

# Putting Our Money Where Our Mouths Are

# 7

## Our Unit for Teaching “Letter From Birmingham Jail”

Throughout this book, we have been criticizing the instructional ideas of the authors of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for their narrow New Critical focus, for their apparent failure to recognize how a focus on the text can be supported by a focus beyond the text, for their apparent failure to recognize the importance of developing prior knowledge, for their apparent failure to encourage developing strategic understandings that can be transferred from text to text, and for the absence of any serious attention to the power of instructional sequencing. We’ve also discussed how misunderstandings about the text complexity standard and the text exemplars may lead to impoverished curricula.

Throughout this book, we’ve also offered research-based instructional ideas that we believe hold more promise for meeting the CCSS than do the instructional ideas of the Standards writers themselves. In order to summarize our arguments, in this chapter we look closely at the instructional plan that David Coleman proposes for teaching King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail” and contrast it with the kind



of instruction that we'd advocate, which we provide for you in a unit plan, lesson by lesson.

### David Coleman on King's "Letter"

Let's start by taking a close look at how Coleman advocates teaching King's "Letter." We're going to draw on the transcript of "Bringing the Common Core to Life," the presentation he made before the New York State Department of Education on April 28, 2011 (Coleman, 2011) to do so.

We've already discussed Coleman's position on pre-reading, so it's no surprise that he'd want to start with the "Letter" itself. He implies that he'd ask students to read the first paragraph and that after they had done so, he'd read it aloud. Then he'd begin whole-class, teacher-directed discussion with this question: "Based on this text and this text alone, what do you know? What can you make out about the letter King received?" He explains that "clever" students might notice that King himself must be a clergyman but then explains that "we can already know at least two things, it's written to clergymen and says you've been unwise and untimely." This first question reveals the approach he takes throughout his modeling: asking a series of his text-dependent questions that have single correct answers.

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Coleman's first question reveals the approach he takes throughout: asking a series of text-dependent questions that have single correct answers.

That approach is repeated as students (played by the teachers in his audience; we'd love to see him do the same lesson with actual students) march through the "Letter." They read paragraphs 2 through 4 and he asks, "What are the three very different arguments King makes for why he's in Birmingham? And what different kinds of evidence does he use to support them?" Once again he explains the answers he wants to receive. The first argument, he says, is bureaucratic; the second, religious/historical; the third, moral. He says it'd be okay for teachers to pause and explain the historical and religious references, but it's not essential because "as much as they understand that King is comparing himself now to a prophet and making a very different kind of argument, we have enough to keep moving through his argument."

Paragraph 4 introduces King's argument on what King called the "interrelatedness of all communities and states." Coleman suggests

asking what could be an authentic question: “What is the force of [the moral argument]? How does it relate to the arguments that come before?” But he says that ultimately students should understand that it doesn’t fit and that King doesn’t present any evidence in support of it. Coleman explains that the moment students “realize as powerful as these words are that they don’t yet have any support or proof is a wonderful one.”

Coleman then walks his audience quickly through what he’d do with the other sections of the “Letter”: paragraph 5, a transitional paragraph; paragraphs 6 through 9, what Coleman calls the “just the facts” section; paragraph 10, where the focus is on what King means by the word “tension” and why that was such a good rhetorical choice; paragraphs 15 through 21, where King makes a distinction between just and unjust laws. He doesn’t say what he’d suggest for the remaining paragraphs, of the letter, including paragraphs 11 through 14, where King responds to the critique that his action are untimely, except to say that the methodical approach he is suggesting would take six days of class to complete.

Such focused attention, Coleman says, is important:

What the world needs most right now is wonderful questions about things worth reading. Things worth reading and rereading that don’t avoid the text but bring kids into a deeper consideration of it. You noticed I did a lot of chunking and reading out loud, taking a smaller portion and looking at it with care. That allows a much wider range of kids into that process. I am aware that sometimes certain kids will connect to more of this or less of this. Some will see more. But the important deep idea is that they’re all part of it. And the wonderful thing is sometimes a kid [who] is behind will notice something another kid didn’t. And since you’re all looking at the same thing, you have that remarkable moment both as a teacher and as another reader where you say, “Ooh, I didn’t see that. I didn’t notice that,” which is, by the way, how kids talk about a movie when they’ve seen it. Did you catch that? Did you see that? Did you watch that? Did you

see it when he did this? You notice how lively the academic vocabulary is. While we can explain Greco Roman [and] other technical terms that are academic, a rich word like tension is so powerful. (p. 23)

After those six days, Coleman says it would be appropriate to move beyond the letter, to accept King's invitation to apply his principles of justice and injustice to other laws, both those cited in the letter and other historical examples. The letter, he said, would also be a wonderful opportunity to learn about Socrates, to whom King twice alludes. Coleman says "in that third week of instruction . . . maybe it would be fun to find out who this Socrates guy was and see how he thought about tension in Athens" (p. 22). But he provides little detail about just how he sees the instruction that goes beyond the letter proceeding.

We've already presented our worries about the kind of classroom discourse Coleman advocates and we'll leave it to you to assess how your students would respond to six days of it. But before we move onto how we'd teach the letter, let's think about what students would take from such instruction. The few students who entered class already prepared to read the letter may finish the lesson understanding the letter, at least as Coleman understands it. And a few students might recognize Coleman's appreciation of the letter, though their own appreciation would, we think, be undercut by the monotony of the lesson. But so much more could be achieved.

### **An Alternative Approach: Our Unit for Teaching the "Letter"**

We think that the alternative approaches we've discussed throughout this book offer the promise of providing students with much more, including much deeper and transferable understandings of both the procedures highlighted in the Core and the critical concepts the letter takes up. The unit we share is designed to provide those additional benefits.

## A Sample Unit

### *“Letter From Birmingham Jail”*

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#### THE PURPOSE

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How would we start? As we argued in Chapter 5, the place to start thinking about teaching any text is the instructional context in which you’d situate that teaching. We also argued that inquiry units built around essential questions are the most powerful and meaningful instructional contexts one can create. One of the ways to create those units, we argued, was to think hard about what makes a required text worth teaching.

The teachers in Jeff’s courses weren’t satisfied with just developing reading and writing skills in service of pursuing the inquiry and comprehending the “Letter.” After a lively discussion, here’s what they wanted students to do in the course of the unit:

- Exceed the skills articulated in the Common Core
- Work toward service, social action, and civil rights in their own classrooms
- Apply what they learn to their present circumstances and current local, national, and global events

Here are some of the comments they made as they talked about purpose and outcomes for students:

This is about rehearsing and then acting out the principles of democracy.  
(Whitney Douglass)

It’s about cultivating habits of mind, of seeing from different perspectives, of being willing to represent yourself and others. (Sara Fry)

We have to integrate real-life concerns into our teaching and then help kids to apply what they have learned to their lives in ways that make a difference to themselves and to others. (Sam Mora)

This is not just about helping kids be better readers and writers. I want to work towards systemic change, towards service and democracy. (Lynne Doucette)

Inquiry means that you are solving a problem in your classroom, school, or community as you teach towards the Core standards in literacy. (Emily Morgan)

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### THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

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You can do this hard thinking by yourself, with your students, or with a group of teachers who will be teaching the same unit. Jeff's in-service teachers came up with these:

- When is it justifiable to resist authority?
- What would you be willing to do to get your rights?
- What are the most influential speeches/writing leading to social change?  
What is it about these texts that leads to change?
- What are our civil rights, and how can we best protect and promote them?
- When should/must we stand up against injustice?
- What people most need their civil rights promoted, and how can we work for this?
- What is fair? How can fairness be achieved?
- How can we achieve civil rights against powerful interests and forces?

#### **Narrow It Down to One Question**

For the purposes of this unit, we'll use this one:

- How can we achieve civil rights against powerful interests and forces?

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### THE ADDITIONAL TEXTS

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What additional texts would encourage your students to engage deeply with the above question and prepare them to read King's "Letter?" The selections you choose will depend on your own students' interests and abilities. Remember, the texts should provide a variety of different responses to the essential question. Here are the texts that Jeff's teachers recommended, being mindful of their kids and the need for multiple perspectives:

*David and Goliath* by Malcolm Gladwell

"Montgomery Boycott" by Coretta Scott King

“A Chip of Glass Ruby” by Nadine Gordimer

“Black Men and Public Spaces” by Brent Staples

“As the Night the Day” by Abioseh Nicol

*Farwell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki and James Houston

“The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” by Bessie Head

*Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane

“Cranes” by Hwang Sunwon

UN Universal Declaration on Universal Human Rights

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### PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

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Following are some options we do with our students. We want to point out that these activities are substantive, both conceptually and strategically. The activities were created to activate and build on students’ background knowledge. They provide a situation that assists students in developing a wide variety of strategies required by the Core and then rewards them for developing those strategies. They prepare students to have meaningful transactions with a wide variety of texts, including “Letter From Birmingham Jail.”

#### **Strategic Pre-Reading Activity**

- Who’s on the Other Side? (see Figure 4.3 on page 88)

#### **Conceptual Pre-Reading Activities**

- Agree or Disagree? (Figure 7.1)
- Who Has the Power? (Figure 7.2)
- Reflecting on Power and Persuasion (Figure 7.3)

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### “AGREE OR DISAGREE?”

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The “Agree or Disagree” activity presented in Figure 7.1 was developed by teacher Bonnie Warne, a high school teacher.

# AGREE OR DISAGREE?

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

For each quotation, please indicate whether you Agree (A) or Disagree (D) with the statement:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. "I'm really very sorry for you all, but it's an unjust world, and virtue is triumphant only in theatrical performances." (W. S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*)
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. "You just need to be a flea against injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation." (Marian Wright Edelman)
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "Justice is my being allowed to do whatever I like. Injustice is whatever prevents my doing so." (Samuel Johnson)
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. "Some things you must always be unable to bear. Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor and shame. No matter how young you are or how old you have got. Not for kudos and not for cash: your picture in the paper nor money in the bank either. Just refuse to bear them." (William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*)
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. "I guess the only time most people think about injustice is when it happens to them." (Charles Bukowski, *Ham on Rye*)
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. "It takes great courage to open one's heart and mind to the tremendous injustice and suffering in our world." (Vincent A. Gallagher, *The True Cost of Low Prices: The Violence of Globalization*)
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. "Do not make the mistake of thinking that you have to agree with people and their beliefs to defend them from injustice." (Bryant McGill, *Voice of Reason*)

Figure 7.1



## AGREE OR DISAGREE? (Continued)

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. "When you take a stand against injustice inflicted upon innocent people, there will be those who will hate you for it." (Ellen J. Barrier)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. "Injustice in the end produces independence." (Voltaire)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. "I am a person who is unhappy with things as they stand. We cannot accept the world as it is. Each day we should wake up foaming at the mouth because of the injustice of things." (Hugo Claus)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. "It's hard not to empathize with the mayor's anger, given the injustices he'd suffered, but righteous anger rarely leads to wise policy." (Edward L. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. "In the beginning there was only a small amount of injustice abroad in the world, but everyone who came afterwards added their portion, always thinking it was very small and unimportant, and look where we have ended up today." (Paulo Coelho, *The Devil and Miss Prym*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance." (Robert F. Kennedy)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. "I believe that our identity is at risk. That when we don't actually care about these difficult things, the positive and wonderful things are nonetheless implicated. We love innovation, we love technology, we love creativity, we love entertainment—but ultimately those realities are shadowed by suffering, abuse, degradation, marginalization. . . . We will not be fully human until we connect with injustice." (Bryan Stevenson)



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### FOLLOW-UP TO “AGREE OR DISAGREE” ACTIVITY

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**Small-Group Work.** Students discuss their responses in small groups, identifying the claim or claims in each quote and what evidence might be provided in support.

**Optional.** To link this activity to the strategic pre-reading activity, “Who’s on the Other Side?” ask students to discuss what quotes provide counterclaims to other quotes. The students then choose two of the quotes from the “Agree or Disagree” activity and write mini-arguments, providing evidence that supports the quote’s claim (what I have to go on/ what makes me say so) and explaining how that evidence linked to the claim (so what?).

The preceding activities activate students’ interest in and knowledge of injustice and how to combat it and also build upon that knowledge as students share views through discussion and exchange of ideas. At the same time the activities provide procedural scaffolding in evidence-based reasoning and argumentation, which students will be called upon to employ in this unit’s culminating writing assignment. In short, students get lots of conceptual and procedural frontloading that will assist them later in both their reading and their writing. (See Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2012, for a full discussion of such activities for teaching argument.)

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### “WHO HAS THE POWER?”

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The following activity, “Who Has the Power?” shown in Figure 7.2, engages students in thinking about who has power to enact change.

Once again, after engaging in this activity, students should share the responses they felt most strongly about and write a short argument justifying their response by providing evidence (what I have to go on/what makes me say so) and explaining how that evidence linked to the claim (so what?).

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### “REFLECTING ON POWER AND PERSUASION”

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The next activity (Figure 7.3) encourages students to reflect on their own experience in ways that will help them use that experience as a resource when they are reading.

# WHO HAS THE POWER?

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Check the group or individual in each pair who you think has more capacity to enact change. Be prepared to explain what makes you say so and why—that is, “so what” (data and reasoning).

- |  |    |   |
|--|----|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The President                 | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Bill Gates                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pitcher                       | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Batter                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women                         | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Men                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Actor                         | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Script                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parent                        | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> You                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> President of the student body | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Editor of the school newspaper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friendship                    | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Family                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Internet                      | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> TV                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Love                          | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Hate                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Police officer                | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Judge                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comedian                      | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Politician                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Armed forces                  | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Citizens                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paintings                     | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Photographs argument           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Protest music                 | OR | <input type="checkbox"/> Published argument             |



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Figure 7.2

# REFLECTING ON POWER AND PERSUASION

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Complete these sentences in any way that rings true for you:

1. I feel strong when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

2. I feel weak when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

3. People with power should \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

4. People being oppressed should \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

5. I'm most persuasive when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

6. I'm least persuasive when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

7. The most powerful person is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

8. The least powerful person is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.



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Figure 7.3

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## FOLLOW-UP TO “REFLECTING ON POWER AND PERSUASION” ACTIVITY

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**Whole-Class Discussion.** After completing their forms, we reconvene as a class and discuss the statements students wrote. We help them identify the potential for social action in response to injustice and consider the responses to injustice made by the people about whom they will be reading. We practice using the evidence and reasoning that are necessary to making an effective argument.

**Reinforce the Purpose: Create an Anchor Chart.** We suggest regularly reminding students of the essential question and the purpose of the unit: *How can we work toward change and civil rights when opposed by powerful interests and forces?*

One way we do this is to create an anchor chart labeled “What can help us overcome powerful forces?” We remind students that this was the situation that Dr. King found himself in throughout his lifetime of work toward civil rights and that we will soon be reading a text that he used in the struggle to achieve civil rights for African Americans and other minorities. As we read, we begin filling in the chart.

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## READING THE TEXTS

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- Day 1

**Reading.** Read “Introduction” to Gladwell’s (2013) *David and Goliath* in class together with students in which Gladwell proclaims that the book is about what happens “when ordinary people confront giants. By ‘giants’ I mean powerful opponents of all kinds—from armies and mighty warriors to disability, misfortune, and oppression” (p. 5).

**Whole-Class Work.** The class ponders the reading and lists the “giants” that oppose equality and the achievement of civil rights in Dr. King’s time and in our own.

**Pair Work.** Students work in pairs to identify strengths and resources that “less powerful” people or groups might have in the struggle for civil rights.

**Whole Class.** Pairs report back and class begins listing strengths and resources on the anchor chart.

[Jeff's students' list included the following: courage, faith, belief in your cause, knowing your strengths, knowing the strengths of the opponent, knowing your own and your opponent's weaknesses, knowing that your strengths can be your weaknesses, and relentlessly pressing all advantages.]

- **Day 2**

**Reading.** The class reads Chapter 1 of Gladwell's book about the realization that came to software mogul Vivak Renadive while coaching his daughter's basketball team: Underdogs had to acknowledge their weaknesses and choose an unconventional strategy to compete because convention favors the powerful. The reading could be assigned or done in class through paired partner reading.

**Whole-Class Work.** We begin with a whole-group brainstorming session during which students begin to list resources for fighting the powers in the status quo that might be oppressive.

**Pair Work.** In pairs, students add to the list of resources for fighting the powers in the status quo that might be oppressive. Here are just some of the things our students came up with:

- Questioning the status quo
- Breaking the unwritten rules
- Sharing the load
- Taking the offensive
- Choosing the ground
- Using fake-outs and surprise
- Hiding weaknesses and playing to strengths
- Planning, practicing, and being tight and cooperative with your team

**Reading.** Students individually read selections about how to combat cyberbullying, taken from Glen Downey's (2014) *Digital World*. Ask them to compare the resources needed to combat cyberbullying to their ongoing anchor chart list. Add to the list as students see fit.

**Reading.** Students read several trickster tales told by oppressed peoples, including several Anansi and Coyote tales. (When Jeff taught the unit, students self-selected print or picture book versions from the classroom library and read them in class, but the reading could also be a homework assignment. If you don't have the tales, you can find them at a variety of websites.) Again, students add to the anchor chart list.

By now, students are building a theory about what is necessary to fight for civil rights. As they work on the chart they consider this: The extent of what underdogs need to do is a function of the specific context in which they find themselves.

### • Day 3

**Reading.** Students read Chapter 6 of *David and Goliath*, a chapter that is point on for reading the "Letter" as it is about Walker Wyatt, one of Dr. King's right-hand men in waging the civil rights struggle in Birmingham.

**Read Aloud.** Read aloud the first five paragraphs of M. L. King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail."

**Small-Group Work.** Students try to reconstruct, as best they can, the letter to which King was *responding*. [This activity asks students to apply the understandings they developed through the strategic frontloading activity we present in Figure 4.3.]

**Small "Jigsaw" Group Work.** Students from different groups form new groups and do the following:

1. Share their reconstructed letters and discuss the similarities and differences among them.
2. Return to the injustice quotes frontloading activity and select which quotes they think King's audience (the men who wrote him the letter he is responding to) would most strongly agree with and those with which they'd most strongly disagree.
3. Groups present their conclusions to the class.

- Day 4

**Read Aloud.** M. L. King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail": paragraphs 6–11

This is the section in which King explains the four basic steps to a campaign of nonviolence. As you read aloud, ask students to note which of King's techniques are consistent with the strategies students listed on their anchor chart—and which ones aren't.

**Quick-Think Pair Share.** Students quickly share notes on their findings.

**Pair Work.** In paragraph 12, King talks about the pain of explaining injustice to a young child. Ask students to count off by twos and have them play out this parent-child scene in their new pair. Next, have them get with a new partner and reverse roles to ensure that students experience the dilemma from both perspectives.

- Day 5

**Read Aloud.** M. L. King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail": paragraphs 12–21

This section of the letter focuses on King's distinction between just and unjust laws.

**Small-Group Work.** First, ask students to summarize King's distinction between just and unjust laws. Then ask them to apply these distinctions to a series of modern laws—or rules within the school or the community, for example, locker searches or curfews.

**Re-read.** Have students re-read the end of paragraph 12, beginning with the sentence, "You express a great deal . . ."

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OPINIONNAIRE SCALE FOR "LETTER  
FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL"

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When students have finished re-reading, ask them to place their personal viewpoint on the continuum on the following opinionnaire scale, a combination of an opinionnaire statement and a semantic differential scale (Figure 7.4).

**Partner Work.** Have students choose a partner whose views fall at least two scale points away from theirs. Partners discuss their views.



• Day 6

**Reading.** Assign students to read the remainder of M. L. King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail.”

To increase transfer of knowledge and encourage independence, it’s important to give students an opportunity to grapple with the text on their own. One great way to do so is to have students consciously apply different critical lenses in their reading (Chapter 4). Although the theories from which these lenses are derived are literary theories, we have found them equally useful to foster students’ engaged attention on a wide variety of texts, including nonfiction.

## OPINIONNAIRE SCALE FOR “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL”

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

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It is never okay to disobey a law. One has a moral obligation to disobey an unjust law.

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Figure 7.4

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## READING “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL” THROUGH LITERARY LENSES: A GROUP ACTIVITY

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Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one of the following literary lenses:

- Psychological
- Social power
- Formalist
- Historical
- Biographical

### **Part 1. Reading the Letter, One Lens at a Time**

Each group receives the handout in Figure 7.5, which outlines the fundamental theoretical principles that undergird each lens and summarizes what those principles mean for reading and interpreting texts. Make certain that each group reads the description of the assigned lens and then discusses the following questions:

- What is this lens asking us to look at, to consider, when we read?
- Why is this perspective important in thinking about “Letter From Birmingham Jail?”
- If we apply this lens to “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” the following passages stand out:
- If we apply this lens to this text, the following questions arise:
- We think this lens is/isn’t (choose one) useful to reading letter because . . .

### **Part 2. The Jigsaw Move: Looking at the Letter Through Multiple Lenses**

Regroup your class so that there is someone from each lens group in each new group. Then ask each new group to discuss the following questions:

- What was brought into sharper relief when you read the letter from your assigned lens?
- List some things that someone from a different group mentioned that never came up in your own lens discussion.
- Which lens or lenses seem to be the most useful in your analysis of “Letter From Birmingham Jail?” Why?

# LITERARY PERSPECTIVES TOOLKIT

Literary perspectives help us explain why people might interpret the same text in a variety of ways. Perspectives help us understand what is important to individual readers, and they show us why those readers end up seeing what they see. One way to imagine a literary perspective is to think of it as a lens through which we can examine a text. No single lens gives us the clearest view, but it is sometimes fun to read a text with a particular perspective in mind because you often end up seeing something intriguing and unexpected. While readers typically apply more than one perspective at a time, the best way to understand these perspectives is to use them one at a time. What follows is a summary of some of the best-known literary perspectives. These descriptions are extremely brief, and none fully explains everything you might want to know about the perspective in question, but there is enough here for you to get an idea about how readers use them.

## The Psychological Perspective

Some literary critics call this the psychological or character perspective because its purpose is to examine the internal motivations of literary characters. When we hear actors say that they are searching for their character's motivation, they are using something like this perspective. As a form of criticism, this perspective deals with works of literature as expressions of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of the author or of a character within the literary work. As readers, we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text (although sometimes an examination of the author's psychology is considered biographical criticism, depending upon your point of view).

## The Social Power Perspective

Some critics believe that human history and institutions, even our ways of thinking, are determined by the ways in which our societies are organized. Two primary factors shape our schemes of organization: economic power and social class membership. First, the class to which we belong determines our degree of economic, political, and social advantage, and so social classes invariably find themselves in conflict with each other. Second, our membership in a social class has a profound impact on our beliefs, values, perceptions, and our ways of thinking and feeling. For these reasons, the social power perspective helps us understand how people from different social classes understand the same circumstances in very different ways. When we see members of different social classes thrown together in the same story, we are likely to think in terms of power and advantage as we attempt to explain what happens and why.

## The Formalist Perspective

The word "formal" has two related meanings, both of which apply within this perspective. The first relates to its root word, "form," a shape of structure that we can recognize and use to make associations. The second relates to a set

## LITERARY PERSPECTIVES TOOLKIT (Continued)

of conventions or accepted practices. Formal poetry, for example, has meter, rhyme, stanza, and other predictable features that it shares with poems of the same type. The formalist perspective, then, pays particular attention to these issues of form and convention. Instead of looking at the world in which a poem exists, for example, the formalist perspective says that a poem should be treated as an independent and self-sufficient object. The methods used in this perspective are those of close reading: a detailed and subtle analysis of the formal components that make up the literary work, such as the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols.

### The Historical Perspective

When applying this perspective you have to view a literary text within its historical context. Specific historical information will be of key interest: about the time during which an author wrote, about the time in which the text is set, about the ways in which people of the period saw and thought about the world in which they lived. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time. For example, the literary works of William Faulkner frequently reflect the history of the American South, the Civil War and its aftermath, and the birth and death of a nation known as the Confederate States of America.

### The Biographical Perspective

Because authors typically write about things they care deeply about and know well, the events and circumstances of their lives are often reflected in the literary works they create. For this reason, some readers use biographical information about an author to gain insight into that author's works. This lens, called biographical criticism, can be both helpful and dangerous. It can provide insight into themes, historical references, social oppositions or movements, and the creation of fictional characters. At the same time, it is not safe to assume that biographical details from the author's life can be transferred to a story or character that the author has created. For example, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos were both ambulance drivers during World War I and both wrote novels about the war. Their experiences gave them firsthand knowledge and created strong personal feelings about the war, but their stories are still works of fiction. Some biographical details, in fact, may be completely irrelevant to the interpretation of that writer's work.

*Here are some other lenses that can also be used as ways to consider texts. We won't be using them for our work with "Letter," but you will find them useful in your future reading.*

### Reader-Response Perspective

This type of perspective focuses on the activity of reading a work of literature. Reader-response critics turn away from the traditional idea that a literary work is an artifact that has meaning built within it; they turn their attention instead to the responses of individual readers. By this shift of perspective, a literary work is converted into an activity that goes on in a reader's mind. It is through this interaction that meaning is made. The features of the work itself—including narrator, plot, characters, style, and structure—are less important than the interplay between a reader's

## LITERARY PERSPECTIVES TOOLKIT (Continued)

experience and the text. Advocates of this perspective believe that literature has no inherent or intrinsic meaning waiting to be discovered. Instead, meaning is constructed by readers as they bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading. In turn, what readers get out of a text depends upon their own expectations and ideas. For example, if you read “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin and you have your own troubled younger brother or sister, the story will have meaning for you that it wouldn’t have for, say, an only child.

### The Archetypal Perspective

In literary criticism, the word “archetype” signifies a recognizable pattern or a model. It can be used to describe story designs, character types, or images that can be found in a wide variety of works of literature. It can also be applied to myths, dreams, and social rituals. The archetypal similarities among texts and behaviors are thought to reflect a set of universal, even primitive ways of seeing the world. When we find them in literary works they evoke strong responses from readers. Archetypal themes include the heroic journey and the search for a father figure. Archetypal images include the opposition of paradise and Hades, the river as a sign of life and movement, and mountains or other high places as sources of enlightenment. Characters can be archetypal as well, like the rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the villain, and the goddess.

### The Gender Perspective

Because gender is a way of viewing the world, people of different genders see things differently. For example, a feminist critic might see cultural and economic disparities as the products of a “patriarchal” society, shaped and dominated by men, who tend to decide things by various means of competition. Because women are frequently brought up to be more cooperative than competitive, they may find that such competition has hindered or prevented them from realizing their full potential, from turning their creative possibilities into action. In addition, societies often tend to see the male perspective as the default, that is, the one we choose automatically. As a result, women are identified as the “other”: the deviation or the contrasting type. When we use this lens, we examine patterns of thought, behavior, value, and power in relations between the sexes.

### Deconstruction

Deconstruction is, at first, a difficult critical method to understand because it asks us to set aside ways of thinking that are quite natural and comfortable. For example, we frequently see the world as a set of opposing categories: male/female, rational/irrational, powerful/powerless. It also looks at the ways in which we assign value to one thing over another, such as life over death, presence over absence, and writing over speech. At its heart, deconstruction is a mode of analysis that asks us to question the very assumptions that we bring to that analysis. Gender, for example, is a “construct,” a set of beliefs and assumptions that we have built, or constructed, over time and experience. But if we “de-construct” gender, looking at it while holding aside our internalized beliefs and expectations, new understandings become possible. To practice this perspective, then, we must constantly ask ourselves why we believe what we do about the make-up of our world and the ways in which we know it. Then, we must try to explain that world in the absence of our old beliefs.



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**Re-Read and Apply Theories.** Students silently re-read the “Letter,” applying the critical lens they were assigned. Ask them to identify five passages that stand out to them as they read it through their assigned lens.

Paragraph	Passage

After completing their charts on their own, students convene with their lens-alike groups to discuss the following questions:

- What elements of King’s “Letter” seem especially important from the perspective of your lens?
- Based on your lens, what would you say is the overall theme or meaning you discovered in King’s Letter?

### • Day 7

Students briefly reconvene with their theory groups from the previous class meeting to conclude their discussion. Then, they reassemble into jigsaw groups.

**Jigsaw Groups.** Students work in jigsaw groups (i.e., each group contains members who examined *different* lenses) to share what they found. Groups discuss how each

lens helped determine a different interpretation of the letter, bringing certain elements of the text into sharper relief.

**Whole-Class Concluding Discussion.** After the jigsaw sharing, have the whole class discuss the following questions:

- Which lenses seemed to work best with this text?
- What kinds of details did different lenses help you notice?
- How did the overall meaning of the letter change with each lens? Or did it?
- How can looking through multiple lenses enrich our understanding of “Letter From Birmingham Jail”?

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## CULMINATING PROJECTS

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As you may recall, we argued earlier that building an inquiry unit requires planning backward from what kids will be doing as culminating projects and suggested that units



should include both a conventionally academic product and some other form of meaningful making.

### **Academic Project**

Ask students to write a formal academic argument in which they identify an instance in which someone’s rights are begin violated in their school or community and propose a plan of action that could be undertaken to rectify the situation.

We suggest asking them write two versions of their arguments, one to their classmates and the other to someone whose actions or inattention somehow contributes to the problem.

Why two audiences? Remember, Coleman explained that whenever we read arguments, we construct both the arguments themselves and the arguments against which they are directed. That was our focal reading strategy for the unit. A complementary focal writing strategy is one articulated in the Standards themselves: adjusting one's arguments on the basis of "the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices/Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a, p. 45), a strategy that can be best assessed when students are writing for real and different audiences.

After a consideration of the problems students identified, the class then chooses one on which they would work together in a social action project.

### **Social Action Project**

Below are brief descriptions of five culminating social action projects designed by Jeff and Jeff's teachers reflecting their desired purpose and outcomes as expressed at the start of the unit. We think these are all solid and even inspiring projects.

- Emily Morgan's ninth-grade class engaged in a project to mentor refugee students in her school; the class is also teaching students to be mentors for students in lower grades.
- Amanda Micheletty's ninth graders trained to be peer tutors in their writing center and are creating video and written guides about how to survive and thrive in the high school environment.
- Angela Housley's fifth-grade class engaged in creating what they call "friendship cards" that give advice on how to disagree nicely, how to see and represent another's interest or rights, be strong when your rights are assailed, express reasonable expectations, work toward realizable and sustainable changes in the classroom and on the playground, and much else. The students use these as trading cards, and an archival copy of all the cards is in the counselor's office, to which she points students as a reference for navigating civil rights issues.
- Sam Mora's sophomores involved themselves in a bridge program to integrate refugee students into the school and to help them tell their stories and articulate their challenges. The group is hosting what they are calling cultural



banquets during lunch at school to provide a context for interaction with refugee students and to allow the sharing of culture.

- Jeff had his high school students create quick video biographies of the refugee students in his class so that their stories and challenges can be shared. He challenged the students to do something to promote the natural human rights of classmates who face challenges.

But we want to point out that the outcome of the papers themselves and the social action projects hinge on students' having a deep understanding of civil rights and the range of ways people throughout history have dealt with the powers that be to promote those rights. A unit like the one outlined here can promote this deep understanding.

### **A Summary of This Unit's Approaches**

We believe much more would be achieved in this kind of unit than in a Colemanesque close reading of the "Letter." With our approach, students would read the letter in its historical context but would read it as more than a historical document. They would read it as a document that helps them grapple with a question that's compelling in the here and now, one that could inform their thinking about how to work for change in the microculture of their lives, the mesoculture of their classroom and school, and in the macroculture of American culture and the world. The essential question, the frontloading, the sequencing of texts and activities, and the repeated practice with strategies necessary to be successful on the culminating projects not only cultivate interest and assist students in the more powerful use of literacy strategies, but also do something else: engage students in understanding both that they have the power to comprehend difficult texts and that they have the power to change themselves and the world around them.

Even as our instruction fosters this kind of engagement and understanding, it helps students develop the skills, strategies, perspectives, and habits of mind that will serve them well in their subsequent reading and schooling.



## Principles of Practice

We hope that we have made it clear that we appreciate the need for standards. After all, how can you get where you want to go if you don't know where that destination happens to be? We believe that the CCSS have the capacity to foster increased attention to promoting deeper thinking and strategic facility as students engage with texts that others have written and compose their own.

The CCSS and whatever standards may replace them are part of the educational enterprise and can be allies in the adventure of teaching and learning. But they can't stand alone. Through the course of this book, we've worked to articulate *principles of practice* that will help teachers

work toward those standards. Principles of practice constitute what cognitive scientists would call *heuristics*—flexible yet transferable tools for solving evolving problems and meeting challenges. Heuristics stand in stark contrast to algorithms or “one-size-fits-all” directives. Teaching and learning are too complex and too contextualized to be addressed through algorithms. That's why we need professional knowledge and the guidance of heuristic principles that can be flexibly adapted to new and changing situations.

After all, the world's only expert about what your students need and how to best teach them is *you*. Although standards can be powerful and principles of practice are necessary to professional teaching and problem solving, you must learn from your students how to best teach them. It has to be up to you what materials and methods will be best to leverage the kind of learning that will help them best meet the standards.

As we've talked to teachers about the CCSS as part of our work on this project, we've realized that many of the concerns we've heard are not about the CCSS themselves but about *what has been said about them*. We hope we've made it clear that David Coleman and his colleagues are

not the Core. In fact, we think much of what they have said about the Core and how to implement it undermines the letter and spirit of the document itself.


Another common concern we've heard is also not about the CCSS themselves but rather about *how they are being implemented*. In many districts and states, teacher expertise and their independent professional decision making, foundational principles of the CCSS document, are being undercut by prescriptive curricula, materials, and implementation plans. If your district or state is mandating materials and methods in the name of the Core, then they are undermining the policy document itself and the legislation that put it into place. We hope that this book helps you speak against any initiatives that de-professionalize teaching and undermine the extent to which the CCSS can be a lever for progressive practice.

Of course, the CCSS themselves are not the only things that will influence teachers' practice. So too will the next generation of assessments. If our students are to be successful on those assessments, they will need the most powerful instruction possible.

After all, instruction is what has the single greatest impact on what students learn, master, and transfer (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). Powerful instruction is what we have focused on in this book. Standards are useful only to the degree that they empower and encourage, require and reward the most powerful instruction possible.

We're optimistic that this next generation of assessments can also be used as levers for progressive practice. These new assessments are designed not to test recall of information but rather to assess student mastery of strategies that make up the anchor standards. They will require actual reading and composing in "contexts of use" in both short and more extended performance tasks.

As this goes to press, several states are gearing up to have their students take a first pass at the next generation of tests. A couple of states have already done so. As expected, scores in these pilots were well below what they had been in the past. That's because the tests are significantly more challenging than past assessments and because proficiency has been redefined. Perhaps as a consequence, there is a lot of ink being spilled at



Many of the concerns we've heard from teachers are not about the CCSS themselves but about *what has been said about them and how they are being implemented*.

the moment about the tyranny of such tests and how teachers should resist them. We sympathize with this view to a certain degree and share many concerns, but we want to make several points.

**1. The next generation of assessments, both in the United States and the rest of the world, are an improvement over most of what has been done in the past.** For the most part, the short and long performance task items actually assess problem solving, situated strategy use, reading, and writing in ways that correspond to how experts use these processes in real life and in disciplinary work. Could the tests be better? For sure. But do the new tests represent significant progress? We think so. To take just one example, Idaho's previous test tested through multiple-choice questions rather than the complex writing performances the new tests will require.

**2. The next generation of assessments in the United States align us more closely with more rigorous international assessments.** This was one of the reasons for the Core in the first place and the reason it enjoyed widespread and bipartisan support (at least initially). We are now operating in an international context and are compared to schools and systems on an international basis. There is nowhere to hide.

**3. For the foreseeable future, we are going to have high-stakes assessments and accountability for student learning.** When Jonathan Kozol spoke recently as a Distinguished Speaker for Boise State University, Jeff was his driver. In one conversation, Kozol argued that, as civil servants, teachers are in the position of being “accountable” and “answerable”—that is, that we have to prove that what we do works. He argued both that there must be metrics and performances that the public understands and that it is part of our job to assess the assessments, to be advocates for how to improve them and for how they should be interpreted.

### **Accountability and Assessments**

The desire for accountability means that for the foreseeable future, teachers are going to have to prepare students to meet the challenge of the new assessments. Therefore, powerful instruction is more important than ever before. Students are being asked on the tests

(and therefore must be asked in school and at home) to read more, to read across different kinds of texts, to solve a problem with the data they have processed and then reflect and write about *how* they solved the problem. This means that students will need to learn how to activate what they already know so they can bring that knowledge to bear as resources for their reading. In this book, we have shown you multiple ways to do this.

Because students will be reading both more *different kinds* of texts and more *complex* texts for the new generation of assessments, we need to teach them how to transfer their learning from one textual context to another. As we have argued, transfer can be achieved only by cultivating a spirit of transfer by having students name and justify what they learn, apply it to new situations, reflect on that application, and consider future possible applications. As we have shown, text-dependent questions do not cultivate transfer. But instruction that is situated in inquiry contexts, that builds knowledge text by text and activity by activity, that provides meaningful practice until heuristics are mastered, and that requires continuous practice and development and application over time *does* do this.

The new assessments will ask students to demonstrate proficiency in complex tasks. Among other things, the next generation of assessments will ask students to do the following:


- **Put texts into conversation with each other.** Students will be asked to see complex implied relationships inside longer texts and across various texts and data sets. This means that we need to create sequences of instruction, situated in ongoing inquiries that give students practice doing just that. The emphasis the authors of the CCSS place on “this text and this text alone” doesn’t do that. The instruction we talk about in this book does.
- **Foreground problem solving and use logical evidentiary reasoning to make cases and compose arguments.** This means that we need to create contexts that require, support, and reward these activities. We know from classroom research that New Critical classrooms result in little discussion, little accountable talk, little real argumentation and problem solving. The instruction that we suggest engages students

in responding to authentic questions and real problems that will require that they hone their argumentative skills.

- **Include and create multimodal texts** in the forms of graphs, tables, data sets, photos, and the like in their writing and comprehend them in their reading. Text complexity as expressed in the lists of exemplar texts in Appendix B (NAGC Center/CCSSO, 2010b) privileges conventional texts, which is both at odds with the tests and with the Standards themselves. In this book, we try to demonstrate how to expand the range of texts you include in your classroom. Text complexity, as reflected in the lists in the CCSS document and its appendices is oversimplified to the detriment of students and teacher decision making. We encourage you to think about interpretive complexity in addition to text complexity to help students progress from their own current capacities to new levels of competence.

### Final Thoughts

This political moment in time will pass. The Core will be revised or replaced. David Coleman will surely disappear from the scene. New assessments will evolve. But students and teachers, their relationships, and their relationships with texts and literacy will remain. Identifying and promoting good teaching will always be essential. Good teaching is not a fad; it cannot be politically dictated and cannot follow political trends.



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We can't let political tides and policies lead us to throw out what we know about best practice. We need to stand against what is arbitrary and uninformed. We must be wide-awake practitioners who are in touch with articulated principles of powerful practice and who are willing to speak about them. But as we engage in this process, we need to remain open-minded inquirers into the possibilities of any reform and not resist them in knee-jerk fashion either.

We stand, as individual teachers and as a profession, at a moment in history. We hope this book is useful to you in this moment. We hope it helps you stand against bad ideas and stand up for good ones. We hope it helps you achieve the promise of the CCSS and avoid the pitfalls. We hope it helps you get it right for your students both now and in the future.