

The Civil Rights Movement “I Have a Dream”

ANALYZING THE MESSAGE

INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you talked with your friends or family about a great speech you heard? Who can you name as a great speaker of today? Perhaps the days of great speechmaking, the golden days of oratory, are behind us, fallen victim to an age of electronic communications. But inarguably, a great speech inspires, persuades, and sends a call to action. What makes a great speech? What does a great speechmaker sound like? Whose speeches have withstood the test of time? In the age of the sound bite, we might look back and note that Abraham Lincoln stood on the hallowed grounds of the Battle of Gettysburg and gave an address that went down in history. John F. Kennedy’s inaugural speech, appealing “Ask not what your country can do for you...” was also a great speech. Today, we recognize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the greatest speechmakers of our time—his eloquence and passion stirred men’s souls. King gave a number of public addresses, but the one for which he is best known occurred in 1963.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his now-famous “I Have a Dream” speech while standing symbolically at the foot of a memorial to Abraham Lincoln. The crowd, primarily African-American, numbered well over 200,000, and had come from all over the United States, with heavy representation from the South. It was a hot day in late August 1963. The occasion was the March on Washington, D.C., for civil rights. King, inspired by the great Mahatma Ghandi, stood with the multitude as the voice for the Freedom Now Movement—one voice representing many thousands. Was his intended audience the sea of people before him? ...those tuned in by radio? ...by television? Was his address for the 1960s? ...90s? ... the 21st century? Was he talking to you and me today?

This activity examines Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—the man, the scholar, the leader, the orator. The goal is to gain insight into Dr. King’s vision for his people to be “free at last,” and the steps that he took to share that vision with his “brothers and sisters.” By understanding his message, we can better understand his vision. But where do we begin? Let’s start with looking at the three necessary elements in the delivery of a speech: 1) a speaker, 2) an audience, and 3) the words.

THE SPEAKER

You have completed a study of the Civil Rights Movement that spanned around 50 years of the 20th century. Some will argue about when civil rights activism officially began, and others will say that it has never ended. However, most historians agree that the decade of greatest activism for civil rights in the United States was the 1960s; most will agree that history shows that the civil rights leader who emerged from that decade was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. Read the full text of the “I Have a Dream” speech provided by your teacher.
2. As you read the text, remember the image of King and the crowd of people gathered on the Washington Mall that you observed on the video.

3. Make a list of your own observations regarding the credibility of the speaker. In assessing whether a speaker is credible, you look for indications that he or she is trustworthy, reliable, has integrity and authority. In other words, what values did King bring to the podium before he ever uttered a word? What was it in this man that would make people leave their homes, families, and jobs, and travel long distances in the heat of summer to hear what King had to say?

THE AUDIENCE

When trying to persuade an audience, it's important to use techniques that put them in the right frame of mind.

1. Make a list of the effects that the setting would have had on an audience. Why was it held at that location? (If you have difficulty with this, consider the impact on such a speech if it was given in a rolling meadow in the Midwest. How would that setting be different?)

2. Why was timing important for this event? What civil rights events led up to this march?

THE WORDS

King used words that were intended to instill excitement and drama into his message—words that were dramatic and volatile.

1. As you read his speech, make a note of terms that were used in the everyday vernacular of the 1960s that are seldom used today.

2. As King began his speech, he was careful to align himself with his audience when he said that he was happy to “join” them. In his next sentence, who was he aligning himself with when he began, “Five score years ago,...”?

3. King punctuated his speech with words and phrases that drew stark contrasts. List several of these below. The first one is done for you.

“...a joyous daybreak,”	“...the long night of captivity,”

4. How did these contrasts add drama to his speech? Choose three contrasts to support your reasoning.

5. King used repetition toward the end of his speech to reach a climax, beginning with his recommendation to “Go back, ...go back, ...go back,” and then with “I have a dream,” and “Let freedom ring,” both used in succession, and finally building up to “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.” Consider the effect this repetition would have on a crowd the size that King was addressing. How would the effect of the speech be altered with the absence of repetition?

Note: What you have just completed is a process developed over 200,000 years ago by another man, scholar, leader, and orator by the name of Aristotle. He called the elements that we used his three modes of proof: (1) *ethos*, 2) *pathos*, and 3) *logos*. You may recognize the Latin words as roots for common terms in the English language today. The first term, *ethos*, depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second, *pathos*, on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; and the third, *logos*, on the apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.

6. Now that you have had an opportunity to read the words and understand how Dr. King decided to deliver his message, write your own reaction to his speech. Specifically, note why you think this speech is one that is still significant in history as well as today. If King were to visit our society today, would he be pleased or disappointed? Provide two or more reasons and explain how these reasons support your claim.