

Letter from birmingham, martin luther king jr.

Sociology



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Just Arguments in the Battle against Segregation “ If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having patience, I beg God to forgive me” (King 301). Martin Luther King Jr. writes an argumentative letter defending demonstrations against segregation. While serving eight days in prison for participating in protests in Birmingham, King writes his famous “ Letter from Birmingham Jail” (293).

King is effective at arguing his case because he provides counter arguments, gives many examples of real life situations, and reflects on statements made. King begins by providing background and explaining the true purpose of non-violent direct-action demonstrations. In the letter, King refutes the arguments made by clergy, which were untimely action, breaking laws, direct-actions precipitate violence, extremist, and commended police. King explains that he traveled to Birmingham to participate in non-violent protest against segregation, stating “ injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (289).

King responds to the clergy by saying, “ your statement... fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations” (289). King continues by explaining the four basic steps of non-violent direct-action, which are: “ collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct-action” (290). While providing great detail on the situation and steps taken, King continues to build his argument against the statements made by the clergy. The first statement was that the action taken in Birmingham was untimely.

In the letter, King provides great details about the planning and execution of the demonstration, which shows that much thought was placed on the timing of the protest and explained that it was, in fact, not untimely. King uses a very effective method to evoke personal feelings by writing a long list of heart-throbbing experiences of Negro people during segregation (289-292). Next, King refutes the second statement that demonstrators break laws. King explains that “ there are two types of laws: just and unjust” (293). King’s reflecting help the reader understand his arguments (293-294).

The third statement from the clergy says the direct-actions precipitate violence. King states he does not advocate breaking the law. However, “[King] submit[s] that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law” (294). The fourth statement is condemning the actions in Birmingham as extreme. King counters by providing examples where extreme measures were taking to right an injustice, such as with Abe Lincoln and freeing the slaves (296-297).

Finally, King addresses how the clergy commended the police force for keeping order. King responds with examples during the demonstrations in which the police acted inhumane (300-301). By providing considered and well formulated arguments, King is effective at arguing his case against segregation. King addresses any possible counter arguments on his stance and does so in great detail. By reflecting on statements made, King allows the reader to fully understand his arguments and point of view. The “ Letter

from Birmingham Jail” is an excellently structured argumentative letter against segregation.