
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.



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.

Style

Style is a distinctive way of doing something. King writes in a style that is uniquely his own. His style is a combination of Baptist preacher and teacher, of religious leader and social leader. But, he always writes in a style that demonstrates that he is a well-educated scholar. His style shifts from a simple accounting of factual events to a visionary idea of what America could be. His style changes from poetic to plain. However, King always uses the style that is best suited to the immediate subject. This is an excellent example of rhetoric. **Rhetoric** is the careful use of language to cause a strong emotional reaction in a listener.

King was a firm supporter of nonviolent protest. He explained his methods this way:

I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, perhaps even more so, to use moral ends to preserve immoral ends.

“Moral” addresses the question of right or wrong. Something moral is right, something immoral is wrong. What King is saying is that it is wrong (immoral) to use violence to attain justice (moral ends). Further, it is also wrong to use moral means (the law) to preserve immoral ends (segregation).

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.

In response to the Alabama clergymen, or representatives of the Church, King - who was an ordained minister himself – wrote a very strong criticism of the Church.

So often the contemporary church is a weak, **ineffectual** voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the **status quo** ... The power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent – and often even vocal – sanction of things as they are.

How can you figure out the meaning of “ineffectual?” Look at the context clues, which are the words “weak” and “uncertain.” The word **ineffectual** is joined with these clues. Things that are weak and uncertain do not get much accomplished. They don’t have much impact. King says that the church’s voice is “weak, **ineffectual**, and uncertain.” Therefore, we can understand that the word **ineffectual** means to not produce any - or the desired - result. In this context, then, King says that the church’s voice doesn’t change anything, it is ineffective.

What is the “status quo?” Keep reading. “The average community is ... consoled by the church’s ... sanction of things as they are.” Here King is restating himself. So we can understand “status quo” to mean “things as they are.”

But King goes on to praise individuals who have “broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity” to join the civil rights movement. Let’s analyze, or look closer at, this sentence:

They have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

Let’s break this down. “They have acted...” This means that they have done something. “In the faith...” Faith means belief. “That right defeated...” ‘Right’ here means goodness. “Evil triumphant.” This means evil is in control. So let’s put it back together: They have done something in the belief that goodness out of power is stronger than evil in power. In other words, that goodness is stronger than evil and right is stronger than wrong regardless of who is in power. Maybe you’ve heard the expression, “Right is right and wrong is wrong.” King found a very poetic way of expressing that belief.

Even though King saw white Southern churches protecting segregation, he was confident that equal rights for African Americans was inevitable - “inevitable” means certain to happen.

But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about our future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham ... We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.

King’s faith in America is inspiring. Even though many white Americans were angry at King for leading protests against segregation and for civil rights, King himself believed that the actions of the protestors were acts of true American patriotism.

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at a lunch counter, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values ... thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

“Disinherited children of God” refers to black Americans who did not have equal rights. “Sat down at a lunch counter” refers to a nonviolent protest when several young black men sat down at a “whites only” lunch counter. They were refused service, but they refused to move. Eventually they were arrested and sent to jail. These were the types of social injustice that nonviolent protestors wanted the world to see.

Vocabulary

There are many words in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* that will help you build your **vocabulary**. Let’s take a look at some of these words.

Deplore – verb – To strongly disapprove of something

“Jimmy, I heard you plan to drop out of school, and I want you to know that I *deplore* the idea!”

Superficial – adjective – Existing only on the surface; not deep or thorough

“You’ve only had two French lessons. Your knowledge of the language is *superficial*.”

Grapple – verb- To wrestle or struggle with someone or thing

“I can’t decide what to do about it! I *grappled* with the problem all night!”

Growth & Assessment

1. King was assassinated.
 - a. TRUE
 - b. FALSE
2. What does the term “status quo” mean?
 - a. Things as they are
 - b. Ineffectual
 - c. Archdefender
 - d. To be extremists
3. According to King, what is the “goal of America”?
 - a. A dream
 - b. Social justice
 - c. Segregation
 - d. Freedom
4. Did King believe that the actions of the nonviolent protestors were destructive or patriotic?
5. King was concerned about questions of morality. What does it mean to be moral?