

# The Power to Persuade

**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.** WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST ORATORS OF THE 20TH CENTURY. HIS WORDS HAD THE POWER TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S MINDS AND MOVE THEM TO ACTION. LEARN FROM THE MASTER HOW TO MAKE AN ARGUMENT YOUR READER CAN'T REFUSE.

## Who was Martin Luther King Jr.?

During his leadership of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested 30 times for participating in nonviolent demonstrations. Although he suffered many physical attacks, Dr. King believed in peaceful resistance.

Beginning with the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955, Dr. King led dozens of nonviolent campaigns to end segregation in the South. In 1962, he led a series of sit-ins at lunch counters in Birmingham, Alabama, to call for desegregation. In January of 1963, eight Alabama clergymen published a letter in a newspaper urging Dr. King to end these "untimely" demonstrations. King read the letter while in jail, and was so impassioned that he began to write a response in the margins of the newspaper.

His essay was eventually published, and has become famous as the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

In 1964, at the age of 35, Martin Luther King Jr. was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He was the youngest man ever to receive this honor. Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.



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## How to Write From Models:

>> **READ THE EXCERPT THROUGH ONCE WITHOUT READING THE NOTES.**

>> **READ IT A SECOND TIME, WITH THE NOTES.**

>> **THINK ABOUT WRITING YOUR OWN VERSION OF THIS ARGUMENT.**

>> **USE THE NOTES AND WRITING PROMPTS AT THE END TO GET STARTED.**

(from "Letter from Birmingham Jail")

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, "Why didn't you give the new administration time to act?" The only answer I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo. . . .

● We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never."

1. The purpose of Dr. King's essay is to defend his actions against the criticism that they are untimely. His thesis is that the government will not implement change unless citizens first demand it.

2. Here, Dr. King refers to the new mayor of Birmingham. While the clergymen implied that the activists didn't give the mayor enough time to change the law, Dr. King points out that Mayor Boutwell has a personal and political interest in maintaining segregation, and therefore must be persuaded to take action.

3. "Mr. Connor" refers to Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety, whose confrontational reaction to the civil rights demonstrators—which included setting police dogs on the protesters—had focused national attention on Birmingham.

4. This sentence creates a neat formula for Dr. King's thesis: the oppressed must demand freedom from the oppressor. This logic transcends the specific situation in Birmingham and brings a larger philosophical and historical perspective to the argument.

continued →

5. The quotation and the mention of the number of years that blacks have been denied their rights both emphasize that equal rights are long overdue.

We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

6. By ending with the image of a cup of coffee, Dr. King reminds us of the simple dignities that black people are fighting for and makes the inhumanity of segregation clear.

## WRITE YOUR OWN IMPASSIONED ARGUMENT

USE THESE PROMPTS TO CRAFT AN ARGUMENT AS PERSUASIVE AND PERSONAL AS DR. KING'S

**1** Imagine that you are living at the same time as Dr. King and that you must write an argument for desegregation of public places, including restaurants, buses, and schools.

**2** Review notes #1 and #3 before you develop your thesis. Be sure that you can say in one sentence why you think that desegregation is necessary.

**3** Review note #5. Like Dr. King, you will need to support your argument with quotations and facts. Find out about the history of segregation and gather evidence for your thesis.

**4** Review note #2. One of the reasons Dr. King's argument is so effective is because he flows seamlessly from one idea to

the next. Outline your essay so that each paragraph will build on the one before it to advance your argument.

**5** Reread notes #4 and #6. The dramatic flourishes in Dr. King's writing—the dialogue, metaphors, and images—are all persuasive because they bring the tragedy of segregation to life for the reader. Use at least one of these rhetorical devices in your essay.

**6** Share with a friend. The purpose of an argument is to convince another person of your viewpoint. Ask a classmate to read your essay and tell you which parts were most persuasive and which left some doubt. Revise as necessary.