

Language and Rhetorical Strategies Guide “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

Name, author, and date of work

Purpose (Aim)

Structure: Describe the types of modes used and why they are effective.

Meaning: (Thesis, main idea, meaning of work.) Is the meaning denotative or connotative?

Tone (Voice, attitude, mood): Describe any shifts in tone.

Diction: Formal, informal words, jargon, euphemism, sense words, imagery, literal, concrete words, abstract words, metaphor, cliché, jargon, passive, active, choice of words: verbs, nouns, adjectives, any vagueness, strong, figurative language. What words create the tone or mood?

Describe elements of pathos, logos, and ethos.

Syntax: Where does King use parallelism and repetition?

One of the most important rhetorical devices that King uses is allusion. Describe the allusions and how they support meaning.

What part does audience play in this essay?

Sentences: compound, complex, simple, sentence variety, length, subordination coordination, loose sentences, periodic sentences. What effect does sentence structure have?

Paragraphs: Topic sentence, unity, transitions, repetition—repeat word, pronoun, synonym, phrase.

Language and Rhetorical Strategies

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

Key

Important themes: Interrelatedness of all communities and one’s moral obligation (4), Civil disobedience and non-violent action (6), just versus unjust laws (15, 16) ends versus means (43)

Important rhetorical devices: allusion, shift in tone, imagery, use of loaded abstract words, metaphor, parallelism

Structure: Modes—persuasive: Gives opponent’s objections and counters them (12); descriptive: oppression (14), jail and other (44); expository: nonviolent campaign (6), creative tension (10, 16), just and unjust laws, civil disobedience (21), extremism (31).

Tone: “Patient and reasonable” (1); defensive position (23) until becomes offensive (39), humble (44)

Metaphor: 10, 11, 26, 42, 47

Imagery: 14, 44

Humor at beginning

Irony at end

Pathos: 14, 32, 42, 45

Ethos: 1 and through allusion (Paul, Jesus)

Logos at the beginning of many paragraphs: he states an opposing assertion and then refutes it with reasoning.

Parallelism: Cadence—41, 31

Part played by audience: Ministers: played on the guilt of the role of the church and God. Used religious allusions. Moral arguments.

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail” Journal Topic Quotations

“I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities.” 4

“Constructive, nonviolent tension is necessary for growth.” 10

“Justice too long delayed is justice denied.” 13

“. . . groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.” 12

“One has a moral obligation to disobey unjust laws.” 15

“Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.” 24