

Pathos in letter from the birmingham jail argumentative essay examples

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



“ Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a famous open letter written by Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963. After he was arrested for participating a nonviolent protest in Birmingham, Alabama as part of the Civil Rights Movement, he wrote this letter to address several concerns he had about the concepts of racial segregation and the ideas of racism present in America at the time, particularly the South. It was published in various newspapers and magazines thereafter, and in his book *Why We Can't Wait*.

The primary point of the letter was to respond to the “ Call for Unity” that white members of the church created in Alabama a few days earlier. In it, they stated that they were aware of the injustices that were present in society, but that the legal system was the place to fight that battle instead of taking it outside in the streets, against police and the rest of society. King was opposed to this, as he felt that everyone had a part to play in the presence of racism, and subsequently its abolition. The only way to be legitimately heard was by making the problem and the subsequent fight for a solution public; unjust laws needed to be disobeyed in order to portray moral responsibility.

In order to appeal to these clergymen, and subsequently whomever else read the letter, King opts to employ pathos in the writing of “ Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Pathos is an emotional appeal, and is one of the three modes of persuasion delineated in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Pathos can be conveyed in many ways, but the primary two include metaphor and passion. When conveying pathos, the speaker or writer can use a metaphor or some other kind of hook to draw the reader in and allow them to connect the story

being told to their own life. Furthermore, the speaker or writer can deliver their message with clear passion, showcasing intense and fervent emotion when dealing with the situation. This can make the audience much more sympathetic to the reader, as they can feel more emotionally invested. More than other methods of persuasion, this one is the most emotional - "persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions" (Aristotle, Rhetoric).

Pathos is used by Martin Luther King, Jr., to appeal to the audience of "Letter from Birmingham Jail," connecting their religious loyalty and sense of honor to his campaign to end segregation and racism. King links the suffering of his people at the behest of the Birmingham police force to his audience's praise at their actions, making them feel horrible for applauding such an act.

Metaphors such as Biblical references and other such allusions appeal to their sense of Biblical loyalty by painting his crusade as similar to other righteous Biblical crusades, using pathos to play on their sympathies toward these religious figures. Furthermore, King's use of emotional appeals of sympathy, and his humility in the presentation of his argument makes the audience feel guilty for opposing his position, and guilty for not coming to this righteous man's simple request for aid sooner.

King's use of metaphor has the effect of putting his appeals in a more familiar perspective to the clergymen who are his audience; in the third paragraph, he compares his presence in Birmingham to the Biblical examples of "the prophets of the eighth century BC [who] 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” (King, 1963). This example is meant to connect his actions with righteous actions portrayed in the Bible; it is an example of pathos as it appeals to their emotions and links what he is doing to actions that they could not question or look down upon. As a result, his actions become righteous as well. To the claims that he is an extremist, King later relates himself with other extremist Biblical figures, such as Amos, Paul and Martin Luther. He then transitions smoothly to real and recent figures, like Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson. All of these individuals performed extreme actions for the sake of the greater good; since they are lauded as heroes, especially by these clergymen, there is no reason to look down upon King’s similarly righteous, but extreme actions. Given their status as extremists, he puts the emotional burden on the audience to determine how their energy will be spent - “ So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be” (King, 1963).

King’s use of emotional appeal is rampant throughout the letter, appealing to their sense of justice and duty as well as their humanity. He uses rampant examples to relate to the audience (namely, the clergymen who wrote “ A Call for Unity”); the second paragraph touts his professional affiliations to the church, noting his many accomplishments and the size of his church. What’s more, he calmly states that he was there at the behest of his affiliate in Birmingham, shifting the responsibility for the demonstration off his shoulders - he was merely asked to be there. In the fourth paragraph, King says that all states are interrelated - “ injustice anywhere is a threat to

justice everywhere” (King, 1963). This is meant to combat his alleged status as an ‘outside agitator’ who brought chaos and upheaval to Birmingham; his fight is rightly his, and so it should be with everyone, including the clergymen involved. King then lays the responsibility of fighting racism directly on them as well with an emotional appeal: “ I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes” (King, 1963). By linking their inaction with a lack of investigating social injustice, he is spurring them to action, as they do not want to perceive themselves as being cowardly or uncaring toward the needs of their fellow man.

The plight of the Negro is emphasized through descriptive language in King’s letter. In response to their statement lauding the police restoration of peace, he states that he doubts that “ you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes.... if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls,” as well as hit innocent Negro men and refuse everyone food. By describing in detail these terrible acts, and by characterizing the Negroes involved as weak (citing old and young Negroes of both genders, not strong men and women), he makes it a bad thing to support the police who stopped the demonstration (King, 1963). His primary reason for rejecting the idea of settling the issue of the court system in racism is the moral and emotional appeal to fight injustice wherever it may be. King states that “ an unjust law is no law at all,” citing St. Augustine, another Biblical figure, to lend himself credence. Since the laws of

segregation “degrade human personality,” they are unjust, and must be disobeyed.

King’s delivery of his main points is often peppered with apologetic, humble language, stating that he had never written a letter this long before and that he laments taking up the ‘precious time’ of the audience – “If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me” (King, 1963). This showcases how humble and polite King is, and it underlines the importance of the struggle – this action is perceived by King to be so out of the ordinary and disruptive that there must surely be a good reason for it. He would not bother the clergymen unless it was this vital to the safety and freedom of his people, and of great concern for every man and woman. By coming from a friendly stance, and not a confrontational one, the responsibility falls to the clergymen to say ‘no’ if they so desire. King wished to present his case as eloquently and friendly as possible, as he seeks for them to be allies in his cause. “Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty” (King, 1963).

In conclusion, Martin Luther King uses many elements of pathos in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in order to convince the clergymen who wrote “A Call for Unity” that what he did was righteous, and that injustices must be fought wherever they may be found, instead of merely in the courts.

Metaphors link his cause to other righteous causes normally celebrated by his audience, so as to link them together and make their cause more sympathetic. Emotional appeals, such as his insistence that he is taking up their time and remaining humble and apologetic during his letter makes him less confrontational, and therefore less easy to ignore. In addition to that, his detailed descriptions of the hardships that occurred at the hands of the people his audience celebrated makes it harder to support them in the long run.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. Rhetoric. [1st Modern Library ed. New York: Modern Library, 1954. Print.
- King, Martin Luther. Letter from Birmingham city jail. Birmingham: American Friends Service Committee, 1963. Print.