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Group Concept: Institutions

Subject/Course: AP English Language & Composition

Title Image (with citation and brief byline of the photo):



Don Cravens / The Life Images Collection / Getty; Bettmann / Getty

Arrest photo of Martin Luther King, Jr., Birmingham city jail; King reflecting in his cell.
www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/letter-from-birmingham-jail/552461/

Lesson Plan:

“Letter From Birmingham Jail”: MLK and the Language of Dissent

Brief narrative/Lesson Plan (2 short paragraphs)

In April of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was jailed for the 13th time in Birmingham, Alabama. Beginning with the arrest of Rosa Parks and the ensuing Montgomery bus boycott of 1956, a series of events now referred to as the Civil Rights Movement led up to this pivotal moment. The oppressive police-state social environment of Birmingham also contributed significantly to Kings' decision to get arrested. While incarcerated, King penned "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as a searing rebuttal against the hypocrisy, shortcomings and flaws of the white clerical establishment in relation to the Civil Rights Movement. It remains as a paragon of rhetoric and one of the preeminent American historical documents of the 20th Century.

This multi-day lesson requires students to initially gain a thorough working understanding of the events and social conditions leading up to the tumultuous, history changing events that took place in Birmingham, Alabama in the spring of 1963. Once oriented, students must recognize key rhetorical strategies used by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) as they analyze his **calculated response** to the criticisms of local clergymen who objected to what they saw as King's unwelcome intrusion into local racial politics. By focusing on the connotation of key words and phrases, they will identify King's intent. Finally, using their annotated copies of King's speech and notes from class discussions, students will compose a two-page written analysis of their chosen word or phrase.

Guiding Questions

- a. How did events of the Civil Rights Movement and the social conditions in Birmingham, Alabama contribute to MLK's decision to come to Birmingham in April, 1963?
- b. When is challenging and/or breaking the law (e.g. going to jail) warranted?
- c. How can people of the same religious faith, who read the same holy text, have different interpretations of what is morally right?
- d. How does Martin Luther King employ powerful diction and rhetorical strategies to refute critics of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement in 1963?

Learning Objectives

- **Students will understand the social and historical context (kairos) surrounding MLK's historic "Letter from Birmingham Jail."**
- **Students will identify key rhetorical concepts (i.e. connotation, irony, ethos, allusion) in King's speech and discuss their usage.**
- **Students will analyze how King's use of diction and tone enable him to effectively create a powerful rhetorical message to his audience.**

Class Periods (required to complete the lesson)

Four or five one-hour periods.

● College and Career Readiness Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.8

Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

● Preparation (this could be an activity)

Lecture: [MLK, the Civil Rights Movement and Birmingham, Alabama](#)

Read and discuss as a class:

[The 6 principles of nonviolence](#)

Note: students will possess a working knowledge of connotation and denotation, rhetorical appeals (i.e. ethos, pathos and logos), and other pertinent rhetorical concerns (i.e. audience, kairos, tone) prior to the lesson.

● Lesson Activities (numbered and in order) - description and links

1. Read the [Call for Unity](#), a letter written to MLK by eight local white clergymen opposing his involvement in Birmingham's Civil Rights Movement, and complete a rhetorical analysis ([SOAPSTone](#)) of the text.

-Quick Write/Class Discussion:

*Are their concerns warranted?

*What do they want?

*Why?

2. Read first section (5 paragraphs) of "[Letter From Birmingham Jail](#)" aloud to students; they will take notes, annotate and prepare for discussion in small groups.

3. Small Group Discussion:

In groups of 4-5, students will briefly discuss their understanding of and response to the introductory section of the speech. They should focus on specifics and quote text from the speech to serve as examples.

4. Whole Class Discussion...Rhetorical aspects of "Birmingham Jail" speech:

-Who is the intended audience? How does he address them? What is the initial tone of the letter?

-What ethos does MLK possess? How does he achieve this in his writing and otherwise?

-What kairos informs/surrounds this specific rhetorical situation? (both past & present)

5. Homework (OR, a full class period can be used if preferred):

Students will read "[Letter From Birmingham Jail](#)" in its entirety and annotate for key diction, allusions, and rhetorical concepts.

6. Focused Group Analysis:

Create five groups consisting of an equal (or near equal) number of students. Each group will be asked focus on ONE word/idea of King's letter as assigned below. Then, as a group, they will discuss the letter in terms of the topic they are given. They will be tasked with giving a brief 10-minute presentation to

the class in order to educate and enlighten them about King's message and rhetorical purposes.

Group 1: "Law and Order" (pg. 3)

Group 2: "Untimely" (pg. 2)

Group 3: "Extreme" (p. 4)

Group 4: "Religious...traditions" (p. 5)

Group 5: "Restraint" (pp.4-5)

● **Assessment**

- What is the established denotation of the word/idea?
- In the context of the "Statement from Alabama Clergymen," how is the word/idea connoted? Explain the point they are making in a short paragraph.
- In his letter to the clergymen, how does King *invert* the connotation of the word/idea to establish a different meaning and refute the points made by the clergymen?
- Provide specific textual evidence to support your ideas.

● **Lesson Extensions**

You will write a thesis-driven rhetorical analysis essay in which you examine the rhetorical effectiveness of the "[Letter From Birmingham Jail](#)" written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. The main purpose of the assignment is not to inform your peers of your views on the argument, but rather, to argue whether the author uses rhetorical devices (ethos, pathos, logos) effectively and how he does that. Direct your analysis to an audience of your classmates.

Write a brief thesis-based rhetorical analysis of King's speech focusing on your groups word/topic from the exercise.

● **Reference Websites**

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/letter_birmingham_jail.pdf

https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230016/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf

Materials and Media (supported files)

[SOAPSTone worksheet](#)

[The 6 principles of nonviolence](#)

[“Call for Unity”](#)

“Letter From Birmingham Jail”