

Lesson Name : 36

Lesson Title : Letter from Birmingham Jail, Section 1

Course Name : English 2 Part 1 [Honors]

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Essential Instruction

Please read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)" from the beginning through the line "...antidotes to combat the disease of segregation."



A **rhetorical work** is one that is often analyzed to determine *how* the author makes his or her points about a topic, rather than analyzed to determine *what* the author says. It relies on the audience's emotions, morals, and values to get its message across. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a good example of a rhetorical work.

When you are analyzing a rhetorical work, first identify what the work is about. This will help you to understand why and how the author is writing. The title of this work tells you that King is writing the letter from jail and that he is writing it in response to criticism. King also expresses his reasons for participating in civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. Look at the example from the text below to see more specifically what he is writing about.

Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.

This passage explains that King and his supporters are in Birmingham to lead the locals in a civil rights movement.

To understand this rhetorical work, think about why and how King is writing this letter. He is trying to explain and convince the people of this city that African Americans are not being treated fairly and that this is not just an issue for African Americans, but for all people who enjoy and deserve freedom. One of the most famous sentences from this letter is "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." This sentence reminds the audience that the treatment of one group of people affects the treatment of all.

This letter is significant culturally because of the long history of disagreement in the United States regarding the issue of racial equality. Particularly in the South, many conflicts erupted due to the injustices associated with civil rights, who they were granted to, and who they were withheld from. African Americans were not allowed to ride in the front of the bus, were not allowed to eat at the same counters as white people, and were victims of many crimes that went unprosecuted, or unpunished. King's primary mission was to overcome these and similar injustices.

Additionally, the letter has historical significance because the civil rights movement in Birmingham came about in response to a highly segregated, or separated, society. King was invited to Birmingham in response to the formation of a new group, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Fred L. Shuttlesworth formed this group after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was banned in Alabama in 1956.

All of these events happened in the 1950s – not that long ago. You probably know people or have relatives who are still alive today who witnessed these events either in person or on the news.

### Language

When analyzing a rhetorical work such as "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," it is important to consider the specific words and phrases that the author uses in the work. Authors of rhetorical works use language deliberately. Words and phrases are carefully chosen in order to convey tone and purpose, to persuade the audience, and to refute counterarguments.

The table below will help you to examine some examples from Dr. King's work.

Passage or Word	Analysis
"... just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town."	In these lines, King makes an analogy comparing his own work to that of the Christian Apostle Paul. This is an effective strategy to use to reach the clergymen in his audience, many of whom share King's religious background.
Injustice	King uses this word several times throughout his speech because of its negative connotation. It effectively emphasizes the reasons King is in Birmingham, while undercutting any argument that what he is doing is unnecessary.
"But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim ..."	In this portion of his letter, King addresses the many injustices to which the African-American community is subjected. He uses specific, graphic images in order to refute the argument that equality can wait.
"We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was 'legal' ..."	This reference to Hitler's regime in Germany serves to refute the argument that King's actions are illegal. By mentioning the legality of the atrocities that Hitler committed against the Jewish people, King negates the argument that what is legal is automatically right.

Morally	Throughout his letter, King talks about his goals as a moral obligation, and he repeats the word <i>morally</i> multiple times. This emphasizes to his audience that action is not a choice, but rather a responsibility.
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As you can see, King's use of language has a specific purpose in this letter. When analyzing a rhetorical work, it is important to look at not just what the author says, but also the reason the author says it.

## Context Clues

**Context clues** are helperwords that can help you to understand the meaning of a sentence that contains an unfamiliar vocabulary word. When you read a word that you aren't familiar with, try to determine what the rest of the sentence or paragraph means, then fill in the blank with your best logical guess. Look at an example to review how to use context clues.

There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of **brutality** is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, **brutal** facts of the case.

The meaning of the vocabulary word *brutal* is hinted at by the surrounding words and phrases, "racial injustice engulfs this community," "most thoroughly segregated city," "ugly record," "grossly unjust treatment in the courts," and "unsolved bombings." The final sentence of this selection emphasizes that the facts are hard and brutal, which should lead you to conclude that the word means ruthless or cruel.



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Martin Luther King Jr. uses a rich vocabulary in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Here are some vocabulary words that are used in the selection you read for this lesson.

1. **cognizant** – adj. – having knowledge or being aware of
2. **interrelatedness** – noun – state of being related or connected to one another
3. **deplore** – verb – feel or express strong disapproval for something
4. **grapple** – verb – to try to overcome or deal with
5. **moratorium** – noun – a temporary prohibition, or shut-down, of an activity
6. **earnestly** – adv. – sincerely
7. **gadflies** – noun – literally, flies that bite livestock. Here, the term is used to mean people who motivate or annoy people by being critical.
8. **futility** – noun – state of being incapable of producing any useful result; pointless
9. **abyss** – noun – a deep or seemingly bottomless chasm; a bottomless pit
10. **advocate** – verb – publicly recommend or support