

rhetical analysis of "a letter from birmingham jail" essay sample

Law



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Rhetorical Analysis of “ A Letter From Birmingham Jail” Essay Sample

On April 3rd, 1963, various sit-ins and marches began in Birmingham, Alabama to protest racism and racial segregation. These protests were led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. On April 10th, King and other marchers were unfairly arrested for marching without a permit. While in jail, King saw a letter in the local newspaper from eight clergymen that expressed their concerns over having King and his protestors in Birmingham in the first place. “ A Letter from Birmingham Jail” is King’s response to those clergymen, in which he explains to them why he has come to their city and how an unjust law is no law at all.

Purpose

King wants to make these men understand the struggle of his people. He writes to give them a new awareness of the unjust way in which they willingly live. He spends an entire paragraph explaining the horrors of segregation, including lynchings, police brutality, poverty, and daily public humiliation. The purpose of the letter is to try and instill a conscience in these unfair and unlawful people.

Claims (Major)

Thesis- It was hard for me to find a clear-cut thesis. Professor Langley always says “ What I want to say about *thing* is...” and that wasn’t made really apparent to me. When matched up with the topic sentences, though, I would have to say that the thesis and major claim of the letter is, “ I am in

Birmingham because injustice is here.” The entire letter is about the stigma
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King faces when he enters Birmingham and the measures he tried to take to make some positive changes.

Claims (Minor)

“ I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against ‘ outsiders coming in.’” This ties directly to the thesis to set up why he’s come to Birmingham.

“ Then it occurred to us that Birmingham’s mayoralty election was coming up in March, and we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day.” King shows his willingness to cooperate with local government and events, to be as little a nuisance as possible.

“ The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” He reiterates the urgency of his situation and ties back to the injustice he talks about in the thesis.

“ Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws.” King talks a lot about the difference between breaking an unjust law and abiding by one. At one point, King says, “ A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.” He goes on to state that an unjust law is a hypocrisy, meaning only certain people need abide by it.

“ We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “ legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was ‘

illegal.’” He gives examples of injustice found in other parts of the world, comparing them to what he faces in cities like Birmingham.

“ Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever.” King continues to speak to the injustice stated in the thesis.

“ In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure.” He also speaks a lot to the unfair treatment he receives from the church and how he hopes that will change in time.

“ Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping ‘ order’ and ‘ preventing violence.’” King calls out the church for supporting the police brutality that takes place every day in Birmingham without anyone so much as blinking an eye at it.

Audience

King writes not only to the eight clergymen who want him out of Birmingham, but to the upperclass white men as well. He uses an extensive vocabulary and calls on specific politicians, such as Albert Boutwell. Boutwell won the Birmingham mayoral election on April 2nd, 1963 after a long campaign against two other segregationists, none of whom appeared to have a clear shot at winning. King writes to people of power who could make changes, but only if they wanted to.