



## A Mini lesson on Semicolons

**Overview:** Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" demonstrates that even the smallest punctuation mark signals a stylistic decision, distinguishing one writer from another and enabling an author to move an audience. In this mini lesson, students first explore Dr. King's use of semicolons and their rhetorical significance. They then apply what they have learned by searching for ways to follow Dr. King's model and use the punctuation mark in their own writing.

Note that while this lesson refers to the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," any text which features rhetorically significant use of semicolons can be effective for this mini lesson.

### Standards:

**L.11-12.2:** Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, **punctuation**, and spelling when writing.

**W.11-12.5:** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, drafting and revising their own writing, based on the stylistic knowledge gained from their exploration.

**RI.11-12.10:** Read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range

### Objectives:

#### Students will:

1. Read a nonfiction passage for understanding of content.
2. Analyze the use of language and punctuation used in the passage.
3. Determine the impact of the use of the semicolon in the passage.
4. Model the style of the writing passage including the specific use of the semicolon.
5. Draft an original piece of writing that imitates the style of the passage.
6. Edit and revise their writing for correct use of language and punctuation.
7. Discuss their opinions about the importance of using the semicolon correctly.



### Instruction & Activities:

1. Ask students, working alone or in groups, to search out and circle as many semicolons in [Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"](#) as they can find. Be aware that the copies of King's letter included in many anthologies exhibit slightly different punctuation and phrasing; however, the texts demonstrate fairly consistent punctuation, including semicolons. If there is a pertinent question regarding a semicolon, the copies of the letter on the [Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project](#) Website should be considered the definitive texts, as they are the copyright versions endorsed by the King family.
2. Once students have had a chance to work through the letter, ask them to share passages that they have found with the class.
3. Pass out the handout which accompanies this lesson which reveals a shorter piece that uses semicolons **or** display the sentences on an overhead or Elmo projector. Students will use these sentences to analyze Dr. King's punctuation in context, as the rhetorical work of an author trying to connect with an audience that may or may not agree with his political protest.
4. Ask students to go through the sentences circling the semicolons.
5. Invite students to discuss the ways that Dr. King uses the punctuation mark in his writing by looking closely at each of the passages (or using passages that students have identified from the letter). Questions such as these can spur useful conversations about areas of grammar and writing related to semicolon use—for example, parallelism, repetition, and contrast:
  - Why did Dr. King use a semicolon here instead of a stronger period or a weaker comma?
  - How does this semicolon shape the meaning of its sentence, its paragraph, the work as a whole?
  - Does this semicolon help King to reach his audience? Why or why not?



Now,

6. Look closely at the longer version of the Letter. Begin by reading the passage aloud.
7. Ask students what they note about the passage. If students do not volunteer details, the following discussion questions can lead to conversation:
  - Where does Dr. King use repetition in the passage? What is the point of the repetition?
  - Where does Dr. King use semicolons in the passage? What ideas do the semicolons join?
  - Why would Dr. King choose one sentence with semicolons over two or three short sentences?
  - Where does Dr. King use short sentences in the passage? What role does the short sentence play rhetorically?
  - What overall conclusions can you draw about Dr. King's style, including his use of sentence length and punctuation, from this passage.
8. Next turn to students' own decisions about when to use the semicolon. Share the version of the text without the use of semicolons. Begin by reading the passage aloud.
9. Ask students to imagine that they are the Letter's authors and to identify places in the passage where they might insert a semicolon. Give them a few minutes to explore the passage alone or in groups.
10. After students have had sufficient time, ask them to identify places where they would insert semicolons in the passage. Students will typically choose more than one place. Some join the sentences beginning "A just law" and "An unjust law"; others may choose to join the two sentences that begin "Any law." Encourage students to share the possibilities they have identified.

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11. As students share their ideas, ask them to support their choices. Discussion can include the following questions:
  - Why are these two sentences related?
  - What rhetorical advantage does the author gain by linking the clauses in the reader's mind?
  - What rhetorical advantage does the author lose by abandoning the short, abrupt stops that periods create?
12. Ask students to choose a piece of writing from their writer's notebook or another piece of writing that they are working on.
13. Ask students to find one or two places in their drafts where they could insert a semicolon. Have students circle the semicolon with a pen or mark it with a highlighter to make it obvious.
14. Allow students to work at their own pace. Circulate through the room, helping any students who have questions or comments. If time is short, students can revise their own texts for homework or during the next class session.
15. Once students have added the semicolons, ask them to write a short reflection in their writer's notebooks that identifies the sentences they've joined and the reasons they selected the sentences. Encourage them to apply the same questions that they applied to Dr. King's letter, such as the following: Why are these two sentences related? What rhetorical advantage do I gain by linking the clauses in my reader's mind? What rhetorical advantage do I lose by abandoning the short, abrupt stops that periods create?

*The Handout: Examples of Dr. King's Use of Semicolons accompanies this lesson on a separate sheet of paper.*



**Example of Dr. King's Use of Semicolons**

SHORTER VERSION OF PASSAGE

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the idea and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." 1963.