

# Civil Disobedience

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: KWL, Discussion Groups, Think-Pair-Share, Marking the Text

Fill in the KWL chart below with ideas about civil disobedience.

What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned

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**Timed Writing Prompt:** Draft a response to the following question: What is the effect of civil disobedience on changing social attitudes? Your teacher will specify the amount of time you will have to write your response. In your response, write an effective thesis, support your thesis with evidence, use appropriate rhetorical devices (such as rhetorical questions; appeals to ethos, pathos, or logos; metaphors; irony; etc.), and include effective transitions to develop your opinion and provide a logical flow of ideas.

## My Notes

## Speech

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Born in 1869, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a great believer in the power of using civil disobedience against governments that oppressed the poor and the disenfranchised. He spent seven years in South Africa leading and defending Indians born and living there without legal rights. It was there that he began practicing *satyagraha*, or passive resistance. Later, he returned to his homeland of India where he helped the country gain its independence from the British in 1947. He became known there as Mahatma, or “Great Soul.” India, though free from Britain, suffered from internal turmoil as religious factions fought for power. Gandhi was assassinated by a fanatic in 1948.

As you read “On Civil Disobedience,” consider how Gandhi might advise you to respond to an unjust law.

Excerpt from

“ON  
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE”

by Mohandas K. Gandhi

JULY 27, 1916

There are two ways of countering injustice. One way is to smash the head of the man who perpetrates injustice and to get your own head smashed in the process. All strong people in the world adopt this course. Everywhere wars are fought and millions of people are killed. The consequence is not the progress of a nation but its decline. . . . No country has ever become, or will ever become, happy through victory in war. A nation does not rise that way;



it only falls further. In fact, what comes to it is defeat, not victory. And if, perchance, either our act or our purpose was ill-conceived, it brings disaster to both belligerents<sup>1</sup>.

But through the other method of combating injustice, we alone suffer the consequences of our mistakes, and the other side is wholly spared. This other method is *satyagraha*<sup>2</sup>. One who resorts to it does not have to break another's head; he may merely have his own head broken. He has to be prepared to die himself suffering all the pain. In opposing the atrocious laws of the Government of South Africa, it was this method that we adopted. We made it clear to the said Government that we would never bow to its outrageous laws. No clapping is possible without two hands to do it, and no quarrel without two persons to make it. Similarly, no State is possible without two entities, the rulers and the ruled. You are our sovereign, our Government, only so long as we consider ourselves your subjects. When we are not subjects, you are not the sovereign either. So long as it is your endeavour to control us with justice and love, we will let you to do so. But if you wish to strike at us from behind, we cannot permit it. Whatever you do in other matters, you will have to ask our opinion about the laws that concern us. If you make laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner and without taking us into confidence, these laws will merely adorn the statute books<sup>3</sup>. We will never obey them. Award us for it what punishment you like; we will put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffold<sup>4</sup> and we will do so laughing. Shower what sufferings you like upon us; we will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body. We will gladly die and will not so much as touch you. But so long as there is yet life in these our bones, we will never comply with your arbitrary<sup>5</sup> laws.

### Discussion Group:

On separate paper, create a graphic organizer that illustrates Gandhi's argument.

Who is Gandhi's **audience**? What in the text tells you this?

<sup>1</sup> **belligerents**: participants in a war

<sup>2</sup> **satyagraha**: (Sanskrit) insistence on truth—a term used by Gandhi to describe his policy of seeking reform by means of nonviolent resistance

<sup>3</sup> **statute books**: books of law

<sup>4</sup> **scaffold**: a platform on which people are executed by hanging

<sup>5</sup> **arbitrary**: illogical, unreasonable



### WORD CONNECTIONS

**Belligerents** contains the root *-belli-*, from the Latin word *bellum*, meaning “war.” This root also appears in *bellicose*, *antebellum*, and *rebellion*.

**Suppressed** contains the root *-press-*, from the Latin word *premere*, meaning “to press.” This root also appears in *repress*, *impress*, *impression*, and *pressure*.

### LITERARY TERMS

An **audience** is the reader, listener, or viewer of a particular piece of writing, speaking, or visual.

## My Notes

## Speech

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) is considered the most important voice of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Under King’s leadership, African Americans gathered forces to overcome the legalized racism of segregation in the South. King enjoined communities to participate in nonviolent acts of resistance. In 1963, King and many others were sent to jail for peacefully demonstrating in Birmingham, Alabama. While in jail, King wrote a letter in which he articulated his ideas about civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance. Soon after, King and a crowd of 200,000 participated in the historic March on Washington, D.C., where King gave perhaps his most famous speech, “I Have a Dream.” King was assassinated at age 39.

Dr. King also advocated civil disobedience. Annotate “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as your teacher directs a guided reading.

Excerpt from

*Letter from  
Birmingham Jail*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

APRIL 17, 1963

Chunk  
1

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom do I pause to answer criticisms of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticism that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff,

educational, and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came, we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city’s white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative. . . .

You may well ask: “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and halftruths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies<sup>1</sup> to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

Chunk  
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<sup>1</sup> gadflies: pests

## My Notes

# Civil Disobedience

## My Notes

The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue. . . .

Chunk  
3

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954<sup>2</sup> outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical<sup>3</sup> for us consciously to break laws. One may ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine<sup>4</sup> that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus is it that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Chunk  
4

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in

<sup>2</sup> **1954 decision of the Supreme Court:** *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which stated that racially separated schools were unequal and violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution

<sup>3</sup> **paradoxical:** self-contradictory

<sup>4</sup> **St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich:** theologians

enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego<sup>5</sup> to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

Chunk 5

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian<sup>6</sup> freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's anti-religious laws. . . .

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of

Chunk 6

<sup>5</sup> **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Nebuchadnezzar:** In the Bible (Daniel), King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon required citizens to worship an idol. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused, accepting the punishment of a fiery furnace. They were miraculously saved, unharmed by the fire.

<sup>6</sup> Hungarian freedom fighters demanded democracy for Hungary but were defeated in a Soviet attack in 1956.

### My Notes

Handwriting practice lines for notes.

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## WORD CONNECTIONS

Dr. King relates the word “Zeitgeist” to the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement. The word derives from German, meaning “spirit of the times.” Its parts provide a literal meaning: *zeit* meaning time and *geist* meaning spirit.

## My Notes

## LITERARY TERMS

An **allusion** is a reference to a well-known person, event, or place from literature, history, music, or art.

freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist<sup>7</sup>, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides — and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, “Get rid of your discontent.” Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

## Chunk 7

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.” Was not Amos<sup>8</sup> an extremist for justice: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.” And John Bunyan: “I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.” And Abraham Lincoln: “This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” And Thomas Jefferson: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .” So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Cavalry’s hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime — the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists. . . . I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness

<sup>7</sup> **Zeitgeist**: German for “the spirit of the times”

<sup>8</sup> **Amos, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, James Meredith**: all known for courageous opposition to injustice



that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and when her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.

After reading the letter, analyze how Dr. King uses his knowledge of his audience to shape a persuasive argument.

Taking into consideration the reading, writing, thinking, and discussing that you have done in the unit so far, reflect on your growing understanding of the essential questions in this unit:

- What is the nature of justice?
- How does one construct a persuasive argument?

## My Notes

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Chunk  
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