"I Have a Dream"

This speech, which has become one of the most recognized symbols of the civil rights movement, was written more than three decades ago as America struggled with the problems of how to create racial equality for all of her citizens. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered the speech on August 28, 1963, to more than 200,000 people gathered during a massive demonstration before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. Called the March on Washington, the demonstration was organized on the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation to call attention to the wrongs suffered by African Americans and to push for federal legislation to bring about change.

Background

Before the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's, racial discrimination was deeply imbedded in American society. The reality of life for the great majority of African Americans meant that they lived with gross inequities in housing, employment, education, medical services, and public accommodations. Often they were denied the right to vote and faced great injustices within the legal system.

Segregation was a way of life. Most urban blacks, particularly in the South, lived in isolated tenements because white landlords refused them rent. Blacks had little access to "good" jobs, finding work mainly in positions of service to white employers. Black children attended separate, inferior schools. The result of being denied both employment and educational opportunities was that the great majority of African American families lived in poverty, with nearly 75% earning less than $3,000 a year in 1950. In addition, Southern blacks were denied admittance to such public facilities as hospitals, restaurants, theaters, motels, and parks. Blacks were even denied the use of public restrooms and drinking fountains marked with "For Whites Only" signs. When separate public accommodations for blacks were provided, they were usually inferior in quality and poorly maintained. At establishments in which practicality dictated that blacks and whites share the same facilities, blacks were relegated by law to the back of buses and trains and to the balconies of movies houses and courtrooms.

Worse, many African Americans were even denied the right to participate in America's political process. They were kept from voting by state laws, polltaxes, reading tests, and even beatings by local police. Unlawful acts of violence against blacks, such as those perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan, were ignored by the much of Southern society, and African Americans could expect little help from the judicial system. In fact, instances of police intimidation and brutality were all too common.

Change came slowly. Embittered Southern whites carried distrust learned during the years of Reconstruction following the Civil War. However, in the late 1940's following World War II (when America had fought for freedom and democracy abroad and therefore felt compelled to make good on these promises at home), the federal government began to pass laws against racial discrimination. The United States military was integrated for the first time, and new laws and court rulings prohibited segregation in schools, government buildings, and public transportation. However, many of these laws met with bitter opposition in the South or were simply ignored. When members of the African American community tried to break through old barriers, they were often threatened or beaten and, in some cases, killed. Likewise, black homes and churches were sometimes burned or bombed.

It was within this atmosphere that Martin Luther King, Jr., rose as a prominent leader in the civil rights movement. The son of a Baptist minister who was himself ordained, he was inspired by both Christian ideals and India's Mohandas K. Gandhi's philosophies of nonviolent resistance to peaceable confront injustice. King first came into the national spotlight when he organized the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott----during which time he was jailed, his home burned, and his life threatened. The result, however, was the mandate from the Supreme Court outlawing segregation on public transportation, and King emerged as a respected leader and the voice of nonviolent protest. He led marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, and black voter-registration drives throughout the South until his assassination in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1964 King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in the civil rights movement. Both Americans and the international community recognized King's contributions in overcoming civil rights abuses without allowing the struggle to erupt into a blood bath. It was King's leadership that held the movement together with a dedication to nonviolent change. Many believe that King's skillful guidance and powerful oratory skills kept the South out of a second civil war, this time between the races. King led the civil rights movement to meet each act of violence, attack, murder, or slander with a forgiving heart, a working hand, and a hopeful dream for the future.
'I Have A Dream'

On 28 August, 1963, Martin Luther King delivered his magnificent "I have a dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Below is an abridged (shortened) version of his speech.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But 100 years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We cannot be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For Whites Only". We cannot be satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed - we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.
I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning: "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.
Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.
Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!
Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.
Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California.
But not only that.
Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.
Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"
Worksheet

Do NOT write on this paper! Answer the following on your own sheet of paper.

I. Vocabulary

1. Find three words in the background information about which you are unsure and look up their meanings. Write the definitions.
2. Find five words in Dr. King's speech about which you are unsure and look up their meanings. Write the definitions.

II. Rhetorical Structure: Figures of Speech

Certain rhetorical devices called figures of speech (similes, metaphors, allusions, alliteration, etc.) are used in both poetry and prose to make ideas more memorable and forceful. For centuries speakers and writers have known that such well said devices affect listeners and readers in powerful ways.

3. "Five score years ago," the opening phrase of King's speech, is an allusion to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Why was this an appropriate and strong way for King to begin his speech?
4. Find an example of a metaphor. Write it down and explain what effect it has on the speech.
5. Find an example of a simile. Write it down and explain what effect it has on the speech.
6. In the second paragraph, King says that "the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination." These words bring up strong images of slavery. Why would this be an effective method of moving his audience?

III. Understanding the Dream

7. Write a paragraph summarizing King's dream in your own words.
8. "I Have a Dream" was a persuasive speech meant to convey to King's audience the need for change and encourage them to work for federal legislation to help end racial discrimination. If you had been in the crowd that day, do you think you would have been moved by King's speech? Why or why not?

IV. Relating to the Dream

9. What is your definition of racism?
10. King was assassinated for his work in civil rights. A quotation from the Bible on the memorial at his gravesite reads, "Behold the dreamer. Let us slay him, and we will see what will become of his dream." What do you think has become of King's dream? Write two paragraphs: one telling in what ways the dream has been fulfilled and one telling what yet remains to be accomplished.

V. Connecting to the Dream

What is your dream? Is there something within your world that you would like to see changed or improved upon? Using King's "I Have a Dream" speech as a guide, write a speech of your own about something you feel passionate about. You won't have to deliver the speech to the class, but write it as if you were about to present it to someone with the power to change things.