
Objectives:

- Students will be able to analyze a rhetorical work and to understand its cultural influence and its historical significance.
- Students will be able to use context clues to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words.
- Students will be able to correctly use vocabulary words.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 – 1968)

Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister, social activist, and the leader of the American Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his use of nonviolent protest to achieve civil rights. He was famous as a speaker, writer, social and religious leader. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, but the cause to which he dedicated his life – the end of segregation and equal rights for African Americans – continues on.

Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Segregation was the legal separation of races. It was practiced in the southern states. During segregation, African Americans could not attend the same schools, eat in the same restaurants, use the same bathrooms, sleep in the same hotels, or drink from the same water fountains as Caucasian (white) Americans. Even public transportation was segregated. African Americans had to sit in the back of city buses while whites sat in the front. If there were not enough seats, blacks had to give up their seats for white riders.

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” was written on April 16, 1963 while King was imprisoned for leading nonviolent protests against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Only eight days before his arrest, eight white Alabama clergymen admitted that social unfairness existed, but that the battle to change them should be fought in the courts and not in the streets. King wrote the letter in response. His letter explains the need for action and his methods. The power of King’s arguments in the letter influenced Americans of all races and cultural backgrounds and fueled the civil rights movement. As a result, its historical and **cultural significance** cannot be overlooked.



In the letter's beginning, King explains why he has the right to be in Birmingham, and why he has a moral obligation to be there. He writes:

I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. ... What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." What does this mean? Is he saying that if a house down the street is robbed, it threatens every house in the neighborhood? Does he mean that human rights in China affect human rights in the United States? He means that social justice in Alabama affects social justice in Georgia, but is the overall suggestion even greater? What do you think?

Further in the letter, he explains the purpose of nonviolent protest:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.

In other words, he wants to create a situation that makes it impossible to ignore the problems. What would cause King to use such methods?

Context Clues

Context clues are "helper" words and phrases within a sentence that can help you understand an unfamiliar word. Being able to understand what you are reading will help you better grasp the full understanding of the literary work.

"Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing **familiarity**. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see ... that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

What does the word **familiarity** mean? How can we figure it out? What other word does it look like? It looks like the word "family." You know the members of your family. It also looks like the word "familiar," which again means something that you know. Therefore, we can understand the sentence to mean that the word is painfully familiar.

"Justice too long delayed is justice denied." Taken in context, how can we understand this line? King has just written that in regards to social change that "Wait" actually means "Never." He is unwilling to wait for social justice to be given to him. He believes that it would be given "never." And, that "justice delayed is justice denied." If you have to wait for justice, then the time spent without it is still unjust. He believes that he must act.

Since King wrote the letter while in jail, he must have broken a law. How does he explain this? King uses the technique of quoting well known authority figures from the past. Notice how by using this technique not only does King explain his own actions, but he delegitimizes – which means to make unjustified – the laws that put him in jail.

How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? ... To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation laws are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality.

Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an ... expression of man's ... terrible sinfulness? Thus I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

How would you make sense out of the next section?

An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority **compels** a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.... A just law is a code that a majority **compels** a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself.

In this passage, you read the terms “majority” – which is a stronger force – and “minority” – which is the weaker of the two. As well, the word “power” is attached to “minority.” You can assume that the majority have power over the minority. Also, the phrase “minority group to obey” indicates the minority must do what the majority tells them to. Put all of that together and you can conclude **compels** means “forces.”

Growth & Assessment:

1. What is segregation?
 - a. A speech
 - b. Forcing people to live together
 - c. Imprisonment
 - d. The legal separation of races
2. What was the goal of nonviolent protest?
 - a. To make it impossible to ignore problems
 - b. To be able to sit at lunch counters
 - c. To sit at the back of the bus
 - d. To be extremists
3. What does “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” mean?
 - a. People should ignore each other’s problems
 - b. Social justice in one place affects social justice somewhere else
 - c. Segregation is a just law
 - d. A code that a majority forces a minority to obey
4. What did King believe the South, the nation, and the world was in serious need of?
 - a. Unjust laws
 - b. Segregation
 - c. Creative extremists
 - d. Piercing familiarity
5. How did King explain being in jail?