**Rhetorical Techniques Of Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” Speech (1963)**

**Alliteration.** King’s phenomenal ear for the [music of language](http://www.writersrelief.com/blog/2009/12/the-language-of-musicality-in-poetry-vocabulary-for-poets/) is legendary—and we hear the lyricism of his prose in his alliterations.

Example: *Rise from the dark and desolate…the marvelous new militancy…trials and tribulations…*

**Allusion**. King’s speech reaches well beyond his words. He points to shared references that are already heavily loaded with built-in emotion.

Example:*Five score years ago, a great American…signed the Emancipation Proclamation.*

Example: *Many references and quotes from “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” and “Free at Last.”*

[**Amplification**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amplification_(rhetoric)). This happens when a writer makes a point twice in a row, with greater emphasis, details, or explanation the second time—thus, amplifying it. It’s powerfully effective.

Example: *America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.”*

**Antithesis.** This is a contrast made clear by using contrasting language. In the following, King places *color/content* and *skin/character* side by side, drawing our attention to radically different ways of seeing the world.

Example: …*they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

[**Repetition**](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/figures/conduplicatio.htm). This is the repetition of a word or phrase, often at the beginning of a series of sentences or phrases.

Example: *Repetition of sentences beginning with “I have a dream.”*

**Litotes**. You may be using litotes without even knowing it. By using understatement, along with a double negative, King draws our attention in.

Example: *I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations.*

**Metaphor**. We’re not talking about “the cloud was a ball of cotton candy.” We’re talking hard-hitting metaphors that aren’t just about making comparisons but about stirring emotions.

Example: *[The Emancipation Proclamation] came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.*

Example: *We will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.*

[**Parallelism**](http://www.writersrelief.com/blog/2009/08/finding-parallel-perfection-parallelism-in-writing-sentences/). With parallel phrasing, King carries his message with engaging, memorable rhythm. Isn’t it gorgeous how the passage below builds?

Example: *We will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together…*

**One More Thing We Learn About Rhetoric From Martin Luther King, Jr.**

While we’ve taken a moment to dissect some of King’s rhetorical techniques, there’s one key thing that makes this speech such a standout: heart. Separating King’s talent as a writer from his passion for his cause is impossible; the success of this particular speech comes from the combination of passionate caring AND eloquence.

**Now Your Try:**

Find an issue that you want to advocate for. This **1 minute speech** will be your CALL TO ARMS.

Examples include; asylum seekers, racism, climate change, a local issue, a state issue, a national issue.

**Excerpt from ‘I Have A Dream’ Speech by Martin Luther King Jr., 1963**

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, 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 the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of 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 color 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 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 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 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. 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 snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes 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 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!"

**Alliteration Allusion** [**Amplification**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amplification_(rhetoric)) **Antithesis** [**Repetition**](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/figures/conduplicatio.htm) **Litotes** **Metaphor** [**Parallelism**](http://www.writersrelief.com/blog/2009/08/finding-parallel-perfection-parallelism-in-writing-sentences/)

**Preface**

In 1950's America, the equality of man envisioned by the [Declaration of Independence](http://www.usconstitution.net/declar.html) was far from a reality. People of color — blacks, Hispanics, Asians — were discriminated against in many ways, both overt and covert. The 1950's were a turbulent time in America, when racial barriers began to come down due to Supreme Court decisions, like *Brown v. Board of Education*; and due to an increase in the activism of blacks, fighting for equal rights.

Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, was a driving force in the push for racial equality in the 1950's and the 1960's. In 1963, King and his staff focused on Birmingham, Alabama. They marched and protested non-violently, raising the ire of local officials who sicced water cannon and police dogs on the marchers, whose ranks included teenagers and children. The bad publicity and break-down of business forced the white leaders of Birmingham to concede to some anti-segregation demands.

Thrust into the national spotlight in Birmingham, where he was arrested and jailed, King helped organize a massive march on Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963. His partners in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom included other religious leaders, labor leaders, and black organizers. The assembled masses marched down the Washington Mall from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, heard songs from Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, and heard speeches by actor Charlton Heston, NAACP president Roy Wilkins, and future U.S. Representative from Georgia John Lewis.

King's appearance was the last of the event; the closing speech was carried live on major television networks. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King evoked the name of Lincoln in his "I Have a Dream" speech, which is credited with mobilizing supporters of desegregation and prompted the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The next year, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

1. Give Background
2. Each student gets a printed copy of speech and speech techniques
3. Show the video of the speech
4. Students to annotate whatever might stand out to them
5. Time in small groups – to review the speech and highlight in different colours the techniques found.
6. Discussion as a class – how did King’s use of these techniques allow him to spread his message?  
   What else helped?  
   How significant was this speech?