

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” Exemplar Lesson

Classroom background:

This lesson operates from the assumption that students have a very basic understanding of argument and appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. Because it is an exemplar text, it is not assumed that students are to be experts in these appeals.

Introduction:

The majority of our students will be familiar with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his “I have a dream” speech, however their knowledge of his life beyond that may be somewhat limited. In order to facilitate understanding and engagement, it is recommended you have students answer the following questions via class discussion or journaling:

1. Who is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?
2. Why is he famous?
3. What impact did he have on the United States?

From these basic facts you can glean the level of student background. I typically then set the scene for students so that they have the full context in which the letter was written. I ask them to imagine that they were imprisoned and that the very people that you hoped would support you have, instead, written a letter saying that you deserved to be there. We discuss our reactions. I also set the scene for the specific environment in which the letter was written. King did not have access to technology, air conditioning, etc. and this makes his letter all the more profound. Students then read the full text of the letter without the exemplar color coding. It can be found here:

https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

After they have read it through one time, have students note the appeals through highlighting, underlining, or circling (whatever strategy works best for your students) and request that in the margins they discuss the argument he is creating: who is he arguing against and what is his claim? What is his purpose? Why does he state the things he says. This may be done in pairs or groups as your class dynamic demands. Unless students are particularly accomplished in analysis, it may be difficult for them to complete the entire text alone as it is quite lengthy and loaded.

Ask students to give their reactions to the text: Where is there pathos present: why is it there? Where is there logos present: why is it there? Where is there ethos present: why is it there? What is his argument? How does he make it? What claims is he refuting. Once you have generally analyzed what students have found, refer to the exemplar text and take students through it step by step so they can see all of the ways that King structured his text.

Enrichment and Extension:

The original letter sent to King from the Alabama clergymen can be found here:

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf

and this lesson can be used for further enrichment as students could reflect on both King's letter and the clergymen to see how King directs his claims and counterclaims to answer the accusations present. Analysis of appeals and argument could also be done on the Clergymen's letter.