



Martin Luther King: Beyond the Dream

Youth Essay Contest **Required Reading**

Before responding to the essay prompt, you must read all three excerpts. Together, they introduce parts of Martin Luther King Jr.'s work, ideas and personal sacrifice that are often less emphasized in familiar retellings of his life.

Excerpt 1: King's Work, Victories, and the Work Still Ahead

Context for students

By 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. had spent more than a decade helping lead campaigns against segregation and racial injustice. Those campaigns had helped produce enormous change. The Montgomery Bus Boycott helped end legally segregated city buses. The Birmingham Campaign helped build national pressure for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Selma campaign helped create momentum for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The movement had won major victories. But King did not believe the work was finished.

By 1967, he was asking harder questions about why Black Americans remained disproportionately poor, unemployed and confined to inadequate housing even after major civil-rights laws had been passed. His attention increasingly turned toward the structures that produced inequality.

Selected excerpt from *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

[Insert the selected substantive passage beginning with King's discussion of poverty and the economic system. The selection should carry students through his distinction between helping people in need and questioning the structures that repeatedly produce need, including his argument that "an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." Continue far enough for students to encounter his argument that racism, economic exploitation and war are connected.]

As you read, consider: What does this excerpt reveal about how King's thinking had expanded beyond changing discriminatory laws?

Excerpt 2: The Human Cost of the Work

Context for students

The King remembered in photographs can seem almost fearless. But King did not describe himself that way.

In January 1956, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was only 27 years old. He was a young pastor, husband and father. His family was receiving repeated threats. Late one night, another caller threatened to kill him and harm his family. King could not sleep. He went into his kitchen alone.

Selected excerpt from King's account of the kitchen-table experience

[Insert the fuller narrative passage in which King describes sitting at the kitchen table, thinking about his wife and infant daughter, admitting his fear, considering whether he could leave the movement, praying when he felt he had reached the end of his own strength, and finding the resolve to continue. The selection should include his admission: "I was ready to give up."]

Three days later, King's home was bombed while Coretta Scott King and their baby daughter were inside. They survived.

As you read, consider: How does knowing about King's fear, exhaustion and doubt change or deepen your understanding of his courage and sacrifice?

Excerpt 3: What King Was Fighting for When He Died

Context for students

Twelve years after that night in his kitchen, King's work had expanded considerably. In the final years of his life, he spoke increasingly about poverty and economic inequality. In late 1967, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began organizing the Poor People's Campaign, which sought economic security for poor Americans across racial lines.

In 1968, approximately 1,300 Black sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike after years of low wages, dangerous working conditions and racial discrimination. King went to Memphis to support them.

This matters because King is often remembered for how he died without equal attention to what he was fighting for when he died.

Selected excerpt from *I've Been to the Mountaintop* (April 3, 1968)

[Insert a substantive section that allows students to hear King discussing the sanitation workers, economic power, collective action and the need to remain committed to the struggle. The selection should include: "We've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end," and move toward his awareness of threats against his life and his determination to continue.]

King was assassinated the following evening, April 4, 1968. He was 39. But the Memphis sanitation strike did not end when King died. The workers continued, and later that month the city reached an agreement that included union recognition and wage increases.

King, the Movement, and How We Remember Him

King mattered enormously. His leadership, strategy, voice and sacrifice mattered. But the victories of the Civil Rights Movement were never his alone. They were achieved through movements involving local organizers, students, churches, civil-rights organizations and thousands of ordinary people.

King acknowledged this himself. Reflecting on Montgomery, he explained that he had not started the protest and had instead responded when the community called on him to serve as a spokesman.

His death did not end the work because the work had never belonged to one person.

How Did King Want to Be Remembered?

King is often presented through a small number of familiar images and phrases, especially the March on Washington, the “I Have a Dream” speech and his commitment to nonviolence. Those are real parts of his story, but they are not the whole story.

Two months before his assassination, King preached “The Drum Major Instinct” at Ebenezer Baptist Church and imagined what he would want said at his funeral. He did not want the focus placed on his awards or status. He wanted his life remembered through service, love, justice, peace and commitment.

“I just want to leave a committed life behind.”