

“Letter from Birmingham” News Literacy Lesson
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News Literacy Summer Institute 2011

AIM

To examine Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 essay “Letter from Birmingham Jail” using news literacy terms.

Objective

Students will be taught the political significance of the essay and will better understand the news values used to promote King’s cause.

News literacy terms to be incorporated:

Refer to Slides:

- Context
- Primary source
- Self-interested source
- Verify or Assert
- News Neighborhoods: News and Propaganda

Introducing the Lesson

Prior to the presentation students will read the King essay and discuss why they think the late civil rights leader is so important to American history.

Motivating the Lesson

Students will be directed to key passages from the essay and discuss whether King’s essay is relevant today. Students can also select their own key passages to deconstruct in groups.

Talking Points

Questions to ask students:

- What are the motivations of self-interested sources
- How is King a self-interested source
- Is the letter credible?
- What message or agenda does King have?
- What were some of the arguments King used to make his case for civil rights?
- Were those arguments valid?
- Who is the audience?
- How can you prove King’s assertions are valid?

- How did King use verification and assertion?

Summarizing The Lesson

The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was a promotional document for the Civil Rights movement. News organizations published the letter because of its news values. Today, some groups have referred to King’s letter to support other social causes.

Outcome

Students will have a better understanding of the news neighborhood as a news literacy concept. Students will hand in a 500-word (double-spaced typed essay) for homework based on ONE of the following sentences from King’s essay. Discuss an example from your personal experience or from your knowledge of events taking place in other parts of the world.

1. “There are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face but unjust in its application.” (King, 87)
2. “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come.” (King, 90)
3. “So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a tail light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.” (King, 93)

Another possible assignment:

Have students read each other’s essays and explain it to the class as an oral presentation.

ENGLISH, SOCIAL STUDIES, OR OTHER STATE STANDARDS THAT ARE MET IN THIS LESSON.

New York State English Language Arts Learning Standards

Number 3 – Students will read, write, listen and speak for critical analysis and evaluation. As listeners and readers, students will analyze experiences, ideas, information, and issues presented by others using a variety of established criteria.

Works Cited:

King Jr. Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail". Mercury Reader. Comp.
York College Eng 125 Custom Reader. New York: Pearson Custom, 2009. Print.