

Exploring Expository Writing: Historical Context*Segregation and the Civil Rights Movement*

The United States of the 1950s and 1960s experienced unrest during the Civil Rights Movement's struggle to abolish segregation. At the beginning of the 1950s, segregation, the separation of races, was legal and enforced by law. Throughout the country, separate bathrooms, drinking fountains, and schools existed. Whites and African-Americans were expected to lead separate lives in separate schools and neighborhoods.

The first time that segregation was legally challenged was in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case which went before the Supreme Court. A group of African-American parents and children sued to attend white schools after they realized that the white schools had better facilities with more resources. At this time, some of the schools for African-Americans had no desks, gym, or cafeteria and received much less funding than their neighboring white schools. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court justices unanimously ruled that "separate but equal" is inherently unequal and required all public schools to integrate.

Even though the Supreme Court tried to end segregation, it could not erase citizens' racist feelings and beliefs. African-American children were taunted and threatened as they tried to attend school, and one Virginia school district decided to close its public schools for five years rather than integrate them.

In December 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, African-American Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man and move to the back of the bus as was customary at the time. After the forty-three year old Parks was jailed, Montgomery's African-American citizens, led by the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., boycotted the city's buses.

Even though King advocated peaceful resistance, the Civil Rights Movement was characterized by violence. In Birmingham, Alabama, the city police chief arrested hundreds of children when they marched for their rights. On Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, a bomb tore through an African-American church and killed five teenage girls.

Dr. King continued to advocate for equal rights for all Americans. He gave his rousing "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. in front of 250,000 people and also received the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize for his work. After President Lyndon B. Johnson proposed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the Voting Rights Bill in 1965, Dr. King led a march of 25,000 citizens from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery. This time, however, the marchers were protected, rather than arrested, by

Name _____ Period _____

the National Guard. In 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated by James Earl Ray in Memphis, Tennessee. Death could not end King's influence, however, which still inspires Americans today as they advocate for equal rights for all people.

Comprehension Check: Historical Context

Directions: *After Reading the article about the Civil Rights Movement, answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate piece of paper.*

1. Define segregation.
2. List three examples of segregation.
3. Explain the importance of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.
4. Who is Rosa Parks? Why was she important to civil rights?
5. Write a paragraph summarizing the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
6. Describe an aspect of life where equal rights do not exist in American society. Include how you can advocate for equal rights for this cause.