



Interpreting Emotional Appeals – “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Foundation Lesson – High School

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking				
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate
Close Reading	Grammar	Composition		
Reading Strategies Determining Author's Purpose Generalization Inference Summary Literary Elements Imagery Literary Techniques Argumentation emotional appeals Figurative Language Metaphor Sound Devices Alliteration	Syntax Techniques Antithesis Repetition anaphora	Types Expository analytical		

Materials and Resources

- “Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Close Reading Lesson: “Interpreting Ethical Appeals”
- Close Reading Lesson: “Interpreting Logical Appeals”

Lesson Introduction

During non-violent demonstrations for racial equality in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King was arrested and jailed for eight days. He wrote this letter to white clergymen to explain his actions and to answer those people who urged him to call off the demonstrations he had called for. He responds to his critics who claim that he and other African-Americans should wait for the federal, state, and local governments to make changes.

King’s letter uses all three persuasive appeals – logical, ethical, and emotional. An emotional appeal is an appeal to *pathos*, which in Greek loosely translates to “pain.” Most people respond to emotion, but the writer must be careful to use this appeal wisely and fairly. The writer’s aim should not be to manipulate the reader through emotions but to appeal to needs that all humans have in common:

- physical needs (life and health)
- psychological needs (a person’s need for love and respect)
- social needs (the need for freedom, for respect, for acceptance)



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Study the following paragraph from Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” a paragraph in which he employs an emotional argument to convince his audience that his actions were moral and just. Identify the elements of an emotional appeal and analyze the rhetorical devices King uses to develop this appeal.

Using a highly effective emotional appeal, King writes the following:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “Colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “Boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable patience.



With great skill, King uses an abundance of rhetorical devices that have the potential to overwhelm the audience emotionally.

Contrast (antithesis)

1. King employs antithesis in the second sentence. Outline the pairs of contrasts.
 - a. Places: _____ and _____
 - b. Moves like _____ (first place)
and _____ (second place)
 - c. Gains _____ (first place)
and _____ (second place)
2. In a sentence, explain King's rhetorical purpose in employing these antithetical places and ideas.
3. Find another example of antithesis in this paragraph. In a sentence, analyze the rhetorical effect.

Metaphor

4. The antithesis in the second sentence contains two metaphors. Identify them and explain their effect in the sentence.
5. The passage contains other metaphors in addition to the two already mentioned.
 - a. Identify as many metaphors as possible.
 - b. Find a pattern in the types of metaphors King uses.
 - c. In a well-developed paragraph, connect the pattern you see to King's rhetorical purpose.

Anaphora

The fourth sentence not only contains over 300 words but also develops the most powerful emotional argument in the paragraph. The force of the paragraph depends on King's use of several rhetorical techniques, but the anaphora propels a driving rhythm that is particularly effective.

6. Identify similar wording repeated at the beginning of the clauses. Analyze the rhetorical effect of repeating this phrase nine times.

Alliteration

Martin Luther King is a master at using sound devices to add emphasis and detail. For instance, beginning in line 3, King writes “but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee. ...” The repetition of the hard *c* sound accentuates the slow pace of reforms to gain even the smallest right. Both “creep” and “cup of coffee” are humble things, contrasted with Asia and Africa, which move like jets to gain something much grander than a cup of coffee – “political independence.” King uses the repetition of consonant sounds to reinforce the idea of struggling for basic rights, rights any one should take for granted.

7. Find at least four more examples of alliteration in the passage. Write the words or phrases in which alliteration is used; then write a sentence or two that explains the effect of the alliteration.

a. Alliteration _____

Effect _____

b. Alliteration _____

Effect _____

c. Alliteration _____

Effect _____

d. Alliteration _____

Effect _____



Imagery

This passage floods readers with imagery designed to evoke the pity, compassion, and empathy of King's critics.

8. Identify the types of imagery listed below and write a sentence that explains the emotional effect of each one.
 - a. Sight
 - b. Sound
 - c. Touch
 - d. Hearing

Composition

9. As a final exercise, write a one-to-two page essay explaining how King uses emotional appeals to influence his audience.