

Letter from Birmingham Jail

Lesson Summary

Students read and discuss Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* with facilitation from teachers. Students are encouraged to reach agreement on the meaning of the text and its wider application to principles of civil disobedience, nonviolence, and current events.

Materials

- Excerpts from letter
- Discussion questions

Procedures

1. Begin by telling the class about the context for King's writing of his letter. Ask him what they know about segregation and Jim Crow laws. Tell them about the circumstances in Birmingham that caused him to be involved in protests and to be arrested.
2. Tell the students that you will be reading excerpts from this famous text, stopping to discuss each part. Tell them that they may encounter unfamiliar words or references in the text, and that they should underline those to ask you about after the reading. Tell them that there are no right or wrong answers to the discussion questions for the text – the point of a discussion is not to tell you their answers, but to share their answers with each other so they can develop a shared meaning of the text.
3. Ask for volunteers to read each excerpt and then open up a discussion with questions. As it seems appropriate, take key words from student responses and write them on the board. Feel free to move through questions as interest wanes, but don't feel like you need to get through all of the excerpts or all of the discussion questions.
4. With at least ten minutes left in class, tell students they should take a minute to summarize their reaction to the text in a sentence. They will have to share this sentence with the group before they leave class. Begin with your examples, and allow students to respond.