



King and the African-American Freedom Struggle

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Introduction:

In this lesson, students study Dr. King's role in the civil rights movement, also known as the African-American freedom struggle, and use what they learn to define how he should be remembered. In Part One of the unit, students also learn about some of the other major figures and events of the African-American freedom struggle, which helps dispel the myth that the movement was the work of Dr. King alone.

In Part Two, students learn about the Children's March in Birmingham and then use its example to design their own march for a current social injustice. The array of culminating activity options in Part Three will assess what students have learned about Dr. King's role, considered along with the contributions of ordinary individuals to the movement. Students will be able to accurately articulate King's legacy and accordingly suggest how he should be remembered. Choose one or more of these culminating activities to end the unit.

Grades: 9-12

CA State Standards: 11.1, 11.10

Essential Question:

How should Martin Luther King, Jr. be remembered?

Sub Questions:

- What was King's role in the African American freedom struggle? Who else was involved in this movement and what were their roles?
- Was the African-American freedom struggle the work of one man or the culmination of the struggles of many individuals?
- How can we learn from the legacy of the African-American freedom struggle to effect social change today?

Unit Parts:

1. People and Events of the African-American Freedom Struggle
2. Learning to Organize Social Justice Campaigns
3. Honoring Dr. King: His Legacy



Part One: People and Events of the African-American Freedom Struggle

Materials Needed:

- Flashcards/Card (baseball card size), markers
- Internet Access
- Handouts A through J

Handouts:

A: [Major Figures in the African-American Freedom Struggle](#)

B: [Document Analysis Worksheet](#)

C: [Address by Dr. King to the Montgomery Improvement Association Mass Meeting](#) at Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama on 5 December 1955. (Suggested Excerpt: Paragraphs 2 – 5, and 8.)

D: Manifesto, “[The Meaning of the Sit Ins](#),” James Robinson of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

E: [Letter from James Farmer of Congress of Racial Equality \(CORE\) to President John F. Kennedy](#), informing him of details of the Freedom Ride.

F: King, [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#), 12 June 1963. (Teachers should choose an excerpt based on time and interest of the class.)

G: [Letter from Clarence Jones to A. Philip Randolph](#), 11 July 1963.

H: Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), [Pamphlet on Mississippi Freedom Summer](#), 1964.

I: King, “[Beyond Vietnam](#),” Address at Riverside Church, New York on 4 April 1967.

J: King, “[I’ve Been to the Mountain Top](#),” Address at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple, 3 April 1968.

Activities/Instructions:

1. **Opening Activity:** Get students familiar with some major figures in the civil rights movement or African-American freedom struggle.
 - a. **Baseball Cards:** Choose 8 major figures of the civil rights movement. Refer to the online [Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia](#) on the King Institute website for names of people to include. Have students count off 1 through 8 and assign each civil rights figure to a number. Ask students to create a ‘baseball card’ for the civil rights veteran they are assigned, with a picture on one side and information on the other. Direct students to the online King Encyclopedia to do research.



- b. **Share out:** Have students get into groups with other students who were assigned the same civil rights veteran. In small group, students present their baseball cards and compare the information they included.
 - c. **Stay and Stray:** Pass around **Handout A: Major Figures in the African-American Freedom Struggle** (included here with 8 sample figures from the movement) to the class. Set up 8 stations around the classroom, one for each figure. From each group, have two students ‘stay’ and two students ‘stray’ to the other stations. The students who ‘stay’ are charged with presenting their figure to their classmates who come to their station. The students who ‘stray’ talk to their classmates about the other figures studied and fill in Handout A as they move from station to station. Teacher calls time, indicating when students move to the next station. After one full round is complete, the ‘stay’ students switch with the ‘stray’ students from their own groups. Repeat the cycle.
 - d. Students come up with headlines and symbols to represent each figure they learned about through the previous activities.
2. **Primary Document Analysis:** Students learn about 8 major events of the African-American freedom struggle through an informative powerpoint presentation and document analysis.
 - a. Introduce 8 major events of the African-American freedom struggle to the class, using [this presentation](#). The events are: Montgomery Bus Boycott, Sit-Ins, Freedom Rides, Mississippi Freedom Summer, Selma to Montgomery March, Birmingham Children’s March, March on Washington, and Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike.
 - b. Pass around **Handout B: Document Analysis Worksheet** to the class. Have students get into their groups from the previous activity or divide the class into new groups. Assign an event to each group for study.
 - c. From the list of primary documents **Handouts C – J**, give each group copies of the relevant document related to the event they are studying. In groups, students analyze their document using Handout B: Document Analysis Worksheet. Each group shares its findings with the class.

Note to the Teacher:

Depending on your class’ previous knowledge of the African-American freedom struggle, consider a prerequisite ‘Three Posters’ activity to start off this lesson. Label three posters ‘People’, ‘Events’, and ‘Themes’ of the African-American freedom struggle. Ask students to form three groups, one for each poster, and fill in what they know. Then students rotate among posters and add to what their peers wrote. Once students have had the chance to review and fill in each poster, debrief with the class about its collective knowledge. Paste the posters on the wall. This exercise helps get at the funds of knowledge with which students enter the classroom. It’s also a great assessment tool as it illustrates what they don’t know, which can be compared with what they have learned by the end of the unit.

A possible extension for Activity 2.c. Document I is to have students compare Dr. King speaking out against the Vietnam War to current protests against the Iraq War.



Part Two: Learning to Organize Social Justice Campaigns

Materials Needed:

- Documentary, [Mighty Times: The Children's March](#) (2004)
- Handout K: [Understanding the Children's March](#)
- Handout L: [Designing Your Own March](#)
- Poster paper, markers

Activities/Instructions:

1. Tell students that today they will get a taste of organizing for a cause by first understanding an infamous campaign of the African-American freedom struggle – The Children's March – and then working in groups to strategize their own march/campaign.
2. Play the film *Mighty Times: The Children's March* in class. **Pair-Share:** Have students pair up and fill out **Handout K: Understanding the Children's March**. Students share out responses in a class discussion.
3. Have students get in small groups and strategize their own march on poster paper, using the guiding questions in **Handout L: Designing Your Own March**. Tell them that what they learned from the video they watched will come in handy.



Part Three: Honoring Dr. King: His Legacy

Materials Needed:

- Poster paper and/or design software
- Examples of obituaries from newspapers

Activities/Instructions:

1. Discuss Dr. King's legacy of fighting for economic justice with your students by reminding them that though Dr. King was a PhD, a minister, and a Nobel Laureate, he chose to fight for garbage men, despite his colleagues' lack of support, in what turned out to be his last campaign. Also discuss the Poor People's Campaign that King was organizing in an effort to bring about economic justice in America. Refer to the [King Encyclopedia](#) for more information on the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike and the Poor People's Campaign. (Consider conducting a side discussion on why some people are unwilling to support economic equity).
2. Ask students to complete this simile: "The civil rights movement/African-American freedom struggle is like...." Ask them to share their responses with the class. Examples: like a brick wall (the wall is the movement and each brick is a person or event contributing to the movement; like a tree (the trunk is the movement and King is a major branch), etc. Ask students to respond to one of the essential questions of the unit – "Was the African-American Struggle the work of one man or the contributions of many" – based on their responses to the simile exercise.
3. **Culminating Activity Options:**
 - a) Ask students to create an obituary honoring Dr. King. Ask them to use the information they have learned about King's role in the African-American freedom struggle and accordingly define his legacy. Time and internet access permitting, students can choose pictures to accompany their obituary.
 - b) Ask students to design a monument for Dr. King, illustrating how King's legacy should be redefined. Designs can either be hand drawn or computer assisted, time and software permitting.
4. Remind students that Dr. King achieved all that he did before he even reached age 40 (he died at 39). After the previous activity reflecting on King's legacy, have students reflect on their own lives in a freewrite responding to the prompt: "What would you like to achieve by age 40?" Have students share out answers by the class.
5. Tell students that Dr. King made improving social, economic, and racial conditions in society his life mission. His final book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* was an analysis of American race relations and the future of the freedom struggle. **Homework:** Ask students to pick one current social injustice they care about and write an essay responding to the question "Where do we go from here?" regarding their perceived future of that issue in American and/or global society, based on research into that issue. Ask them to ponder and include what King would have said today in response to that social injustice.