

## A Close Read of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail

On April 12, 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested for breaking an Alabama injunction against demonstrations in Birmingham. He was placed in solitary confinement and on April 16th he read a letter from Alabama clergymen published in the New York Times. From his Birmingham City Jail cell, King wrote the following response along the margin of the paper. This lesson only contains the first four paragraphs of King's letter.

**Target Benchmark: Civics Standard Three [Citizenship] Grades 9-12a** – Students will understand that citizens are individually responsible for keeping themselves informed about public policy issues on the local, state, and federal levels; participating in the civic process; and upholding the laws of the land.

*Lesson Essential Question:*

- Why must citizens inform themselves about issues from all areas of the country?
- Why should citizens ensure that the laws of the land are upheld across the country?

**Literacy Standard Supported by this Activity:**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8

Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

<p>Bishop C.C.J. Carpenter          Bishop Joseph A. Durick          Rabbi Milton L. Grafman          Bishop Nolan B. Harmon          The Rev. George H. Murray          The Rev. Edward V. Ramage          The Rev. Earl Stallings</p> <p>My dear Fellow Clergymen:</p>	<p>Martin Luther King, Jr.          Birmingham City Jail          April 16, 1963</p> <p><b>Sourcing the Document:</b></p> <p>What type of text is this? Who was the author?          When was it created? Why does this matter?          (DE History Standard 2)</p>
<p>While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.</p>	<p><b>Text Dependent Literacy Questions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Based on paragraph one, what can you infer about the letter King received? (CCSS RH.9-10.1)</li> <li>2. King addresses his audience as "men of genuine good will" and mentions that their concerns are "sincerely set forth." What is the connection between "genuine" and "sincerely"? What tone do these words and phrases create, and why does King choose to use them? (CCSS RI.9-10.4)</li> </ol>
<p>I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. What specific claim is King responding to in paragraph two? (CCSS RH.9-10.1)</li> <li>4. In paragraph two, what is King's argument for being in Birmingham? (CCSS RH.9-10.8)</li> <li>5. What evidence does King provide to support this claim? (CCSS RH.9-10.8)</li> </ol>

<p>affiliates. 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.</p>	<p>6. What does the line “when the hour came we lived up to our promise” imply about King’s character and beliefs? (CCSS RH.9-10.1)</p> <p>7. How does this line help strengthen King’s argument? (CCSS RH.9-10.8)</p>
<p>But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and 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. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.</p>	<p>8. In paragraph three, with whom does King compare himself? (CCSS RH.9-10.1)</p> <p>9. How does his comparison support his argument for going to Birmingham and impact the tone of the text? (CCSS RH.9-10.8 &amp; CCSS RI.9-10.4)</p>
<p>Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.</p>	<p>10. What is the central idea of King’s argument in paragraph four? (CCSS RH.9-10.1)</p> <p>11. How does the argument in paragraph four fit or relate to the other reasons and evidence he has shared in this letter? (CCSS RH.9-10.8)</p> <p>12. What words or phrases does King use to convey a sense of duty or responsibility for action in Birmingham? (CCSS RI.9-10.4)</p>
<p>Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.</p> <p>Martin Luther King, Jr.</p>	

### Assessment Prompt

The excerpt below appeared in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* in 1963.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Based on this excerpt, what can you infer about King's beliefs about the responsibilities of citizens?