



**"Bringing the Common Core to Life"**  
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**Chancellors Hall - State Education Building - Albany, NY**  
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**Part 6**

**Discussion of Common Core State Standards for ELA & Literacy and  
"Letter from a Birmingham Jail" by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
David Coleman**

Hopefully, some of you who prepared for this conversation today took a look at King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail and I'd like to tell you what I'm going to try to do with you over approximately the next 20 minutes with that letter. What I'm trying to do is to show you what instruction begins to look like with the core in mind. And, of course, that begins to address the very good question asked me earlier, which was "What's the difference?" How does instruction on a day-to-day basis in a way a teacher looks at it, in the daily choices a teacher makes look different when confronted with the core? The time within which we are discussing this, 20 minutes, is highly elusory because I think teaching this letter is at least six days with maybe another week with a comparison we'll talk to you about. But we just did a body of work, a team and I built up an exemplar around the Gettysburg Address, which as you know is three paragraphs long, and it is for three days of instruction on those three paragraphs and that is not by bringing in other resources yet. That's by focusing on the text itself.

The first major shift I want you to consider is far longer amounts of classroom time spent on text worth reading and rereading carefully, a kind of diligent close attention. This has several implications. It also means that a much wider range of kids are in on the game. It means that you can chunk into smaller parts anything but avoiding the richness and complexity. So while I'll speak to you only for 15 or 20 minutes about the letter, please see it as the beginning of six days of instruction rather than this brief talk.

Finally, I know there's an issue hanging in everyone's mind, which is for what range of students is this really possible a letter like this? These are just my best students who can read King's letter. And I want to challenge you today that our core challenge as a community and this is hard work but work worth doing is to get all kids so that after 12 years of practice they can read a text like this with confidence. This IS what college and career readiness demand. This text is precisely at that level. This IS our shared challenge. And there can be intensive support and scaffolding and additional practice to do it but this is the work of doing it. And, strangely, I want to suggest to you that while this text is complex I would dare to argue that reading is fairly simple, that there is no reason to make more complicated than it is the task of teaching reading, of paying close attention, of gathering evidence from what you read. So I might ask



you to forgive me because I'm worried that you're going to find what I'm about to do far too straightforward for most experts, but far more like the core of instruction for what we must do when facing something difficult.

So the question that faces us when we look at the letter from Birmingham Jail, and I will return by the way to how do we do this for a wide range of students, is how do we begin? This is a great question for an artist when they're beginning something or for a teacher. And I thought I would begin by making myself as unpopular as possible by attacking the three most popular ways of beginning.

The most popular way first, I should give you background information and an account of the letter before we begin so you can get oriented. There was a great man, Dr. King. He wrote a letter while in jail because a set of clergymen had sent him a letter saying he should slow down. This is his ringing defense of nonviolence, of the distinction between just and unjust law. We shall read it to together, etc. What you have effectively done as a teacher when you do this is you've replaced the letter from Birmingham Jail with a simpler text, your summary, that now kids will quote back to you. And because of the overwhelming power of self love, those answers are of course correct. Kids are very artful at this. So that's the first escape from the text is to summarize it in advance. You would be stunned in curricular materials how often a text is trivially summarized before it begins. If this is all King had to offer were those conclusions, we should not do the work of reading the letter altogether.

Number two, pre-reading strategies. So then there's a lot of work you can try to do before the letter like you might try to predict what he's going to say or where he was or you might try to compare it to other prison letters. You might try to do several pre-reading type approaches. Forgive me, but I am asking you to just read. To think of dispensing for a moment with all the apparatus we have built up before reading and plunging into reading the text. And let it be our guide into its own challenges. That maybe those challenges emerge best understood from the reading of it. And that maybe we don't have to force a whole set of additional activities that prepare you to start. I'll give further examples of this later.

And the third typical introduction would be the strategy of the weak. In other words we have a purpose for reading this letter, it's to reinforce our understanding of the main idea. Nothing could be more lethal to paying attention to the text in front of you than such a hunt and seek mission. Why not instead let King set the agenda? Why not dare to read the mystery of what's on King's mind? Why not let those strategies emerge to solve real problems rather than constantly interrupting us or setting an agenda? I'll talk more about this later. But one great benefit, teachers, to the core standards is you know how you've been teaching a hundred lessons every year and over the course of years on cause and effect and that's one of the reading strategies. I'll give you one today. I punch you and it hurts, cause and effect. There's

no need to do it over and over. When have you read a difficult text ever in your life and said, "I've got it now. It's a cause and effect text not a problem and solution text. Now, I've got it." We lavish so much attention on these strategies in the place of reading, I would urge us to instead read.

So Aristotle says at one point of drama, he's talking about drama, that the beginning is more than half the whole. And I think he's right because the opening of a drama is what brings you into it. Just think for a moment of a film and the way we teach reading typically. If I were to go to a film with you, imagine before it started, I want you to do a bunch of pre-film watching strategies. Then I ruthlessly interrupted you as it unfolded and said, "There's a train. Have you ever been on a train ride? What does this remind you of?" You would kill me before we were five minutes through. Why then is this appropriate with reading, which is also a task of deep observation and attention, where the author's story is the most interesting one to start with whether it's informative or a narrative? So I ask you to let kids into that story and try to talk about what that looks like.

So let's open King's letter with that in mind and begin with it. I ask you to please read to yourselves the first paragraph following "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." Since I'm accelerating, I'm going to act like you've had time to do that and then read it to you out loud:

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I want to say perhaps the first question you might ask about this text is, "Based on this text and this text alone, what do you know? What can you make out about the letter King received?" So let's look again at that first paragraph for a moment and we might make out gradually that they've accused him of saying very specific, of being unwise and untimely. We're going to go back to that first question. A clever student might notice that he wrote to his dear fellow clergymen, which reveals something about who wrote the letter and perhaps something about King himself if they understand the construct fellow clergymen which you might work on with them immediately or it will actually come up later. But we can already know at least two things, it's written from clergymen and says you've been unwise and untimely.

Let's then move with some speed here because it's a first reading into the next set of arguments, paragraphs 2 through 4. So again I'd love to give you time to look over them with the following question

in mind. “What are the three very different arguments King makes for why he’s in Birmingham? And what different kinds of evidence does he use to support them?” Now I hope the feeling you’re all having is of not knowing the answer in advance. There’s no way to answer my question without returning again. Who even knew that he made three arguments? Who knew that they were so different? Who knew that they used different kinds of evidence? But let’s look at them together.

The first paragraph, again I’m accelerating here much faster than you’d ever do with students, the first paragraph has become somewhat bureaucratic. I’m here, as he summarizes in the last paragraph, because I have members of my staff and I was invited here. I have organizational ties here. He describes the core offices. So it’s almost a bureaucratic kind of answer.

The third paragraph of the letter, he says, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here” and compares himself to the prophets of the eighth century and to Paul, etc. He makes something of a religious, historical argument. He gives that kind of evidence and information. And that’s where it might trigger that fellow clergymen because he is of course comparing himself to those clergymen of old. Now this is a paragraph dense with allusion. You could slow down a lot here to get what Greco Roman means, to figure out exactly who Paul is. I think one’s always judging as a teacher when to pause in that way. On a first read through we’ll come back to that probably. But as much as they understand that King is comparing himself now to a prophet and making a very different kind of argument, we have enough to keep moving through his argument. But there is nothing wrong with helping kids through that work and helping identify because very few of those words can be determined from the context itself. So at a moment like that it’s perfectly appropriate to fill in some of those blanks and not linger too long there and lose the force of the argument.

Because his next argument is the one for this letter’s most famous is the moral argument and I will read it out loud and you will perhaps remember some of it by heart.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

What I’d like to begin with with this argument, this third moral argument, is the question of what is the force of it? How does it relate to the arguments that come before? Sounds pretty preachy. How does it relate to these other two moves? One, I’ve got offices here and I was invited. Two, I’m like a prophet of the past. But third, there’s this sudden moral claim instead of statements. Well you see on the study of it

that King does something quite remarkable. Being accused of being an outsider, he makes an argument that there's no such thing in matters of injustice. He says there's no such thing as an outside agitator because the injustice that affects you is mine. We are mutually implicated in it. It's very important that kids get time to grasp the force of an argument, the force of the claim. How does this fit in with the argument he's making? How does it fit in with the two arguments before it? But the next question might very well be once you've really thought about that is where's the evidence, King? These are high-flying assertions. It seems obvious that we are not tied together in a garment of destiny. You can walk out this door and you'll be perfectly fine. You get wet; I don't get wet. So where's the evidence to support this claim? In that moment of pause to realize as powerful as these words are that they don't yet have any support or proof is a wonderful one. Also, because it creates an appetite to see if he can pull it off. Because when you realize that question you realize how much of this letter, how much of its beauty is his attempt to answer that very difficult question. So when he goes after the White moderate later, when he makes all these moves in letter, he's demonstrating that interrelation that he does not show yet.

Moving on, paragraph 5 is a transition and I'll conclude shortly but I just want to walk you through it a bit further. Paragraph 5 is another transition and notice how it begins.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.

Now, remember that first simple question when we began--What can you make out about the letter he received? Now we have more evidence growing around that question. That is, now we know something they didn't say. I noticed you complained about me being unwise. How about them being unwise and untimely? That's what he says here and the social foundation of it. So that same question that was so simple and got us into the letter repays throughout the letter. In understanding an argument it's critical to know what something is pushing against. What's the alternative that an author by making an argument throughout is building? So that simple question in the beginning becomes increasingly powerful as the letter unfolds.

Then in paragraphs 6 through roughly 9 is what I like to call the just the facts question. Interestingly, in paragraph 6 enters for the first time in this letter the word "fact." And I'll tell you something very moving. One of the people that works here in New York State told me that this to her is the most moving moment. It is not the ringing moral language I just read to you. It is the moment where he says precisely,

There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation.

These are the hard brutal facts of the case. This is a different voice from King. This is now setting out a body of fact in the next two paragraphs to understand its conclusions. Kids gaining command of those facts, seeing how they relate to the case, gives them a further master class in these different kinds of argument.

Finally, let's go for a moment to paragraph 10 because I want to illustrate to you just how rich a discussion of academic vocabulary can be. Paragraph 10 following a relation of the facts asks,

You may well ask: Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches...

and he goes on in this paragraph to describe tension. He says,

My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

A wonderful question at this moment for your students is what exactly does King unfold tension to mean and not mean in this paragraph and the one that follows? And it's a wonderful way for them to study academic language and practice and for them to wonder what if he used a different word. Not just what does tension mean here but why did he choose it and lavish so much attention to it rather than so many other words. You could spend similar time looking at exactly what Madison does with faction. There are often master words in what we read that we pay close study, but the author shows us he spends so much time on it here so we ought to follow him. I won't bore you with the rest. He goes on to make three arguments again, three different arguments about why we can't wait and makes magnificent closing paragraph about that.

He then in paragraphs 15 to 21 and following makes a distinction between just and unjust law. And some people have asked me impatiently about this exercise. When do we get beyond the letter? When do we get beyond to the broader issues of social injustice? Whether or not you believe in nonviolence, whether you believe in civil disobedience? I want to suggest a couple of things to you. The first principle is allow first the rich comprehension of exactly what King is doing. I hope for many of you this was exciting to see the delicacy, the range with which he works and constructs an argument and sees it interact. Isn't it much more interesting to talk about what we think about nonviolence with that behind us rather than doing it to replace that study or in advance of that study? In that way we can really illuminate what we see happening in Egypt rather than cheaply avoiding the letter by going straight to Egypt and other revolutions happening before us.

It's a dare to follow King. When we talk about going beyond the letter, what's wonderful is the section on just and unjust law King himself goes beyond the letter. That is, he begins to make analogies to Hitler's power. He begins to make analogies about other laws. He invites us, I'm trying to say, to go beyond it with him. So that's a marvelous section to ask students to apply his principles of just and unjust law and ask them what laws they think might fit in those categories. Get them using the principles, applying those principles. Do they work? Do they not? What about historical examples? King himself invites you by making that very same winding himself.

And the other thing that happens in the discussion of just and unjust law is enters for the second time in this rather short letter is a hero of King's. Does anyone know who makes their second appearance in the letter at that point? Socrates—that's exactly right. He made it earlier in the discussion of tension and now he enters again. It's his second cameo where King says,

Like him, he began it all with civil disobedience. And it was from him he cites his knowledge of the creative tension.

That to me is the best invitation an author can give you to perhaps in that third week of instruction I mentioned maybe it would be fun to find out who this Socrates guy was and see how he thought about tension in Athens.

This document is part of the great conversation in the United States. It is a letter that bears comparison with our Declaration, with Lincoln's words that follow it. It is in that history but it's also an international conversation. It is a conversation with Greece and other countries. And I think we can both do the letter depth and then also, as I should reveal Dr. Steiner asked me, go beyond it to bring in the conversation with Socrates when we first understand the fundamental role Socrates plays to King within the letter. You don't need it in advance but once you've wrestled with it to then dive in and see that King is not alone in worrying about these things they've been worried about for centuries in different forms. How exciting is that? And then to submit to Socrates and part of the apology where he defends himself at a trial, a trial pretty close to a prison I might add. What a wonderful moment for kids to begin to see that depth at the same time they're reading.

I hope that's begun to give a sense of the kind of instruction I'm talking about. I hope it was concrete enough and the kind of excitement. I want to admit this is extremely difficult work because of a couple of reasons. The text itself is difficult. It is hard work, but work worth doing. There is no apologizing or getting away from that. I used a number of techniques. The first and most important is to let the mysteries that the letter provokes be the source of student motivation and your interest rather than anything about you or anything I presume about you or your history. In other words, what we've done much too much is

tried to go outside the text to motivate kids. You should be interested in this letter because of your background. It should remind you of something. We try to sell it almost in advance of reading it where the only source of motivation that's reliable is the richness and beauty of it itself which must come alive through our questioning. That is hard work I admit. It is specific to reach text. There's no great general question that will suddenly illuminate everything. That's what we hope working together with the state to give you concrete exemplars of how you might read this letter, the Gettysburg Address. We're working together with a great team here and hopefully you will work together with us.

What the world needs most right now is wonderful questions about things worth reading. Things worth read and rereading that don't avoid the text but bring kids into a deeper consideration of it. You noticed I did a lot of chunking and reading out loud, taking a smaller portion and looking at it with care. That allows a much wider range of kids into that process. I am aware that sometimes certain kids will connect to more of this or less of this. Some will see more. But the important deep idea is that they're all part of it. And the wonderful thing is sometimes a kid is behind will notice something another kid didn't. And since you're all looking at the same thing, you have that remarkable moment both as a teacher and as another reader where you say, "Ooh, I didn't see that. I didn't notice that," which is by the way how kids talk about a movie when they've seen it. Did you catch that? Did you see that? Did you watch that? Did you see it when he did this? You notice how lively the academic vocabulary is. While we can explain Greco Roman in other technical terms that are academic, a rich word like tension is so powerful.

And finally the power focus, without six days of instruction, let's be blunt with each other, this is impossible. What I just did to you is gradual. We covered most of the letter in summary. This would take days. So for principals, superintendents and the leaders of schools, please celebrate time spent slowly doing this hard and deliberate work. The research evidence is overwhelming. The only thing we have seen that rapidly accelerates student performance towards reading more complex text is extensive practice repeatedly even with reading the same text. That's the only thing that's been shown to increase fluency substantially.

I'm going to pause but merely to say this is about much more than reading. This is about today I hope for a moment King to some extent himself became alive, that as we paid more attention to him we could see his mind at work. This is not just about reading. It's about thinking. It's also about critical thinking. Critical thinking is not just what do you think or feel about something. It's daring to follow the depth of an author's argument and allow it to really make an impression on you. Then your critical thought follows that in-depth following and work. And then once we do that, they become our teachers. The text is really the master class here. I as the teacher and student and the servant of it and I have a certain reverence for it and that's I think some of the deeper principles that are operating here.



So before I do math, let's pause and talk about literacy.