

Lesson Name : 37

Lesson Title : Letter from Birmingham Jail, Section 2

Course Name : English 2 Part 1 [Honors]

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Please read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)" from the line "Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment" through the end.



A **rhetorical work** is one that focuses on *how* the author or speaker presents points about the topic that is being relayed to the audience rather than *what* has been written in a speech or letter. It relies on the audience's emotions, morals, and values to get its message across. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a good example of a rhetorical work.

The first thing that you should do to **rhetorically analyze** a piece of work is to identify what the work is about. In this case, King's letter is addressing the Civil Rights Movement efforts, or the process for granting equal rights for African Americans, efforts in Birmingham, Alabama. We also know by the title that he is currently imprisoned. Let's look at an example from the text that tells us what King's topic is specifically.

I wish you had commended the Negro sit inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes.

This shows that King is writing because he wants the readers of this letter to abandon their old beliefs, and to recognize what the moral and just solution would be. He wants his readers to recognize the efforts of the people who peacefully demonstrating to show their support of equal rights for African Americans.

Also, you need to identify what the intent of King's letter is. For example, is it to criticize, to persuade, or to inform? Truthfully, it is all three. As it was previously discussed, the primary recipients, or receivers, of this letter, are eight white clergymen who made a public declaration against King and his supporters' demonstrations. King intends to inform them of the facts, criticize their current beliefs to a certain degree, and also to persuade them to think differently in the future. This is why it is important to also identify the intended audience of a **rhetorical work**. Let's look at an example from the text.

But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice.

Additionally, you can think about the word choice, the tone, and your imagined reactions of other people to further **rhetorically analyze** a piece of work.

Cultural and Historical Significance

As you read this letter, you should also think about the **cultural significance** that it bears. This was a time in American history when African Americans were not allowed equal privileges on many levels, especially in America's South. Civil Rights groups formed all over the country and Martin Luther King Jr. was a leader within this movement. He was well-educated both academically and religiously, and believed very passionately in what he spoke.

There is also **historical significance** to consider, as King's intentions were all meant to be nonviolent. There were growing numbers of groups across the country that weren't satisfied with his progress alone. As these groups began to form, violence once again began to erupt across the country. King was speaking in Memphis, years after this letter was published, when he was assassinated by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968.

Context Clues

Additionally a reader should use **context clues** to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words in a sentence. To do this, you should locate words that you do know the meanings of, and apply it to the unfamiliar word. Let's look at an example from the text.

I wish you had commended the Negro sit inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their **sublime** courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation.

The context clues for the word **sublime** are "commended," "courage," "willingness," "amazing," and "great." All of these words suggest that the word **sublime** means something similar. In fact, it means, *beautiful* and *inspiring*.



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Vocabulary

Understanding the vocabulary can really help you to gain understanding from the material. Here are some vocabulary words that are used in this lesson.

1. **mores** – noun – the essential or characteristic customs and conventions of a community
2. **infanticide** – noun – the murder of a child
3. **irrelevancies** – noun – immaterial or unimportant things
4. **decisive** – adj. – indisputable; definite
5. **vitality** – noun – the state of being strong and active
6. **provocation** – noun – action or speech that makes someone annoyed or angry, often done on purpose
7. **profundity** – noun – deep insight; great depth of knowledge or thought