

# Martin luther king jr. "letter from birmingham jail" essay sample

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## **Martin Luther King Jr. “ Letter From Birmingham Jail” Essay Sample**

Martin Luther King’s use of figurative language in “ Letter from Birmingham Jail” is an effective way for him to reinforce his thesis about non-violent protest and race discrimination. The figurative language in the letter enhances the letter’s persuasive qualities of pathos, ethos, and logos to evoke emotion and sway readers toward King’s point of view. King is the President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was formed in 1957. He was arrested for protests of a non-violent nature against racial injustices in Birmingham, Alabama and wrote this letter to the eight Alabama clergymen while in jail. Through the figurative language in his letter he creates a bridge between his letter and white moderates, so that all readers can see his point of view.

Developing the quality of pathos in a piece of writing is a way of shaping the reader’s feelings. King appeals to the emotions of the people through his use of pathos. He explains that he is in the Birmingham jail because of injustices that took place in Birmingham Alabama. He says: Just as the prophets of the eighth century B. C. left their villages and carried their “ thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

King states how the Apostle Paul carried the gospel of Jesus Christ over the land, and thus compares himself to him. One way King addresses the eight clergymen and justifies his presence in Birmingham is by comparing himself to the Apostle Paul. He is trying to take the gospel of freedom over the land of America. This idea relates to people's emotion because most people are religious and believe in God and Jesus Christ. Comparing himself to the Apostle Paul strikes deep emotion in most people and is almost saying that he is trying to do the work of God by trying to achieve true freedom. This analogy is a great example of pathos and King's use of it appeals to the emotion through examples and figurative language. King uses pathos not just from the Bible but also by evolving ideas from World War II: We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

Here King refers to all the horrible laws that Hitler created in Germany before World War II. He cites how, "It was 'illegal' to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany." He is using this example to compare Germany's laws against Jews to our "separate but equal" law of the time against black people. That law meant that there had to be separate facilities such as schools and bathrooms for black people, but they were still considered

equals. King is stating that law of God comes before the law of man, and if a law is an unjust law then it should be fought against. This is a great use of figurative language and how it appeals to people's emotion.

Creating ethos is a way for a writer to gain the trust of the reader. It can be used to show the effectiveness of one's writing the writer's credibility. King illustrates this quality of ethos when he explains his professional titles: 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. Frequently we share staff, educational, and financial resources with our affiliates.

Here King shows his credibility by citing what his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which is in every southern state, does. He indicates that he is in jail because people in the south have been influenced by the view of "outsiders coming in", even though part of the organization is in Alabama. They say "separate but equal" because people want black people separated from them totally. In the rest of that paragraph he states how they were on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if deemed necessary, and that King and several of his staff members were invited.

In King's opening paragraph to the clergymen he is trying to make himself appear credible and trustworthy: While confined here in the Birmingham city

jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

King immediately is trying to get the trust of the clergy by saying that he is open to criticism, and that he believes the clergymen are men of genuine good will. He expresses good will toward the clergymen to show that he does not want to disrespect them. They have the right to their opinion, just as he does. He may not believe in their opinion, but name-calling wouldn't help anything. King demonstrates that to get his point across and to gain the clergymen's trust he needs to show that he does care about their opinion.

Dr. King appeals to logic in a variety of ways. One way King appeals to logos is the entire letter. The letter is in chronological order, and he ordered the letter by the points brought by the clergymen. Another way is by stating his credentials, like his quote, “I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.” He explains to the clergymen what his position is in the organization, it is straight fact, a good example of logos.

King uses pathos, ethos, and logos in his letter to create a bridge between his letter and white moderates, so that all readers can see the racial injustices that were happening. King's use of figurative language in " Letter from Birmingham Jail" is an effective way for him to reinforce the bridge between readers and his thesis about non-violent protest and race discrimination.

#### Works Cited

1. King, Martin Luther. " Letter from Birmingham Jail." Mastin, Antoinette M. and Miner, Marlene R. Writing with Confidence. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996.

All of the Martin Luther King Jr. quotations I used came from this text.