

## Rhetorical Appeals in Letter from Birmingham Jail

In the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" written by Martin Luther King Jr., he defends his actions against the clergymen's accusations. In his response, he effectively employs Aristotle's three appeals, pathos, logos, and ethos, throughout the entire letter.

First, Martin Luther King Jr. employs pathos by evoking in his audience an emotional response to his narrative and the challenges he faced. Even though he was incarcerated, he found the time and space to write his letter describing what it was like to be an African American. He could not remain inactive in Atlanta because he was concerned about the many injustices occurring in Birmingham, which he considered to be the most segregated city in the United States. He accomplishes this by appealing to the readers' emotions and aspirations. As merchants failed to remove demeaning racial signs, King stated that they were victims of broken promises. He evoked the emotions of parents by describing how racial segregation had affected black children and how difficult it was for parents to explain the situation. They find it difficult to explain to their children why they could not attend a theme park that was advertised on television because they are black. In addition, he reiterated that such an explanation would cause a child to develop prejudices and animosity toward white people. In addition to describing what the children endured, King wished to appeal to White Americans. He desired that they empathize with the suffering of African American communities and experience their pain.

In fact, King underscored the significance of his arguments and described what the American South would be like if African Americans decided to adopt violent actions instead of his nonviolent demonstrations. He was "convinced that by now, many streets in the South would be flowing with floods of blood" (King 4). This quotation appeals to the reader's emotions through the use of a provocative image. He argued that violent demonstrations would provoke retaliation from the white community, bringing chaos and conflict to the entire American South. Therefore, maintaining a peaceful and courageous protest will convey their arguments and garner them the attention they deserve.

Martin Luther King Jr. employs logos to convince his audience with factual evidence. He penned the letter in the style of an attorney, delineating what was just and unjust from a variety of angles. In addition, he utilized logical reasoning throughout the letter, highlighting several facts that the eight white clergymen neglected to consider. For example, he implies that clergymen are selective in their adherence to the law by asking, "[break] some laws while obeying others?" (King 3). Using factual evidence, King argues that nonviolent protests and disobedience are the keys to achieving their "constitutional and God-given rights" (King 3). The aim of nonviolent direct actions is to create tension that will facilitate negotiations. While the clergymen deem the protests imprudent and untimely, they failed to "express a similar concern for the circumstances that led to the protests" (King 1).

King outlines four stages for nonviolent campaigns, which they had already completed in Birmingham: gathering facts to determine if there is injustice, being open to negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. He writes that there was compelling evidence that the Black community experienced racial injustices. Despite this evidence, and despite reaching out to their city fathers for negotiations, they did not engage in good faith negotiations. The merchants made

commitments that they were unable to keep. Realizing it was difficult to rely on them, they resorted to self-purification and required a 'direct-action program for the Easter season' (King 2) to exert pressure on the merchants, which would open the door to negotiations for the neglected Black community.

Lastly, King employs ethos to persuade his audience by using historical figures to demonstrate his credibility. King was circumspect in his self-description, and his argument demonstrated that he understood and acknowledged American cultural ideals. In the introduction, he referred to the clergymen as "fellow clergymen," indicating that they are his equals (King 4). In his response, he also acknowledged their status and sincerity, establishing their credibility as men of benevolence who respect the teachings of the Bible. Even though he introduced himself as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he wrote that it was an honor, as he did not consider himself the best political strategist or the foremost expert on Jesus. In the majority of his arguments in the letter, he cited contemporary leaders and philosophers such as Abraham Lincoln and Socrates. King contends that, like them, these individuals were righteous persecutors, freedom fighters, and countercultural visionaries. He describes how Socrates believed uncertainty or tension was necessary for people to emerge from their stress and struggle and enter a domain of objective evaluation and creative analysis. Similar to Socrates, they used nonviolent actions to create social tension so that individuals would comprehend the need to act.

### Conclusion

In this letter, he uses pathos to persuade his audience of the neglected African American community, logos to emphasize how laws were unfair and shouldn't be treated so lightly, and ethos to explain his logical reasoning with examples of historical figures with similar ideas from long ago. King effectively incorporated Aristotle's three appeals, resulting in a clear and persuasive argument.

### Work Cited

1. King, Martin Luther. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." *The Atlantic*, Aug 1963, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/letter-from-birmingham-jail/552461/>.