The March on Washington: I Have a Dream

By Martin Luther King, Jr.

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In 1955, Dr. King led the greatest nonviolent demonstration of its kind in the United States – the Montgomery Bus Boycott against segregated busing. The boycott lasted for 382 days, ending when the Supreme Court ruled that segregated busing was (and is) unconstitutional. The ruling showed that nonviolent actions can achieve results. It also established King as the foremost leader of the civil rights movement.

An ordained Baptist minister, King was committed to nonviolent protest as a way of achieving social justice. With the eyes of the country and the world on the organizers of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King stirred protestors with powerful speeches and strong words of encouragement. His prominent role came with a price. King’s home was bombed and he himself was arrested and threatened. Nevertheless, he remained committed to the cause of social justice, a commitment that eventually led to the March on Washington.

1. Why might it be important for us to read the text of King’s speech, rather than simply read an analysis or watch a video about it?

Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)
A seminal U.S. document is a document of speech that has helped shaped the country and its people. King’s speech helped propel the civil rights movement, changing our laws and our ideas about equality. In analyzing a speech, you must determine its purpose, or the reason the speaker delivered the speech.

2. Cite the lines that state King’s purpose.

3. What other seminal U.S. documents does King cite in his speech?

Rhetorical devices appear throughout King’s speech. Rhetorical devices are techniques the writers use to enhance arguments and convey ideas. One such device is an extended metaphor, or a comparison between two unlike things that is explored in some depth.

4. Reread lines 17-31 and notice the extended metaphor King uses. What is the meaning of the metaphor?

5. Why does King say that the country has defaulted on its promise to African Americans?

Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)
King’s speech is especially significant because it was made in 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, one hundred years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

6. Cite the line in which King refers to where he is giving the speech. What does he mean by the reference?

Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)

Another rhetorical device is repetition. In his speech, King uses repetition, saying a word or phrase over and over for emphasis.

7. Cite the repeated phrase in lines 70-80. What effect does this repetition have?

8. How might a desolate person feel?

9. Why does King not want the creative protests to degenerate?

10. How might the freedoms of white and black Americans be inextricably bound?

Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)
King employs another rhetorical device called parallelism. Parallelism is the repeated use of the same grammatical construction to express ideas that are equal in importance. For example, King uses parallelism in lines 78-81: “we cannot be satisfied . . . We are not satisfied . . . We will not be satisfied.” Point out that parallelism often employs repetition.

11. What other uses of parallelism are on the page?
12. What does King’s use of parallelism and repetition emphasize in lines 89-91?

Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)

The use of parallelism and repetition can affect the meaning and tone of a speech. Tone is the author’s attitude toward the subject and the audience. The tone of a speech can be angry, encouraging, or even funny.

13. What tone is apparent in the most famous section of King’s speech, in which he repeats “I have a dream”?
14. How does this tone affect the meaning of the speech?
15. In what way might unjust suffering be redemptive?
Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)
Analyzing a seminal speech involves determining its theme or themes, or the central message(s) the speaker wants to convey. Determining a speech’s theme requires them to think about the speech’s context as they analyze the words.

16. Look at lines 120-131. What “faith” is King referring to?

17. What new meaning does King expect Americans to find in the words of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee”?

18. How does the context of the speech, including years of inequality and nonviolent resistance, coupled with an analysis of his words, help illuminate the theme?

Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)

19. Look at the repetition in lines 132-140 of “let freedom ring.” How do the repetition of these words and the parallelism of the clauses affect the meaning of the passage?

20. What parts of the speech did you find most inspiring?
Share your answer with your shoulder partner. (2 min.)