

Letter from Birmingham Jail. **The Power of Nonviolent Direct Action**

Introduction

The following lesson encourages students to reflect on nonviolence as an instrument to change unjust laws by studying the Birmingham Campaign of 1963. Within this six-part lesson students will participate in a role play about the intricate planning strategies for the campaign, also known as "Project C" - "C" for Confrontation. The students will observe the courageous activism of young people, and examine the eloquent words of Dr. King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail. The lesson provides students the opportunity to analyze primary source documents and discuss the concepts of social justice and social transformation in the past and in the present.

The essential question and sub questions are designed to guide the teacher and students through each segment of the lesson. These questions may be used as assessment at the end of the unit or as discussion prompts along the way. Teachers are encouraged to teach the entire unit or to choose the parts which fit their curricular needs. All activities are offered as an online experience or in print format.

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Subject: Art, English Language, U.S. History, World History

Grades: 9-12

Teaching Standard: CA State Standards: **11.1, 11.10, 11.11**

Essential Question

Did the nonviolent direct action, which King describes in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," successfully transform Birmingham, Alabama from a segregated to a just society in 1963?

Sub Questions

- How do we, as a society, define an unjust law, and what kinds of strategies and tactics have proven most effective in changing such laws? If we are able to abolish legal injustice will it necessarily result in social justice?
- What was the social, political and economic situation in Birmingham, AL before the spring of 1963?
- What were the goals of the Birmingham Campaign and how were these goals to be accomplished?

- In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” how does King explain the purpose and effectiveness of nonviolent direct action?
- As Project C began to unfold in Birmingham in the spring and summer of 1963, how were these events reported to the nation and world?
- Was it the adults or the children of Birmingham that lead the strategy to fill the jails through civil disobedience?
- Have the people of Birmingham reached a point of reconciliation after the experiences of injustice, violence and nonviolent direct action?

Lesson Activities

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Introduction to Birmingham

Instructions

1. Introduce the unit with a quick-write or discussion using the following questions: How do you define justice and injustice? What are unjust laws? How do you change an unjust law?
2. Ask students to identify examples from the past and present of unjust laws in the United States. Discuss the process by which these laws have been changed or could be changed. Example: Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended school segregation, or the passage of the *19th Amendment to the Constitution*, which guarantees all American women the right to vote.
3. Watch the short *PBS movie* (ca. 12 min) about Birmingham, Alabama. Provide students with "*Birmingham in the 1960's*" handouts. After the students have read the handout, lead a discussion on the injustice that existed in Birmingham in 1963. You may also wish to have students list violations of democratic principles as stated in the *Bill of Rights* and/or the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Discussion Questions:

- What was the social, political, and economic situation in Birmingham, Alabama before the spring of 1963?
- How do we, as a society, define an unjust law? Which strategies are most successful in changing that law? If we are able to abolish legal injustice will it also result in abolishing social injustice?

Materials

Handouts:

- [King Describes Birmingham in the 1960's/ \(PDF Copy\)](#)
- [Bill of Rights](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)

Resources:

- [King Encyclopedia](#)
- **PBS movie** (ca. 12 min) about Birmingham.

Part Two: Project C Strategy Committee Role Play



King and Abernathy are stopped by a police officer as they lead a march in Birmingham, Alabama on 12 April 1963

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Instructions

"Because we were convinced of the significance of the job to be done in Birmingham, we decided that the most thorough planning and prayerful preparation must go into the effort. We began to prepare a top secret file which we called "Project C"-the "C" for Birmingham's Confrontation with the fight for justice and morality in race relations.

In preparation for our campaign, I called a three-day retreat and planning session with SCLC staff and board members at our training center near Savannah, Georgia. Here we sought to perfect a timetable and discuss every possible eventuality."

From: *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. Clayborne Carson, Chapter 18.

In this classroom activity students reenact the planning of the Birmingham Campaign. Through the Project C Strategy Committee role play students will experience the challenges of organizing a direct action campaign. Students will also be introduced to the historical events in Birmingham through both primary and secondary sources. In both cases, students will complete their Role Play Decision Chart as they progress through each page of the role play.

Discussion Questions:

- What were the goals of Project C and how were these goals to be accomplished?
- As Project C began to unfold in Birmingham in the spring and summer of 1963, how were these events reported to the nation and world?

Role Play Introduction:

In this role play each of you will assume the role of the following participants in the Birmingham movement to end segregation; **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, **Wyatt Tee Walker**, **Fred Shuttlesworth**, and **Ralph Abernathy**. As you participate in this activity, keep record of your decisions and reflection on the Project C Decision Chart. Once you have recorded your answers, continue to the next section.

Information for each segment was compiled from the King Papers Project archives, King Encyclopedia and historian Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters*.

Role Play Activities

Part One: The planning committee

It is January of 1963 in a small town outside Savannah, Georgia. Martin Luther King Jr. of the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** presides over a strategy meeting of eleven activists, including Fred Shuttlesworth, Wyatt Tee Walker, Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young. The goal is to join efforts with the **Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights**, under the leadership of Shuttlesworth, to attack segregation in Birmingham. Wyatt Tee Walker hands out a detailed blueprint of Project C- for “Confrontation.” The campaign's strategy is to put economic pressure on Birmingham's merchants, so organizers scheduled the protests to begin around the Easter season—the second biggest shopping period of the year. He spells out to the group the four stage plan;

1. Begin nightly mass meeting to build strength and support. Organize small-scale sit-ins to draw attention to our desegregation platform.
2. Organize a boycott of the downtown business section and begin slightly larger demonstrations.
3. Increase the pressure with mass marches to both enforce the boycott and to defy unjust segregation laws resulting in mass arrests.
4. If necessary, we will call on supporters outside of Birmingham to cripple the city under the combined pressure of publicity, economic boycott, and the burden of overflowing jails.

Walker explains that each stage must build upon the one before and to maintain momentum. Furthermore, participants must be prepared to put a thousand or more in jail and keep each jailgoer inside for five or six days at a time. The plan requires extensive preparation, perfect timing and loads of money.

As the Planning Committee, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the plan. Record your conclusions.

Part Two: Project C is launched into action

The strategy committee decided to move forward and spends the next few months in painstaking planning. Abernathy and King focus on the necessary fundraising especially in the northern cities, Shuttlesworth continues building support among community leaders in Birmingham, and Walker compiles detailed notes on the distance between meeting location and sit-in targets, creates lists of willing participants and organizes training meetings. During the training meetings King instructs demonstrators on the philosophy of nonviolence.

Wednesday, 3 April 1963 marks the beginning of Project C. Starting their march from the Sixteenth Baptist Church, the headquarters of training meetings and strategy sessions, sixty-five activists marched silently to the stores of Loveman's, Pizitz, Kress, Woolworth's and Britt's and sat at their segregated lunch counters. At four of the five stores, waitresses simply informed customers that they were closing and turned out the lights. Only one store Britt's demanded that police arrest the protestors.

Your campaign is not off to a ground shattering first day. Recent developments include the following;

- As a result of recent city elections, a new mayor has been elected, Albert Boutwell. Many residents and leaders of the community, both white and black, suggest giving the new mayor a chance to reform the government.
- While numbers are slowly growing, volunteers to willingly go to jail are low.
- Although over 100 demonstrators are in jail as a result of their civil disobedience, the national and local news is ignoring the story.
- Robert F. Kennedy, the Attorney General, criticizes the campaign as "ill-timed."
- The *New York Times* is giving the story back page coverage. The headlines read "Integration Drive Slows... Sit-Ins and a demonstration Plan Fail to Materialize... Demonstrations Fail to Develop."

Your strategy committee meets again and discusses the following questions;

Should we call off Project C? Should we give new Mayor Boutwell a chance to make changes? If we continue our campaign, how do we recruit more demonstrators? How do we draw media attention to our actions and goals?

Discuss and record your decisions.

Part Three: The injunction

On 10 April, police commissioner Bull Connor and the Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, successfully convince state officials and a state court to support an injunction banning protest in Birmingham. The injunction ordered King and 133 others not to engage in or encourage protest activities: "parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing," including "conduct customarily known as 'kneel-ins' in churches."

At first glance, this seems to be a huge set-back, but, it can work to your advantage. Why? Discuss and record your answer. (Hint: federalism)

Part Four: Good Friday, April 12th

A lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from New York, Norman Amaker, arrived to provide legal advice. In Room 30 of the Gaston Hotel, just around the corner of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, explained that while the injunction was unconstitutional, that would not keep the demonstrators and the strategy leaders out of jail. Since the Southern Christian Leadership Conference no longer had enough funds to post bail for those willing to go to jail, demonstrators could be held up to six months.

If King, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, and Walker break the injunction and are arrested, they could no longer raise funds or organize bringing Project C to a halt. Furthermore, they may remain in jail for months while federal courts review the constitutionality of the state court order.

Discuss with your partners whether you should openly defy the injunction? Are there any alternatives? Record your decision.

Part Five: Off to jail

Examine the featured photo, of Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King, Jr., in Birmingham, AL, from 4/13/1963. *Who is in the photo? How many people are observing the situation? What is their reaction to the scene? What is the reaction of King and Abernathy to the police officer? Would you describe the situation as confrontational? Why or why not?*

Record your observations.

Materials

Handouts:

- [Role Play Decision Chart](#)
- Role Play Primary Sources: [Photos](#)

Assignment Options:

- [Begin reading "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"](#)

Part Three: Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Instructions

1. Watch a short video about [Martin Luther King, Jr., in Birmingham Jail](#) (ca. 7 min). Ask students to listen for answers to the following questions: how did Martin Luther King, Jr., make the decision to go to jail? Why did King decided to write the letter? What role did his wife, Coretta Scott King, play while King was in jail?
2. Read the [Statement by Alabama Clergymen](#). What are the main arguments of the statement? How do the clergymen feel about the protests?
3. Either as a class or in smaller groups have students read and answer the analysis questions for the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Depending on the level of your students, you may choose from two versions of the letter with analysis questions.
4. **Discussion Questions:**
 - How do we, as a society, define an unjust law and which strategies are most successful in changing that law? If we are able to abolish legal injustice will it also result in abolishing social injustice?
 - What was the social, political and economic situation in Birmingham, Alabama before the spring of 1963?

Materials

Handouts:

- [Letter from a Birmingham Jail Analysis 1](#)
- [Letter from a Birmingham Jail Analysis 2](#)

Resources:

- [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)/ listen to the [Audio Version \(55min\)](#)
- [Martin Luther King, Jr., in Birmingham Jail](#) (ca. 7 min).
- [Statement by Alabama Clergymen](#)

Part Four: The Children Shall Lead

Instructions

1. Begin with discussion prompts or quick write prompts: Would you be willing go to jail to challenge an unjust law? Would you let your child go to jail in an effort to overturn an unjust law?
2. Teenager/Parent Negotiation role play. One student plays a sixteen-year-old student who wants to participate in the mass meetings at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The second student plays the parent who wants the child to “stay out of trouble.”
3. Discussion Question: In Birmingham did the children or the adults lead the strategy to fill the jails through civil disobedience?

Materials

Handouts:

- [Teenager/Parent Negotiation Role Play](#)

Assignment Options:

- Have students discuss with their parent/guardian the role play. Have students ask their parents if they would have allowed them attend the demonstrations. Why or why not?
- Begin work on the culminating project

Part Five: The Big Three: Should they take the offer?

Instructions

1. Challenge your students to analyze and compare primary sources with the activity: Evaluating Newspaper Articles.
2. Ask students to return to their groups for the Project C Strategy Committee role play. Give the students the handout “Should they take the offer?”
3. Create groups of 3–4 and have students answer the reflection questions.
4. Discussion Question: Have the people of Birmingham reached a point of reconciliation after the experiences of injustice, violence and nonviolent direct action?

Materials

Handouts:

- [Evaluating Newspaper Articles](#)
- [Should they take the offer?](#)

Assignment Options:

- [Reflection questions](#)
- Identify a current unjust law and create a list of steps to change the law based on the nonviolent direct action from "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail.](#)"

Part Six: Transformation? Reconciliation? Does nonviolence work?

Instructions

1. Discuss with students the meaning of transformation and reconciliation. Ask students if these were reached in Birmingham during the spring and summer of 1963.
2. Organize students into groups of 3-4 and ask them to write a definition for transformation and reconciliation. Give each group a copy of the [Transformation and Reconciliation handout](#). Students will need two sheets of large paper and markers to complete this activity.
3. Invite students to share their definitions and their quotes.

Materials

- [Transformation and Reconciliation handout](#)