

Questions for "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

1. What is King's tone in the opening paragraph? How might you make an argument for its being ironic?
2. Why does King arrange paragraphs 2-4 in the order that he does? How would reversing the order change the impact?
3. How do King's allusions to biblical figures and events appeal to both ethos and pathos?
4. Why does King go into such detail to explain the basic principles and process of the nonviolent protest movement?
5. In sentence 2 of paragraph 14, what is the effect of juxtaposing the rate of change in Asian and African cultures with the rate of change in American culture?
6. In the long sentence in paragraph 14 (beginning with "But when you have seen"), why does King arrange the "when" clauses in the order that he does? Try repositioning them, and then discuss the difference in effect.
7. What rhetorical strategies are used in paragraph 25? Identify at least four.
8. What are the chief rhetorical strategies used in paragraph 31? Identify at least five.
9. Why does King wait until paragraph 45 to address the alleged commendable behavior of the Birmingham police in "preventing violence"?
10. Trace one of the following patterns of figurative language throughout King's letter: darkness and light, high and low, sickness and health.
11. King uses repetition of single words or phrases, of sentence structures, and of sounds. Focusing on a passage of one or more paragraphs, discuss the effect of this use of repetition.
12. Considering the final three paragraphs as King's conclusion, discuss whether you believe it is rhetorically effective.