

Critical Reading Questions for Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," online at:

<http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=40>

and here

<http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html>

1. How does King establish his credibility in the opening paragraphs? That is, in what ways does he attempt to convince his readers that they should listen to what he has to say?
2. Why is King in Birmingham?
What is his first reason?
What is his second reason?
Why are this second reason and the comparison he makes appropriate for his audience?
What is his third reason?
3. Paragraphs 6-9 include a process analysis of direct-action programs. What is its purpose, and what are the four basic steps in a nonviolent campaign?
4. Why did the Alabama Christian Movement at first postpone direct action until after the election run-off? What does this decision reveal about the movement?
5. What has "wait" come to mean to every Negro (term used at the time), according to King?
6. What two types of laws are there, according to King? What is his attitude toward each?
7. What two confessions does King make to his Jewish and Christian brothers?
8. What two opposing forces exist in the Negro community? How has King tried to stand between them?
9. How has King been disappointed by white moderates? By the white church?
10. If the church does not recapture its early sacrificial spirit, what will become of it, according to King? Why will King not despair even if the church does not come to his people's aid?
11. Maxims or proverbs are a sort of short-hand language that convey a sense of wisdom and truth (by their balanced structure, tone, and commonsense language) to an audience, and thus they have an emotional appeal to readers and to listeners. Find some maxims or proverbs that King coins in this letter. Here is one for an example: "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever."