

Rhetorical analysis mlk letter from birmingham jail

[Government](#), [Corruption](#)



Martin Luther King's inspiration for writing his, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was mainly to appeal to an undeniable injustice that occurred during his time. His letter was in response to eight white clergymen, who objected to King protesting in Birmingham. Dr. King effectively crafted his counterargument after analyzing the clergymen's unjust proposals and then he was able to present his rebuttal. Dr. King effectively formed his counterargument by first directly addressing his audience, the clergymen and then using logos, pathos and ethos to present his own perspective on his opponent's statements.

The majority of the sentences in King's letter can be connected to logos, pathos or ethos and his incorporation of appeals is masterful. On more than one occasion, King uses various strategies to appeal to his audience, in the letter he writes, "I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.

We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights." In this excerpt, King presents his ethos very tactically. The Alabama clergy presents him as an outsider in the letter, but demonstrating his ethos, King presents himself as an insider. He is not just a man who chose to protest in an outside community, but is in fact the president of the Conference. He is a clergyman speaking to other clergymen, but also part of an organization that has a chapter in their state.

There were also other forms of ethos in his letter, King is sure to demonstrate his religious ethos by tracing his own heritage of ministerial ancestors and discussing his own church leadership. He also makes biblical references, comparing his struggle with the Apostle Paul and the prophets who spread their message to neighboring villages- similar to what King did for his people. He uses this connection to further justify his actions.

King makes references to examples throughout history that require a need for action. Some of his examples are well known such as Hitler while others were not as popular. This appeals to ethos because it demonstrates King's palate for quality education, proving his credibility.

" I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of 'somebodiness' that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses.

The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated

Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible 'devil'".

In this passage, King's presentation of logos is genius. He effectively shows the clergymen two sides of the community, the one of complacency and the other of hatred and cynicism. In this excerpt he does not attempt to justify his motives, but rather puts facts on the table so that the audience could clearly see that his response was ideal. It is implied with this statement that King did not have to take control of the situation. He is basically saying that even if he had chosen to remain neutral, Black Nationalist groups would have taken action regardless.

Another instance when Martin Luther King Jr. utilizes the tactic of directly addressing his audience to present his rebuttal is evident in the part of his letter beginning, " You may well ask: ' Why direct action? ... Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are quite right in calling, for negotiation." In this example, he also uses appeal to logic as the main backbone of his argument but occasionally intertwines pathos and clever word choice along with the logos. Dr. King first identifies a portion of his opponent's argument and slowly picks it apart. He accomplishes this by focusing on the word " tension." According to the text, through a comparison of violent tension, which is undesired, and nonviolent tension, which is constructive, he gradually establishes the concept that the ' constructive, nonviolent tension' will, " help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood." King uses unmatched word choice, such as " dark depths" and " majestic heights," to accurately present his point of view.

He then continues with, " Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue." His statement not only uses logical reasoning to identify the necessity for negotiation, but also utilizes pathos to generate feelings of sympathy and remorse. The ' tragic effort' expresses how emotionally intense the past years have been for Negroes and their inability to have a say in the ' monologue'. The logical appeal is also present because he explicitly states the purpose of their direct-action program, which is to force an open door negotiation with both sides having power. Therefore, he is attempting to create the " dialogue" through use of logos but also incorporates word choice and pathos. Logos is present throughout King's letter and this is expected since the letter is a justification of his actions. " I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious-education buildings.

Over and over I have found myself asking: " What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?" King connects his audience to his pathos by using several examples of the church as a source of pathos and making them look closely at the symbolism of the church and the hatred that it aiding in promoting.

He forces the audience (through the rhetorical questions) to look at exactly what their white churches symbolize and the unsuitable manner in which

they treated the African-Americans. Correspondingly, King makes them see the entire situation from his point of view. Through the use of specific rhetorical strategies such as logos, pathos, and ethos, Martin Luther King Jr. effectively contested the clergymen's argument. His success was also due to his unique strategy of directly addressing his audience, the clergymen, to create the basis of his argument. From there, King is able to slowly pick apart and shatter his opponent's claims. This effective method allowed King to present his rebuttal with more authority and conviction and thus achieve his goal: justify the reasons for nonviolent demonstrations against segregation.

Works Cited

King Jr., Martin L. Letter from a Birmingham Jail Fields of Reading 9th Edition.

Nancy Comely, David Hamilton

King, Martin Luther, Jr. " Letter from Birmingham Jail." Invention and Design.

Ed. Forrest D. Burt and E. Cleve Want. 4th ed.

Ali-Dinar, Ali B., ed. " Letter From a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]." African

Studies Center. University of Pennsylvania. 8 Sept. 2007 .

Biographical Outline of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. || King Center. The King

Estate, 2004. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.