to point out hypocrisies in the clergy's praise of police force tactics in keeping order, when in reality they used violence against protestors. Dr. King's primary focus was to point out the problems in what the clergymen stated, but also to bring unity to the cause. He did not scold, per se, instead used logic and examples to make the point that he was doing his best to bring about change without making matters worse.

Exigency:

Continuing racial inequality, political and social stagnation. The civil rights movement was necessary because the government had not done enough to affect change. Legality was being confused for morality. King made this point by noting that Hitler's actions were considered legal and that the Boston Tea Party was illegal. Because the laws were created for people that had no right to vote, and therefore had no say in their creation, they could not be just. Despite the words in America's founding documents that "all men are created equal" there was still no proof of that for African Americans. Dr. King knew that violent methods of resistance would be met with greater force, so he therefore believed that peaceful resistance was the best chance for equality. Division between those seeking the same end, would only delay that end further.

Analysis/Reflection:

Many people have said that Dr. King's message of peace was *too* peaceful, that his methods relied too much on finding the humanity in people that had shown little regard up to that point. In retrospect, it's difficult to argue with the results. After all, the civil rights movement was successful. Or was it? Do we truly have equality now? Some would point to the current divisions in America as evidence that the movement was not successful, only that the symptoms and tactics have changed. A young black soldier, home on leave, was recently killed by police because he was seen as a bad guy for having a gun in a dangerous situation, while other gun-carrying white people weren't killed in that same situation. Is this an example of the inequalities that still exist? Is it simply a matter of media sensationalism? It's possible that a different, less passive, approach might have been met with even more force and more lives would have been lost without affecting change. It's also possible that a more violent approach would have necessitated a far clearer outcome, one in which people of all races know exactly where they stand, equal or not. Dr. King may be remembered for his contributions to the cause of racial equality, but perhaps that's because the powers that be want a man the preached nonviolence to be the example, they want the type of man that's easier to control to be the example. As a former, long-term member of the military, I have seen first-hand that violence can solve problems.