



A lesson on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” Speech in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington

Course | U.S. History/A.P. U.S. History, 9–12

Context | This lesson can be used during a unit on the Civil Rights Movement or in remembrance of the March on Washington or Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birthday holiday.

Length | This lesson is designed for a 60-minute class period. Extension activities are included at the end of the lesson.

Learning Objectives | Students will be able to:

- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of a primary source, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole;
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas;
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a speech, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text;
- Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole; and
- Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

Common Core State Standards Addressed | Literacy in History/Social Studies, Grades 9–10:

- RH.9-10.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- RH.9-10.5 Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

Literacy in History/Social Studies, Grades 11–12:

- RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
- RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.
- RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

Materials Included | Each student should have a copy of the “I Have a Dream” speech (PDF) to read for homework: www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf. Students can view the speech at www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEqnklfYs.

Teacher Background Information | Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his now legendary, “I Have a Dream” speech, at “The Great March on Washington,” August 28, 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial. The march for “jobs and freedom,” organized by a diverse group of civil rights, labor, and religious organizations, drew more than 200,000 people, becoming one of the largest political rallies for human rights in our history. Many regarded it as crucial to the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964), as well as the Voting Rights Act (1965). King’s oration—part speech, part sermon, part prophecy—was the high point of the rally, remembered most for his “dream” vision of the future that articulated the aspirations of the Movement.

But the speech as a whole repays close study and raises interesting questions. The speech begins (and ends) by emphasizing freedom: what does King mean by freedom, and in what sense does he regard African Americans as “still not free”? The speech then moves to speak about justice: can you say what he means by “justice”—equality of rights, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, equality of economic and social condition, or something else? How is it related to the Lord’s punitive justice, prophesied by Amos, that “rolls down like waters” (Amos 5:24)? And what is the connection, according to King, between justice and freedom? Might increasing justice for some require limiting freedom for others?

In recounting his dream of the future, King speaks not only of freedom and justice but also of brotherhood and sisterhood: how is this related to the other goals? Is the goal of brotherhood rooted in the American dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” or is it rooted in the Christian messianic vision, when “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together” (Isaiah 40:5)? Is King, in his remark about the “color of their skin” and the “content of their character,” preaching a vision of color-blind America, where race is irrelevant? Do you share such a vision today? When King concludes with the moving call “Let freedom

ring,” does it carry the same meaning as it does in his source, “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”? What would it mean to be “free at last”?

More information on the March on Washington can be found here: http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_march_on_washington_for_jobs_and_freedom/.

Student Preparation | Students should read the speech (or a section of it, depending on the students’ grade level) for homework, and annotate their copy of the speech, paying special attention to:

- the central ideas and themes of the speech (freedom, justice, brotherhood/sisterhood);
- the meaning of the words and phrases as they are used in the speech, including how King uses the same key terms over the course of a text; and
- how the speech is structured, including key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text.

Class Activity

Warm-Up (20 minutes) | Watch the video of the speech together in class. Have students take notes on anything that captures their attention when listening to the speech. After the speech is over, discuss the advantages to listening to the speech rather than just reading it.

Examining the Primary Source (15 minutes) | Set up three stations around the room, one for each theme: freedom, justice, brotherhood/sisterhood. Group students in pairs or in small groups and have them rotate through each station at their own pace. Instruct them to answer the question at each station with their partner/small group. They may write down their answers on the margins of their speeches or on a separate sheet of paper.

- **Freedom station**: The speech begins (and ends) by emphasizing **freedom**: what does King mean by freedom, and in what sense does he regard African Americans as “still not free”? Use examples from the text and your knowledge of the era to defend your answer.
- **Justice station**: The speech then moves to speak about **justice**: can you say what he means by “justice”—equality of rights, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, equality of economic and social condition, or something else? Use examples from the text and your knowledge of the era to defend your answer.
- **Brotherhood/sisterhood station**: In recounting his dream of the future, King speaks not only of freedom and justice but also of **brotherhood** and **sisterhood**. First, what does King mean by brotherhood? Sisterhood? How is this related to the other goals [freedom and justice]? Is the goal of brotherhood rooted in the American dream of “life, liberty,

and the pursuit of happiness” or is it rooted in the Christian messianic vision, when “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together”?

Class Discussion (20 minutes) | Come back together as a class, and discuss the following questions:

What is the **connection**, according to King, between justice and freedom? Might increasing justice for some require limiting freedom for others?

When King concludes with the moving call “Let freedom ring,” does it carry the same meaning as it does in his source, “My Country ’Tis of Thee”? What would it mean to be “free at last”?

Is King, in his remark about the “color of their skin” and the “content of their character,” preaching a vision of color-blind America, where *race* is irrelevant? Do you share such a vision today?

Wrap-Up (5 minutes) | If you were asked to give a public speech in Washington, DC about what is needed today for a better America, what would you say? What is your “dream”? How would you convince others to follow your dream? Share as a class if time allows.

Extension Activities | 1) Write a paragraph or two answering the following question: Choose one of the themes (freedom, justice, brotherhood/sisterhood) that King emphasized in his speech. How free would King judge America to be today? How just? How much brotherhood can be found in America? Sisterhood? Defend your answer with specific examples from current events.

2) Imagine you are a newspaper reporter who has been tasked to cover the March on Washington. After listening to King’s speech, write an article describing the speech and the crowd’s reaction.

3) Research the [inscriptions](#) on the recently erected Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Washington, DC. Choose your favorite inscription and write a paragraph describing why you think it was chosen for King’s memorial. View photos of the memorial at <http://dc.about.com/od/monumentphotos/ss/MLKMemorialPhotos.htm> and www.demotix.com/news/799570/quotations-inscription-wall-martin-luther-king-jr-memorial.

4) Interview someone who attended the March on Washington. Does his or her memory of the event differ from what you have read about it?