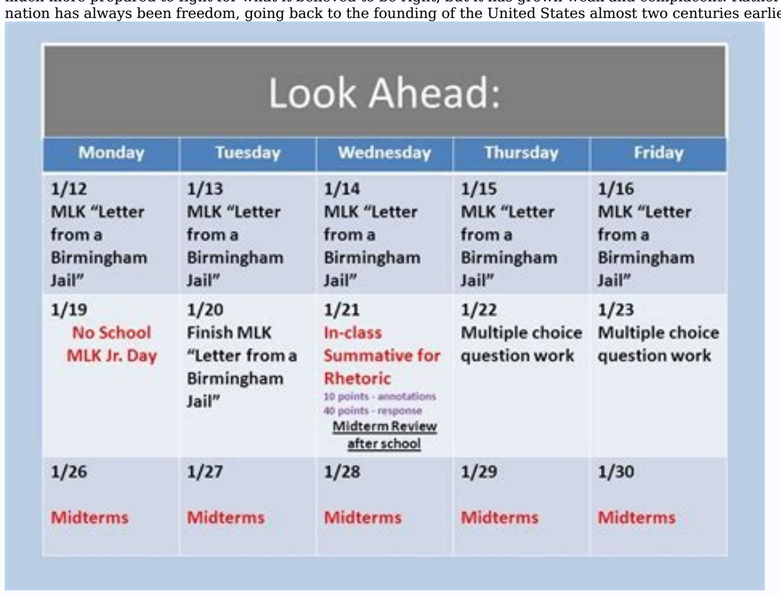


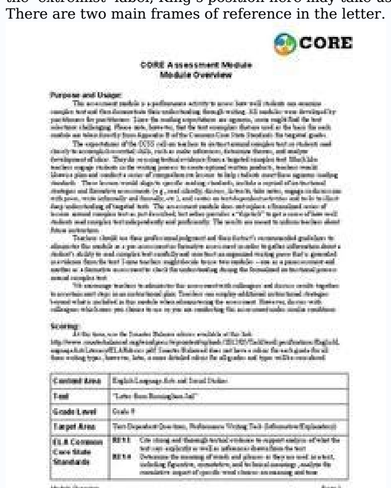
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Letter from birmingham jail rhetorical analysis worksheet

By Dr Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University) ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ is Martin Luther King’s most famous written text, and rivals his most celebrated speech, ‘I Have a Dream’, for its political importance and rhetorical power. King wrote this open letter in April 1963 while he was imprisoned in the city jail in Birmingham, Alabama. When he read a statement issued in the newspaper by eight of his fellow clergymen, King began to compose his response, initially writing it in the margins of the newspaper article itself. In ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’, King answers some of the criticisms he had received from the clergymen in their statement, and makes the case for nonviolent action to bring about an end to racial segregation in the South. You can read the letter in full here if you would like to read King’s words before reading on to our summary of his argument, and analysis of the letter’s meaning and significance. ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’: summary The letter is dated 16 April 1963. King begins by addressing his ‘fellow clergymen’ who wrote the statement published in the newspaper. In this statement, they had criticised King’s political activities ‘unwise and untimely’. King announces that he will respond to their criticisms because he believes they are ‘men of genuine good will’.
King outlines why he is in Birmingham: as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he was invited by an affiliate group in Birmingham to engage in a non-violent direct-action program: he accepted. When the time came, he honoured his promise and came to Birmingham to support the action. But there is a bigger reason for his travelling to Birmingham: because injustice is found there, and, in a famous line, King asserts: ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ The kind of direction action King and others have engaged in around Birmingham is a last resort because negotiations have broken down and promises have been broken. When there is no alternative, direct action – such as sit-ins and marches – can create what King calls a ‘tension’ which will mean that a community which previously refused to negotiate will be forced to come to the negotiating table. King likens this to the ‘tension’ in the individual human mind which Socrates, the great classical philosopher, fostered through his teachings. Next, King addresses the accusation that the action he and others are taking in Birmingham is ‘untimely’. King points out that the newly elected mayor of the city, like the previous incumbent, is in favour of racial segregation and thus wishes to preserve the political status quo so far as race is concerned. As King observes, privileged people seldom give up their privileges voluntarily: hence the need for nonviolent pressure. King now turns to the question of law-breaking. How can he and others justify breaking the law? He quotes St. Augustine, who said that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’ A just law uplifts human personality and is consistent with the moral law and God’s law. An unjust law degrades human personality and contradicts the moral law (and God’s law).
Because segregation encourages one group of people to view themselves as superior to another group, it is unjust. He also asserts that he believes the greatest stumbling-block to progress is not the far-right white supremacist but the ‘white moderate’ who are wedded to the idea of ‘order’ in the belief that order is inherently right. King points out both in the Bible (the story of Shadrach and the fiery furnace) and in America’s own colonial history (the Boston Tea Party) people have practised a form of ‘civil disobedience’, breaking one set of laws because a higher law was at stake. King addresses the objection that his actions, whilst nonviolent themselves, may encourage others to commit violence in his name.
He rejects this argument, pointing out that this kind of logic (if such it can be called) can be extended to all sorts of scenarios. Do we blame a man who is robbed because his possession of wealth led the robber to steal from him? The next criticism which King addresses is the notion that he is an extremist. He contrasts his nonviolent approach with that of other African-American movements in the US, namely the black nationalist movements which view the white man as the devil.
King points out that he has tried to steer a path between extremists on either side, but he is still labelled an ‘extremist’. He decides to own the label, and points out that Jesus could be regarded as an ‘extremist’ because, out of step with the worldview of his time, he championed love of one’s enemies. Other religious figures, as well as American political figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, might be called ‘extremists’ for their unorthodox views (for their time). Jefferson, for example, was considered an extremist for arguing, in the opening words to the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. ‘Extremism’ doesn’t have to mean one is a violent revolutionary: it can simply denote extreme views that one holds. King expresses his disappointment with the white church for failing to stand with him and other nonviolent activists campaigning for an end to racial segregation. People in the church have made a variety of excuses for not supporting racial integration. The early Christian church was much more prepared to fight for what it believed to be right, but it has grown weak and complacent. Rather than being disturbers of the peace, many Christians are now upholders of the status quo. Martin Luther King concludes his letter by arguing that he and his fellow civil rights activists will achieve their freedom, because the goal of America as a nation has always been freedom, going back to the founding of the United States almost two centuries earlier.



He provides several examples of the quiet courage shown by those who had engaged in nonviolent protest in the South. ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’: analysis Martin Luther King’s open letter written from Birmingham Jail is one of the most famous open letters in the world. It is also a well-known defence of the notion of civil disobedience, or refusing to obey laws which are immoral or unjust, often through peaceful protest and collective action. King answers each of the clergymen’s objections in turn, laying out his argument in calm, rational, but rhetorically brilliant prose. The emphasis throughout is non nonviolent action, or peaceful protest, which King favours rather than violent acts such as rioting (which, he points out, will alienate many Americans who might otherwise support the cause for racial integration). In this, Martin Luther King was greatly influenced by the example of Mahatma Gandhi, who had led the Indian struggle for independence earlier in the twentieth century, advocating for nonviolent resistance to British rule in India. Another inspiration for King was Henry David Thoreau, whose 1849 essay ‘Civil Disobedience’ called for ordinary citizens to refuse to obey laws which they consider unjust. This question of what is a ‘just’ law and what is an ‘unjust’ law is central to King’s defence of his political approach as laid out in the letter from Birmingham Jail. He points out that everything Hitler did in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s was ‘legal’, because the Nazis changed the laws to suit their ideology and political aims. But this does not mean that what they did was moral: quite the opposite. Similarly, it would have been ‘illegal’ to come to the aid of a Jew in Nazi Germany, but King states that he would have done so, even though, by helping and comforting a Jewish person, he would have been breaking the law. So instead of the view that ‘law’ and ‘justice’ are synonymous, ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ is a powerful argument for obeying a higher moral law rather than manmade laws which suit those in power. But ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ is also notable for the thoughtful and often surprising things King does with his detractors’ arguments. For instance, where we might expect him to object to being called an ‘extremist’, he embraces the label, observing that some of the most pious and peaceful figures in history have been ‘extremists’ of one kind of another. But they have called for extreme love, justice, and tolerance, rather than extreme hate, division, or violence. Similarly, King identifies white moderates as being more dangerous to progress than white nationalists, because they believe in ‘order’ rather than ‘justice’ and thus they can sound rational and sympathetic even as they stand in the way of racial integration and civil rights. As with the ‘extremist’ label, King’s position here may take us by surprise, but he backs up his argument carefully and provides clear reasons for his stance.
There are two main frames of reference in the letter.


CORE
CORE Assessment Module
Module Overview
Purpose and Usage:
Scoring:
Content Area	English Language Arts and Literacy
Text	“Letter from Birmingham Jail”
Grade Level	Grade 9
Target Area	Text Dependent Questions, Performance Writing Task (Informative/Explanatory)
ELA Common Core State Standards	RI.9.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. RI.9.4 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

One is Christian examples: Jesus, St. Paul, and Amos, the Old Testament prophet, are all mentioned, with King drawing parallels between their actions and those of the civil rights activists participating in direct action. The other is examples from American history: Abraham Lincoln (who issued the Emancipation Proclamation during the American Civil War, a century before King was writing) and Thomas Jefferson (who drafted the words to the Declaration of Independence, including the statement that all men are created equal). Both Christianity and America have personal significance for King, who was a reverend as well as a political campaigner and activist. But these frames of reference also establish a common ground between both him and the clergymen he addresses, and, more widely, with many other Americans who will read the open letter. Explore rhetorical analysis on Martin Luther King Jr. Day using this lesson for “Letter from Birmingham Jail!” Great for AP Language and Composition and senior English classes on MLK Day or any day of the year. Includes digital worksheets for Google Classroom®.Included with this Rhetorical Analysis Lesson for Martin Luther King Jr. Day:✏ Rhetorical Analysis Slideshow Lesson - Google Slides®, Microsoft PowerPoint®, and PDFExplore Ethos, Logos, Pathos, Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle, the SOAPSTone Acronym, and the Rogerian Argument✏ Rhetorical Analysis Guided Note - Digital & Print✏ Rogerian Argument Graphic Organizer - Digital & PrintApply the Rogerian Argument outline to “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King Jr.✏ Detailed Answer Keys✏ Teacher Instructions for using this resourceHow to use this Rhetorical Analysis Lesson for “Letter from Birmingham Jail”:Looking for an activity to teach on Martin Luther King Jr. Day? This rhetorical analysis lesson includes rigorous and engaging activities for AP Language and Composition students and senior English classes alike. This lesson is suitable for MLK Day, or any day of the year!Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" is a great text to practice rhetorical analysis and study the Rogerian Argument outline. This resource includes a Rhetorical Analysis Slideshow Lesson for Microsoft PowerPoint® and Google Slides® with accompanying guided note worksheets.This slideshow will guide your students through a lesson on rhetorical situations, including Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle (ethos, logos, and pathos). Students will also learn about the SOAPSTone acronym for analyzing any text. The slideshow lesson includes a link to a video that your students will use to practice analyzing using the SOAPSTone acronym together.Students will also be introduced to the structure of the Rogerian Argument. To practice, they will apply this structure to Martin Luther King Jr's “Letter for Birmingham Jail” using the Rogerian Argument Graphic Organizer.To consolidate these activities, detailed answer keys have also been provided.I use this resource every year with my Advanced Placement Language and Composition students; however, higher-level English Language Arts classes will also benefit from understanding the Rogerian Argument outline and enjoy the challenge of rhetorical analysis. For classrooms utilizing Google Classroom® To access the digital version of these worksheets, simply follow the instructions within the resource to copy the files directly to your Google Drive®.❤ See what others are saying! ❤ Mastering Elementary (TPT Seller) Extremely satisfiedWhat a great resource! Exactly what I was looking for my lesson this week! Thank you for such a high quality product! :)Amazing Materials for You by Amy Dickson (TPT Seller) Extremely satisfiedI love this product for discussing "Letter from Birmingham Jail." High schoolers will learn to use the Rogerian Argument model with this high interest primary source. Thank you.Teaching With A Thankful Heart (TPT Seller) Extremely satisfiedA great critical thinking activity that will push students to think deeper. I love that an answer key is included for reference! Kindly note that due to copyright restrictions, this resource is not editable. This is a common practice within the TPT marketplace in order to protect the clip artists and software providers that have authorized their intellectual property for the development of this resource.To assess close reading and comprehension, check out these Bell Ringer Reading Quizzes for “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”You might also be interested in Mondays Made Easy's Literary Analysis Resources. Customer Tip! Want FREE CREDIT to go towards purchases? Make sure to offer feedback for your downloads! Follow these instructions below:Go to your "My Purchases" page to find a "Provide Feedback" button next to each download.Follow this link to offer a quick rating and leave a short comment for the product. Each time you give feedback, TPT gives you feedback credits that you use to lower the cost of your future purchases!Your feedback is important to me as it helps me to continually improve my products and ensure they are meeting your needs!Follow me! Be the first to know about product launches, sales, discounts, and free giveaways:➾ Instagram➾ Pinterest➾ Facebook➾ TeachersPayTeachers➾ The BlogFor questions, collaborations, or other concerns:✉ Contact me: hello@mondaysmadeeasy.comAccess my Free Resource Library!Mondays Made Easy is committed to the continual improvement of resources to meet the current needs of teachers. This product was last updated on December 21, 2022.