

Another useful approach is for the instructor to pose a question to the group and then ask the students to jot down their answers. Although taking an extra minute or two, this technique frequently helps students construct more articulate responses before the discussion begins. When a student responds to a question, the instructor should ask for support for the answer from the reading. "Where in the text is there evidence for this?" can be an apt reply. Other students can supply additional evidence to support that point of view. When that position is exhausted, the group can offer alternative opinions, again providing support through evidence from the text itself. When close textual analysis is sufficiently complete, the discussion can be broadened to embrace more evaluative questions—those that invite students to draw upon their own opinions and experiences.

Using the questions in the order given will move the class through the complete text, with the last items addressing the contemporary case material. Here the questions serve to establish the connection, in a very general way, between the major themes in the classic and contemporary cases. Of course, other pedagogical strategies are possible, and the teaching experience of individual instructors will guide them in the proper use of these questions.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why did members of the southern clergy challenge the leadership of Martin Luther King?

Possible answers.

—They thought King was an outsider and did not belong. King had organizational ties in Birmingham. King had been invited. Because "injustice is here."

—King was advocating breaking the law. King admitted to wanting to create tension. They feared King would cause violence.

—The clergy were conservatives who did not want change. Unlike ministers in the African-American community, perhaps the white clergy did not have enough status to risk angering their congregations.

2. Why does King clearly explain the tactics of a non-violent campaign in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"?

Possible answers.

—A leader's job is to communicate to followers what is expected of them and why.

—The letter was used to educate the public, not merely the clergy to whom it was addressed.

— King used the letter as an opportunity to spell out the rationale and the steps of a non-violent protest campaign. The steps as listed in the letter are:

1. collection of facts
2. negotiation
3. self-purification
4. direct action

—King is reassuring the Birmingham leadership of his non-violent intentions.

—King is attempting to protect other demonstrators from violent over-reaction on the part of the Birmingham police.

3. Why does King, in effect, threaten his readers regarding the possible psychological effects of racial segregation?

Possible answers.

—King wants to make clear to the Birmingham leadership that further delay will not be tolerated.

"... our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. . ." (p. 6, ll. 54-5).

—King is warning the southern white leadership of the potential for random acts of violence in the future.

The letter is a call to action.

King refers to distorting the personalities of young children and "ominous clouds of inferiority" (p. 6, ll. 25- 7, 52).

"The cup of endurance runs over" implies that far more serious consequences will occur if the system does not change.

—King includes reference to more militant groups emerging within the movement.

The authorities would be far better off dealing with King and his gospel of love than with more radical factions.

—King is trying to let other readers know how bad things are for black people in the south. Some examples:

People are lynched and murdered.

Old people are beaten.

Women are not treated with respect.

Children are restricted in some amusement parks.

Motels and restrooms are not available for travelers.

Note again, the central purpose of the letter is to educate. In Lewin's three-stage model of change, the first stage is "unfreezing" where the need to make the change is established. The superb communication skills of King are critical at this point, as he attempts to sensitize the broader audience to the basic realities of life in the Jim Crow South.

## Leadership in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

This classic work in the philosophy of non-violent resistance offers an opportunity to discuss leadership on multiple levels. Discussion of both personal characteristics and large-scale social problems are appropriate in this beautifully crafted effort of a man who was “catapulted into leadership” largely on the basis of his communication skills. The case presents material on several themes:

- Bases of Power
- Charisma
- Organizational Change
- Transformational Leadership
- Implementation Tactics
- Interdependence
- Communication
- Leadership Style
- Conflict Resolution
- Discrimination.

## How To Teach This Case

NOTE: In these and subsequent sections of the teaching notes you may find two kinds of references in parentheses. The one type is a shorthand note identifying a work which can be easily found in the bibliography at the end of the teaching notes e.g. (Kouzes and Posner, 1987, 18). The other kind uses the letters p. and l. as abbreviations for “page” and “line” (pp. for “pages” and ll. for “lines”). This type of reference pinpoints the location of a quoted passage in the excerpts of the classic case or contemporary article e.g. (p. 5, ll. 78-80). It can be quickly found in the case.

The instructor may want to initiate discussion of the letter by asking students to select excerpts that deal directly with the issue of leadership and King’s leadership style. This exercise will give the instructor a fairly good idea of how well the students are prepared to discuss the letter in a comprehensive manner. Once the class has established its general understanding of the letter and leadership issues associated with it, the instructor may want to move to the discussion questions. The discussion questions are arranged so that they follow the structure of the text.

Students can be encouraged to study the various means King uses to disarm his critics and enhance his own position. For example, King likens his efforts to those of Old Testament prophets and the Apostle Paul (p. 4, ll. 42-9). He also tries to diminish the distance between his opponents and himself by asserting that he and they are tied together “in an inescapable network of mutuality.” Students can examine the leadership value of this approach by King.

To understand that individuals may enhance their leadership by presenting themselves as reasonable and logical choices for people to follow, students may examine

how King uses the assertion that he stands “in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community”(p. 8, ll. 40-1) to strengthen his credentials for leadership. Students can be given an opportunity to cite other instances of this style from their own experiences.

King makes several references to his “disappointment” with his critics over their support of the status quo. Students may want to examine the appropriateness of using this sort of tactic to get people to support a cause. Are there times and circumstances where this tactic may not be effective?

Finally, students may want to speculate on what tactics King might have used if he had been less optimistic about the ability of Americans to do the right thing eventually. What might he have done?

Ideally, the instructor will introduce the students to the letter by providing them with a description of the historical background and the immediate setting for the reading by having them view selected episodes of the video series, “Eyes on the Prize” and/or “Making Sense of the Sixties.” Both series were produced for PBS and can be rented or purchased from that network. Student interest in the letter will be increased if they can see and hear King speak and experience for themselves his ability to move others to action through the power of his speech.

If the videos are unavailable, the instructor can provide the students with the historical and social context of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by consulting David Garrow’s book, Bearing the Cross, and Taylor Branch’s work, Parting the Waters: America During the King Years, 1954-1963. These are excellent sources. It is important that the instructor provide the students with the means of placing the letter within the larger American context of the 1960s.

## BACKGROUND ON THE “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL”

### Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written at the height of the nonviolent protest movement in the United States. The letter captures King’s ability to lead through the use of language. It also reveals King’s disappointment over criticism of his leadership by a group of Alabama clergymen, his understanding of why oppressed people must resist their oppression, and his deep faith in the fundamental decency of all Americans.

### Family Background

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born into a traditional middle-class southern black Baptist family on January 15, 1929. He was the second of three children. Martin and his sister, Willie Christine, a year older, and brother, Alfred Daniel, a year younger, grew up in a stable, father-centered home where both family and church were extremely