

Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: How to Respond to Violence



*Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X at the US Capitol, March 26, 1964. Photograph by Marion S. Trikosko.
(US News & World Report Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: How to Respond to Violence

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2014, revised in 2024)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Three 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources.

Over the course of three lessons the students will compare and contrast Malcolm X's and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s suggestions for how civil rights advocates should respond to violence directed against them. Should they engage non-violently so as to clarify the brutality of police or mob oppression for a potentially sympathetic audience? Or should they exercise their constitutionally protected right of self-defense? Comparisons will be drawn between two of the documents written by these men. Students will use textual analysis to draw conclusions and present arguments as directed in each lesson. An argumentative (persuasive) essay, which requires the students to defend their interpretations using evidence, will be used to determine student understanding.

Students will be able to

- Close read primary sources and identify important phrases and key terms
- Explain and summarize the meaning of these texts on both literal and inferential levels
- Analyze, assess, and compare the meaning of two primary source documents
- Develop a viewpoint and write an evaluative persuasive essay supported by evidence from two texts

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What did Malcolm X contend was a reasonable and legal response for a person whose body or property was threatened?
- What did Martin Luther King Jr. contend were the benefits of remaining nonviolent even when attacked?
- How did Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. explain why the Civil Rights Movement was needed?
- What common ground existed between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” April 3, 1964, Cleveland, Ohio, from *Speeches on Social Justice*, EdChange Multicultural Pavilion, sojust.net/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html
- Document Analysis: Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”
- Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” May 4, 1966, *Ebony* (October 1966): 27–34. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY. ©1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. © renewed 1994 Coretta Scott King. The issue of *Ebony* is available on Google Books, <https://books.google.com/books/about/Ebony.html?id=OkbpkXl3IMwC>.
- Document Analysis: Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”
- Compare and Contrast: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement by Traci Parker, University of California, Davis

From 1964 to 1966, the Black Freedom Movement achieved key milestones despite significant challenges. In 1964, Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party confronted racial segregation and voter suppression. White terrorists murdered activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. The Civil Rights Act was passed, marking a legislative victory, yet, unrest, including the Harlem Riot, underscored ongoing racial tensions. In 1965, Malcolm X's assassination, the Selma Marches, the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and the Watts Rebellion shook the nation. In 1966, key events included the Chicago Freedom Movement, James Meredith's March Against Fear, Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power, the founding of the Black Panther Party of Self-Defense, and urban unrest in Chicago, Cleveland, and Dayton. (White violence against Black individuals, including police brutality, often served as a catalyst for urban unrest).

Amidst these ups and downs, movement leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., who shared a fervent commitment to racial justice, deliberated on the efficacy of nonviolence versus self-defense. On April 3, 1964, Malcolm X delivered his "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland. In this address, given shortly after he left the Nation of Islam and just before his transformative pilgrimage to Mecca, he insisted we must "become more politically mature and realize what the ballot is for; what we're supposed to get when we cast a ballot; and that if we don't cast a ballot, it's going to end up in a situation where we're going to have to cast a bullet. It's either a ballot or a bullet."

Malcolm X advised Blacks to exercise their voting rights judiciously and cautioned the government that continued obstruction of Black political enfranchisement and equality might lead to armed resistance. He advocated for self-defense, stating, "We will work with anybody, anywhere, at any time, who is genuinely interested in tackling the problem head-on, nonviolently as long as the enemy is nonviolent, but violent when the enemy gets violent." Additionally, he championed Black Nationalism, emphasizing economic autonomy and addressing social issues like alcoholism and drug addiction to uplift Black communities.

On May 4, 1966, King penned an essay in *Ebony* magazine, a prominent Black publication founded by John H. Johnson in 1945, advocating for the effectiveness of nonviolence in the movement. King's essay was prescient; shortly thereafter, SNCC chairman Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) declared, "We want Black Power!" to a crowd in Greenwood, Mississippi, heralding the dawn of the Black Power era.

King asserted that "nonviolence offers the only road to freedom for my people," highlighting its role in exposing societal injustices and rallying community support for reform. He noted that nonviolent tactics such as marches and boycotts had led to significant gains in cities like Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Selma, and Chicago, with minimal loss of life. King promoted a vision of integration, not overthrow, within American society, stating, "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives." He continued, "We want to share in the American economy, the housing market, the educational system, and the social opportunities."

King cautioned against organizing movements around self-defense, although he recognized individuals' right to defend their homes, particularly in the volatile South. He warned of the dangerous boundary between defensive and retaliatory violence, stressing that allowing violence, even in self-defense, risked overshadowing the primary struggle for justice.

Malcolm X's and King's approaches differed. Still, they shared a commitment to ending white supremacy and violence, economic disparities, and systemic racism and realizing racial equality and justice.

Traci Parker is associate professor of history at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement: Workers, Consumers, and Civil Rights from the 1930s to the 1980s (2019).

LESSON 1

MALCOLM X, 1964

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2014, revised in 2024)

OVERVIEW

The students will read excerpts from a speech delivered by Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.” They will use a document analysis activity sheet to facilitate a close reading of the text and track their understanding on both literal and inferential levels. Student understanding of the text will be determined through classroom discussion and the activity sheets completed by the students.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” April 3, 1964, Cleveland, Ohio, from Speeches on Social Justice, EdChange Multicultural Pavilion, sojust.net/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html
- Document Analysis: Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than 3 or 4.
2. Distribute the excerpts from Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech and the Document Analysis activity sheet to each student. The students should discover the meaning of text as they read.
3. Read the speech aloud to the students or play a recording of the Malcolm X delivering the speech (available online). It is important for the students to experience the language and nuances of the text as the author meant them to be heard.
4. Decide whether the text is manageable for your students on an independent reading level. If it is, you can skip this step and go on to step 5. If the text level is more challenging for them, then “share read” the excerpts with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading while you continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
5. The students should now read the excerpts from the speech carefully and complete the Important Phrases section of the activity sheet. If you are having students work with partners or in groups, let them negotiate their answers. Every student must complete their own organizer in order to fulfill the assignment, even if they are working in groups.

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GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. Over the course of three lessons the students will compare and contrast Malcolm X’s and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s suggestions for how civil rights advocates should respond to violence directed against them.

6. Have the students move on to the Critical-Thinking Questions in the activity sheet. Remember to emphasize that they are to use the author's own words as evidence for their answers.
7. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share both their Important Phrases choices and the answers to the Critical-Thinking Questions. Compare those with the responses from other individuals or groups.

LESSON 2

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., 1966

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2014, revised in 2024)

OVERVIEW

The students will read excerpts from an article written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom.” They will use a document analysis activity sheet to facilitate a close reading of the text and track their understanding on both literal and inferential levels. Student understanding of the text will be determined through classroom discussion and activity sheets completed by the students.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” May 4, 1966, *Ebony* (October 1966): 27–34. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY. ©1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. © renewed 1994 Coretta Scott King. The issue of *Ebony* is available on Google Books, <https://books.google.com/books/about/Ebony.html?id=OkbpkXI3IMwC>.
- Document Analysis: Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”

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PROCEDURE

- You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than 3 or 4.
- Distribute the excerpts from Dr. King’s “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom” article (originally delivered as a speech in May 1966) and the Document Analysis activity sheet to each student.
- Read the excerpts from the article aloud to the students. It is important for the students to experience the language and nuances of the text, as it was originally written as a speech.
- If the text will be challenging for the students, share read the excerpts as described in Lesson 1.
- The students should now read the excerpts carefully and complete the Important Phrases section of the activity sheet. If you are having students work with partners or in groups, let them negotiate their answers. Every student must complete their own activity sheet in order to fulfill the assignment, even if they are working in groups.
- Have the students move on to the Critical-Thinking Questions. Remember to emphasize that they are to use the author’s own words as evidence for their answers.
- Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share both their Important Phrase choices and the answers to the Critical-Thinking Questions. Compare those with the responses from other individuals or groups.

LESSON 3

COMPARE AND CONTRAST: MALCOLM X AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2014, revised in 2024)

OVERVIEW

The students will compare and contrast the texts that they have analyzed. They will then write an essay that argues a point of view.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 1964
- Document Analysis: Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”
- Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” 1966
- Document Analysis: Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”
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PROCEDURE

1. This assignment may be an in-class essay, which will require students to write under a time limit, or a take-home essay.
2. The students should have the two completed assignments from Lessons 1 and 2 as well as copies of the excerpts from both texts. They will be referring to them in their essays.
3. The students will write an argumentative (persuasive) essay that addresses the following: Write an essay that explains Malcolm X’s criticism of nonviolent responses and Martin Luther King’s criticism of self-defense. What common ground nonetheless existed between these two leaders?

The students must use textual evidence from both texts in making their arguments.

Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 1964 (Excerpts)

. . . I'm not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem . . . We're all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man. He just happens to be a white man. All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.

Now in speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop oppressing and exploiting and degrading us. . . .

If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out -- time has run out!

So it's time in 1964 to wake up. . . . It's got to be the ballot or the bullet. . . .

These senators and congressmen actually violate the constitutional amendments that guarantee the people of that particular state or county the right to vote. And the Constitution itself has within it the machinery to expel any representative from a state where the voting rights of the people are violated. You don't even need new legislation. Any person in Congress right now, who is there from a state or a district where the voting rights of the people are violated, that particular person should be expelled from Congress. And when you expel him, you've removed one of the obstacles in the path of any real meaningful legislation in this country. In fact, when you expel them, you don't need new legislation, because they will be replaced by black representatives from counties and districts where the black man is in the majority, not in the minority. . . .

I might stop right here to point out one thing. Whatever you're going after something that belongs to you, anyone who's depriving you of the right to have it is a criminal. Understand that. Whenever you are going after something that is yours, you are within your legal rights to lay claim to it. And anyone who puts forth any effort to deprive you of that which is yours, is breaking the laws, And this was pointed out by the Supreme Court decision. It outlawed segregation.

Which means segregation is against the law. Which means a segregationist is breaking the law. A segregationist is a criminal. You can't label him as anything other than that. And when you demonstrate against segregation, the law is on your side. The Supreme Court is on your side. . . .

If you don't take an uncompromising stand, I don't mean go out and get violent; but at the same time you should never be nonviolent unless you run into some nonviolence. I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. But when you drop that violence on me, then you've made me go insane, and I'm not responsible for what I do. And that's the way every Negro should get.

They [white people] don't know what morals are. They don't try and eliminate an evil because it's evil, or because it's illegal, or because it's immoral; they eliminate it only when it threatens their existence. So you're wasting your time appealing to the moral conscience of a bankrupt man like Uncle Sam. If he had a conscience, he'd straighten this thing out with no more pressure being put upon him. So it is not necessary to change the white man's mind. We have to change our own mind. You can't change his mind about us. We've got to change our own minds about each other. We have to see each other with new eyes. We have to see each other as brothers and sisters. We have to come together with warmth so we can develop unity and harmony that's necessary to get this problem solved ourselves. . . .

It's time for you and me to stop sitting in this country, letting some cracker senators, Northern crackers and

Southern crackers, sit there in Washington, D.C., and come to a conclusion in their mind that you and I are supposed to have civil rights. There's no white man going to tell me anything about my rights. Brothers and sisters, always remember, if it doesn't take senators and congressmen and presidential proclamations to give freedom to the white man, it is not necessary for legislation or proclamation or Supreme Court decisions to give freedom to the black man. You let that white man know, if this is a country of freedom, let it be a country of freedom; and if it's not a country of freedom, change it.

Last but not least, I must say this concerning the great controversy over rifles and shotguns. The only thing that I've ever said is that in areas where the government has proven itself either unwilling or unable to defend the lives and the property of Negroes, it's time for Negroes to defend themselves. Article number two of the constitutional amendments provides you and me the right to own a rifle or a shotgun. It is constitutionally legal to own a shotgun or a rifle.

Source: Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," April 3, 1964, Cleveland, Ohio, from *Speeches on Social Justice*, EdChange Multicultural Pavilion, sojust.net/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html

NAME

PERIOD DATE

Document Analysis: Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”

Important Phrases

Which phrases or sentences in the speech are most important or powerful? Choose three and provide the reason for each choice.

Phrase 1:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 2:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 3:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” 1966 (Excerpts)

The year 1966 brought with it the first public challenge to the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence from within the ranks of the civil rights movement. Resolutions of self-defense and Black Power sounded forth from our friends and brothers. . . .

Indeed, there was much talk of violence. It was the same talk we have heard on the fringes of the nonviolent movement for the past ten years. It was the talk of fearful men, saying that they would not join the nonviolent movement because they would not remain nonviolent if attacked. . . .

I am convinced that for practical as well as moral reasons, nonviolence offers the only road to freedom for my people. In violent warfare, one must be prepared to face ruthlessly the fact that there will be casualties by the thousands. . . .

This is no time for romantic illusions about freedom and empty philosophical debate. This is a time for action. What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program which will bring the Negro into the mainstream of American life as quickly as possible. So far, this has only been offered by the nonviolent movement.

Our record of achievement through nonviolent action is already remarkable. The dramatic social changes which have been made across the South are unmatched in the annals of history. . . . Even more remarkable is the fact that this progress occurred with a minimum of human sacrifice and loss of life. . . .

There are many people who very honestly raise the question of self-defense. This must be placed in perspective. It goes without saying that people will protect their homes. This is a right guaranteed by the Constitution and respected even in the worst areas of the South. But the mere protection of one’s home and person against assault by lawless night riders does not provide any positive approach to the fears and conditions which produce violence. There must be some program for establishing law. . . .

In a nonviolent demonstration, self-defense must be approached from quite another perspective. One must remember that the cause of the demonstration is some exploitation or form of oppression that has made it necessary for men of courage and good will to demonstrate against the evil. For example, a demonstration against the evil of *de facto* school segregation is based on the awareness that a child’s mind is crippled daily by inadequate educational opportunity. The demonstrator agrees that it is better for him to suffer publicly for a short time to end the crippling evil of school [segregation] than to have generation after generation of children suffer in ignorance. . . .

It is always amusing to me when a Negro man says that he can’t demonstrate with us because if someone hit him he would fight back. Here is a man whose children are being plagued by rats and roaches, whose wife is robbed daily at over-priced ghetto food stores, who himself is working for about two-thirds the pay of a white person doing a similar job and with similar skills, and in spite of all this daily suffering it takes someone spitting on him or calling him a — to make him want to fight. . . .

I must continue my faith that is too great a burden to bear and that violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.

The American racial revolution has been a revolution to “get in” rather than to overthrow. We want a share in the American economy, the housing market, the educational system and the social opportunities. This goal itself indicates that a social change in America must be nonviolent.

If one is in search of a better job, it does not help to burn down the factory. If one needs more adequate education, shooting the principal will not help, or if housing is the goal, only building and construction will produce that end. To destroy anything, person or property, can’t bring us closer to the goal that we seek.

The nonviolent strategy has been to dramatize the evils of our society in such a way that pressure is brought to bear against those evils by the forces of good will in the community and change is produced.

The student sit-ins of 1960 are a classic illustration of this method. Students were denied the right to eat at a lunch counter, so they deliberately sat down to protest their denial. They were arrested, but this made their parents mad and so they began to close their charge accounts. The students continued to sit in, and this further embarrassed the city, scared away many white shoppers and soon produced an economic threat to the business life of the city. Amid this type of pressure, it is not hard to get people to agree to change.

Source: Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom, May 4, 1966,” *Ebony* (October 1966): 27–34. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY. ©1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. © renewed 1994 Coretta Scott King.

NAME

PERIOD DATE

Document Analysis: Martin Luther King Jr., “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom”

Important Phrases

Which phrases or sentences in the article are most important or powerful? Choose three and provide the reason for each choice.

Phrase 1:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 2:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

Phrase 3:

Why is this phrase important or powerful?

