

# Letter from a Birmingham Jail: Rhetorical Analysis

The “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963, describes a protest against his arrest for non-violent resistance to racism. In the letter, King appeals for the unity against the racism in society and fight for Human Rights, using ethos. Similarly, King uses pathos to trigger the emotional aspect of the readers and pursues his audience to take actions. Moreover, King uses various logical explanations to make clear his position and the reasons to fight against the white supremacy. The letter is reflective in tone and serves to catch both the suppressed people and those who are exploiting them. Thus, the rhetorical analysis example of the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” reveals King’s literary skills and his passion to perceive equality, which he accomplishes by using ethos, pathos, and logos, avoiding logical fallacies above all.

The use of **ethos** in the letter is very influencing. King’s introduction of the letter is the first instance of the use of ethos. He states that he earned a title of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s President and can operate in every Southern State of the US country (King, 1963). Here, King creates a moral connection with the readers and establishes himself as a man with authority. The use of words like ‘president’ and ‘every’ describes the status of the organization as trustworthy and credible, making the ethos appeal stronger.

Furthermore, King was a remarkable speaker and knew the perfect combination of rhetorical devices for persuading his audience. In the letter, he references many notable personalities in order to set a basis for the aim of his writing. For instance, King (1963) compares himself to Apostle Paul, who set out on a journey to convey the message of Christianity all over Greece and Roman. However, the story of Paul is not the only influencing factor that King uses in his letter. King (1963) also specifies various prominent personalities like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, John Bunyan, Martin Luther, and even Jesus Christ in his letter. Moreover, he distinctively pursues his audience into believing that he wants to create a revolutionary change. This anticipated change is big enough to make it into history books and influencing enough to get recognized by the people.

So, the references to such instantly recognizable characters are excellent examples of ethos in this literary work. King (1963) also specifies various prominent personalities like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, John Bunyan, Martin Luther, and even Jesus Christ in his letter. Additionally, King seems to understand that his whole argument and appeal are weaker. If he is not able to provide a substantial threshold for the revolution, he is conjuring. So, King’s usage of such historical elements in order to create a comparable point for his credibility. His intention is very exquisite while obvious appeals can serve as a good example because they can draw an analogy and analyze their works much better too.

King makes the situation of human rights clear. He was jailed on the grounds of the ‘violation of court injunction’ during his 1963 protest against the racism in Birmingham. Moreover, he was put on solitary confinement by the authorities. He even denied his rights of the phone call

(Snyder, 2013). Additionally, King provokes the emotions of the readers. For example, as a protest against this direct abduction of basic Human Rights by Birmingham Clergymen, King (1963) writes about such manipulative issues with law enforcement, using **pathos**. He acknowledges that the requirement of the permit is not an issue. The one may think that he expected the intervention of the authorities, given that he knew about the law.

However, he argues that the detention of the members and the treatment given is against human rights. His statement is justifiable as the protest was non-violent, and police violated human rights (Snyder, 2013). Besides, this statement is an important message for the target audience. Furthermore, King (1963) states that African Americans have waited for long to gain their human rights. The actions and the situation of the racism was a direct violation of the law of a nation as well as the law of God. He clarifies that the lack of rights is against democracy and constitution while Blacks deserve the 'God-given' rights (King, 1963). Additionally, every democratic country provides its citizen with freedom of speech, given that the actions are not violating the legal limits. Nevertheless, King argues that the situation of human rights is contrary to the definition in the constitution.

Therefore, he tries to persuade the readers into knowing the extensity of this situation of human rights. According to King (1963), his presence in Birmingham meant that the situation of human rights was miserable there, and his arrest by the local authorities proved his point. In the same way, he has also made extensive use of pathos against the white supremacy. In his appeal to the Blacks to fight against racism, King (1963) writes about the life of African Americans, highlighting poverty and mistreatment. Blacks are not given the most of the privileges and state the backwardness of them as a consequence. So, this statement exclusively appeals the Blacks in an emotional aspect. The use of pathos in the rhetorical analysis example can easily help people to understand the concept of emotional appeals.

The letter includes different logical explanations. King, being an influential speaker, has added a lot of rational appeals in his work. One of the logics in his letter is his argument on the definition of 'unjust' law. King (1963) provides a definition of such laws and examples of how they are enforced, using common logic to decipher how discrimination exists in society, without encountering any logical fallacies. He uses the example of a just and unjust law. According to him, the law that people follow and the law that was used to arrest him are different, and it is simply a form of 'unjust law' in action.

As a result, the majority of white supremacy define the law with their advantage in mind. Furthermore, he states that it is a bad thing that white supremacists leave Negroes with no other choice as to stand against them (King, 1963). In turn, the whites discriminate them, treat them as the minority, and deny their basic rights granted by the constitution and by God himself. He justifies his presence in Birmingham by writing that he and his friends were "invited" to the prison, satirically highlighting the injustice (King, 1963). Moreover, King is very reflective in his letter, adding emotional appeals after logical ones to deliver the needed message. So, King made it clear that resistance appeared. There was no other way to eliminate

the problem, and the rhetorical analysis example proved that the use of rhetorical appeals could help in delivering such a message.

The proper use of ethos, pathos, and logos, combined with a reflective tone and King's passion, makes the letter stand out as an excellent piece of literature as well as the motivational message. Besides, King establishes himself as a man with trustworthiness by using ethos. He wants the readers to know that he wants a change that is big enough for history. Also, King uses emotional appeals to reflect the miserable situation of Human Rights and states that his presence in Birmingham Jail was desperation. Likewise, King makes excellent use of logos to justify the rogue status of the government. So, the letter is an appeal for those who want change and a warning for those who oppose it. Thus, the rhetorical analysis example explains how one can use rhetorical strategies to enhance the message to people on the national level, bringing the social change to life. Hence, this example can be a good rhetorical analysis sample for further learning on how to write such papers on any literary works.