

The Civil Rights Movement: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X



Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, Washington DC, 1964. Photograph by Marion Trikosko. (Library of Congress)

The Civil Rights Movement: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

BY TIM BAILEY

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources.

Over the course of three lessons the students will compare and contrast the different philosophies and methods espoused by the civil rights leaders Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Comparisons will be drawn between two of the speeches delivered by these men in which they considered the issue of violent protest vs. nonviolent protest. Students will use textual analysis to draw conclusions and present arguments as directed in each lesson. An argumentative (persuasive) essay, which requires the students to defend their opinions using textual evidence, will be used to determine student understanding.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Close read informational texts and identify important phrases and key terms in historical texts
- Explain and summarize the meaning of these texts on both literal and inferential levels
- Analyze, assess, and compare the meaning of two primary source documents
- Develop a viewpoint and write an evaluative persuasive essay supported by evidence from two speeches

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 3

GRADE LEVELS: 6–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW

The students will read excerpts from a speech delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom.” They will use a document analysis activity sheet to facilitate a close reading of the text and track their understanding on both literal and inferential levels. Student comprehension will be determined through classroom discussion and completed activity sheets.

IN CONTEXT

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a civil rights leader who followed the philosophy of change through nonviolence based on the beliefs and methods of Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. King promoted resisting racial discrimination through such actions as sit-ins, boycotts, and peaceful marches and demonstrations. His objective was to let violent oppressors show themselves and the world how morally and legally corrupt the practice of racial injustice is. When he delivered this speech in 1966, some people in the civil rights movement were promoting the use of violence as a means to racial equality, but Dr. King believed that violence would give the opposition something to use to rally support against the civil rights movement.

MATERIALS

- “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., May 4, 1966 (excerpts) from *Ebony* (October 1966): 27–34. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY. ©1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. © renewed 1994 Coretta Scott King.
- Document Analysis: “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”: Martin Luther King, Jr.

PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.

1. Distribute the excerpts from Dr. King’s “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom” speech and the Document Analysis activity sheet to each student. Discuss the information in the In Context section above as needed, but do not give too much away. The students should discover the meaning of text as they read.
2. Read the speech aloud to the students. It is important for the students to experience the language and nuances of the text as the author meant them to be heard.
3. Decide whether the text is manageable for your students on an independent reading level. If it is, you can skip this step and go on to step 4. If the text level is more challenging for them, then “share read” the excerpts with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading while you continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
4. The students should now read the speech excerpts carefully and complete the “Important Phrases” section of the activity sheet. If you are having students work with partners or in groups, let them negotiate their answers. Every student must complete their own activity sheet, even if they are working in groups.
5. Have the students move on to the Critical Thinking Questions. Remember to emphasize that they are to use the author’s own words as evidence for their answers.
6. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share and discuss both their Important Phrase choices and the answers to the Critical Thinking Questions.

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

The students will read excerpts from a speech delivered by Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.” They will use a document analysis activity sheet to facilitate a close reading of the text and track their understanding on both literal and inferential levels. Student comprehension will be determined through classroom discussion and completed activity sheets.

IN CONTEXT

Civil rights activist Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little, but he changed his name because he felt that his last name had been imposed on his family by a slave holder. When Malcolm was young, his family suffered greatly at the hands of White supremacists. His family’s home was burned down, and his father was probably murdered in retaliation for speaking out for African American rights. However, the police called both events accidents. Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam, a controversial group devoted to securing rights for African Americans. He became a national spokesman for the group but left it after he became disillusioned with its leadership. Malcolm started his own organization and soon became frustrated at the civil rights movement’s lack of progress. When asked what should be done to guarantee equal rights for African Americans, Malcolm X replied, “Our objective is complete freedom, justice and equality by any means necessary.”

MATERIALS

- “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm X, April 3, 1964 (excerpts) from *Top 100 Speeches*, AmericanRhetoric.com.
- Document Analysis: “The Ballot or the Bullet”: Malcolm X

PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.

1. Distribute the excerpts from Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech and the Document Analysis activity sheet to each student. Discuss the information in the In Context section above as needed, but don’t give too much away. The students should discover the meaning of text as they read.
2. Read the speech aloud to the students. It is important for the students to experience the language and nuances of the text as the author meant them to be heard.
3. Decide whether the text is manageable for your students on an independent reading level. If it is, you can skip this step and go on to step 4. If the text level is more challenging for them, then share read the excerpts with the students as described in Lesson 1.
4. The students should now read the speech carefully and complete the Important Phrases section of the activity sheet. If you are having students work with partners or in groups, let them negotiate their answers. Every student must complete their own activity sheet, even if they are working in groups.
5. Have the students move on to the Critical Thinking Questions in the activity sheet. Remember to emphasize that they are to use the author’s own words as evidence for their answers.
6. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share and discuss both their Important Phrases choices and the answers to the Critical Thinking Questions.

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

The students will compare and contrast the speeches they have analyzed and choose the leader whose methods and message they find to be the most persuasive. They will then write an essay that argues a point of view in support of one of the texts and refutes the arguments made in the other.

IN CONTEXT

The civil rights leaders Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were two sides of the same coin. Both of them fought for equality and justice for African Americans. Both of them saw a need for immediate action in order to secure those rights. However, they differed greatly in their strategy and tactics. They worked from opposite ends of the activist spectrum toward a goal that was shared by both of them. As Malcolm X put it, “Dr. King wants the same thing I want—freedom!” In the end, they would both suffer violent deaths in service to that shared cause.

MATERIALS

- “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”: Martin Luther King, Jr., May 4, 1966 (excerpts)
- “The Ballot or the Bullet”: Malcolm X, April 3, 1964 (excerpts)
- Compare and Contrast: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

PROCEDURE

1. This assignment may be an in-class essay, which will require students to write under a time limit, or a take-home essay.
2. Review and discuss, as needed, the information in the In Context sections for Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.
3. The students should have the two completed assignments from Lessons 1 and 2 as well as copies of the excerpts from both speeches. They will be referring to them in their essays.
4. The students will write an argumentative (persuasive) essay that addresses the following: “Choose the leader whose methods and message you find to be the most persuasive.” The students must use textual evidence from both speeches in making their arguments. It is important that the students not only provide evidence as to why they chose a particular text, they must also refute arguments made in the speech that they did not choose in order to strengthen their position.

“Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” Martin Luther King, Jr., May 4, 1966 (excerpts)

. . . I am convinced that for practical as well as moral reasons, nonviolence offers the only road to freedom for my people. In violent warfare, one must be prepared to face ruthlessly the fact that there will be casualties by the thousands . . .

Arguments that the American Negro is a part of a world which is two-thirds colored and that there will come a day when the oppressed people of color will rise together to throw off the yoke of white oppression are at least 50 years away from being relevant . . .

This is no time for romantic illusions about freedom and empty philosophical debate. This is a time for action. What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program which will bring the Negro into the main stream of American life as quickly as possible. So far, this has only been offered by the nonviolent movement.

Our record of achievement through nonviolent action is already remarkable. The dramatic social changes which have been made across the South are unmatched in the annals of history . . . Even more remarkable is the fact that this progress occurred with a minimum of human sacrifice and loss of life.

Not a single person has been killed in a nonviolent demonstration . . .

There are many people who very honestly raise the question of self-defense. This must be placed in perspective. It goes without saying that people will protect their homes. This is a right guaranteed by the Constitution and respected even in the worst areas of the South. But the mere protection of one's home and person against assault by lawless night riders does not provide any positive approach to the fears and conditions which produce violence . . .

In a nonviolent demonstration, self-defense must be approached from quite another perspective. One must remember that the cause of the demonstration is some exploitation or form of oppression that has made it necessary for men of courage and good will to demonstrate against evil . . .

It is always amusing to me when a Negro man says that he can't demonstrate with us because if someone hit him he would fight back. Here is a man whose children are being plagued by rats and roaches, whose wife is robbed daily at over-priced ghetto food stores, who himself is working for about two-thirds the pay of a white person doing a similar job and with similar skills, and in spite of all this daily suffering it takes someone spitting on him and calling him a nigger to make him want to fight . . .

I must continue my faith that is too great a burden to bear and that violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives . . .

The American racial revolution has been a revolution to “get in” rather than to overthrow. We want a share in the American economy, the housing market, the educational system and the social opportunities. The goal itself indicates that a social change in America must be nonviolent.

If one is in search of a better job, it does not help to burn down the factory. If one needs more adequate education, shooting the principal will not help, or if housing is the goal, only building and construction will produce that end. To destroy anything, person or property, can't bring us closer to the goal that we seek.

The nonviolent strategy has been to dramatize the evils of our society in such a way that pressure is brought to bear against those evils by the forces of good will in the community and change is produced . . .

Source: “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom, May 4, 1966,” *Ebony* (October 1966): 27–34. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY. ©1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. © renewed 1994 Coretta Scott King.

NAME PERIOD DATE

Document Analysis:

Important Phrases: Which are the most powerful phrases in the speech? Choose three phrases.

Phrase 1:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 2:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 3:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

“The Ballot or the Bullet”: Malcolm X, April 3, 1964 (excerpts)

. . . I'm not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem . . . We're all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man. He just happens to be a white man. All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.

Now in speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us . . .

If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out—time has run out!

. . . I don't even consider myself an American. If you and I were Americans, there'd be no problem. Those Honkies that just got off the boat, they're already Americans; Polacks are already Americans; the Italian refugees are already Americans. Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet.

Well, I am one who doesn't believe in deluding myself. I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn't need any legislation; you wouldn't need any amendments to the Constitution; you wouldn't be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C., right now. They don't have to pass civil-rights legislation to make a Polack an American.

. . . I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare . . .

So it's time in 1964 to wake up . . . let them know your eyes are open too. It's got to be the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet. If you're afraid to use an expression like that, you should get on out of the country; you should get back in the cotton patch; you should get back in the alley . . .

And now you're facing a situation where the young Negro's coming up. They don't want to hear that “turn-the-other-cheek” stuff . . . There's new thinking coming in. There's new strategy coming in. It'll be Molotov cocktails this month, hand grenades next month, and something else next month. It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty, or it will be death . . .

If you don't take this kind of stand, your little children will grow up and look at you and think “shame.” If you don't take an uncompromising stand, I don't mean go out and get violent; but at the same time you should never be nonviolent unless you run into some nonviolence. I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. But when you drop that violence on me, then you've made me go insane, and I'm not responsible for what I do. And that's the way every Negro should get . . . This is what is meant by equality. What's good for the goose is good is good for the gander.

Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the black man in this country. He's the earth's number-one hypocrite . . .

Let the world know how bloody his hands are. Let the world know the hypocrisy that's practiced over here. Let it be the ballot or the bullet. Let him know that it must be the ballot or the bullet . . .

Source: Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” April 3, 1964, Cleveland, Ohio, from *Top 100 Speeches*, AmericanRhetoric.com.

NAME _____ PERIOD _____ DATE _____

Document Analysis: “The Ballot or the Bullet”: Malcolm X

Important Phrases: Which are the most powerful phrases in the speech? Choose three phrases.

Phrase 1:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 2:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 3:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

NAME PERIOD DATE

Critical Thinking Questions: Examples from the text must be cited in answering these questions.

1. Why does Malcolm X say that he is not “anti-white”?
2. Why does Malcolm X say that he does not consider himself an American?
3. What does Malcolm X mean when he says “Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate”?
4. Malcolm X says not to “go out and get violent.” Yet he then says violence is allowable. Why?
5. Why does Malcolm X call Uncle Sam a hypocrite?

NAME _____ PERIOD _____ DATE _____

Compare and Contrast: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were both important leaders during America's civil rights movement. However, they each saw a different way of addressing the challenges faced by African Americans. Choose the leader whose methods and message you find to be the most persuasive. Write an essay that argues your point of view in support of one of the speeches and refutes the arguments made in the other speech. It is important that you use evidence (quotes and ideas) taken directly from the two speeches. Clearly cite this evidence in your essay.

(Attach additional pages if necessary.)