

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Biography

[History](#) >> [Biography](#) >> [Civil Rights for Kids](#)

- **Occupation:** Civil Rights Leader
- **Born:** January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, GA
- **Died:** April 4, 1968 in Memphis, TN
- **Best known for:** Advancing the Civil Rights Movement and his "I Have a Dream" speech

Biography:

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a civil rights activist in the 1950s and 1960s. He led non-violent protests to fight for the rights of all people including African Americans. He hoped that America and the world could become a colorblind society where race would not impact a person's civil rights. He is considered one of the great orators of modern times, and his speeches still inspire many to this day.

Where did Martin grow up?

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, GA on January 15, 1929. He went to Booker T. Washington High School. He was so smart that he skipped two grades in high school. He started his college education at Morehouse College at the young age of fifteen. After getting his degree in sociology from Morehouse, Martin got a divinity degree from Crozer Seminary and then got his doctor's degree in theology from Boston University.

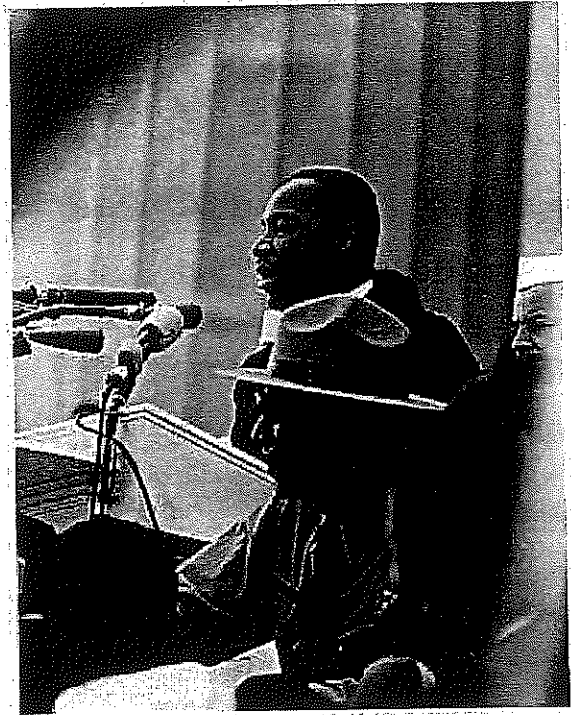
Martin's dad was a preacher which inspired Martin to pursue the ministry. He had a younger brother and an older sister. In 1953 he married Coretta Scott. Later, they would have four children including Yolanda, Martin, Dexter, and Bernice.

How did he get involved in civil rights?

In his first major civil rights action, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This started when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. She was arrested and spent the night in jail. As a result, Martin helped to organize a boycott of the public transportation system in Montgomery. The boycott lasted for over a year. It was very tense at times. Martin was arrested and his house was bombed. In the end, however, Martin prevailed and segregation on the Montgomery buses came to an end.

When did King give his famous "I Have a Dream" speech?

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. helped to organize the famous "March on Washington". Over 250,000 people attended this march in an effort to show the importance of civil rights legislation. Some of the issues the march hoped to accomplish included an end to segregation in public schools, protection from police abuse, and to get laws passed that would prevent discrimination in employment.



*Martin Luther King
at the March on Washington
by Unknown*

It was at this march where Martin gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. This speech has become one of the most famous speeches in history. The March on Washington was a great success. The Civil Rights Act was passed a year later in 1964.

How did he die?

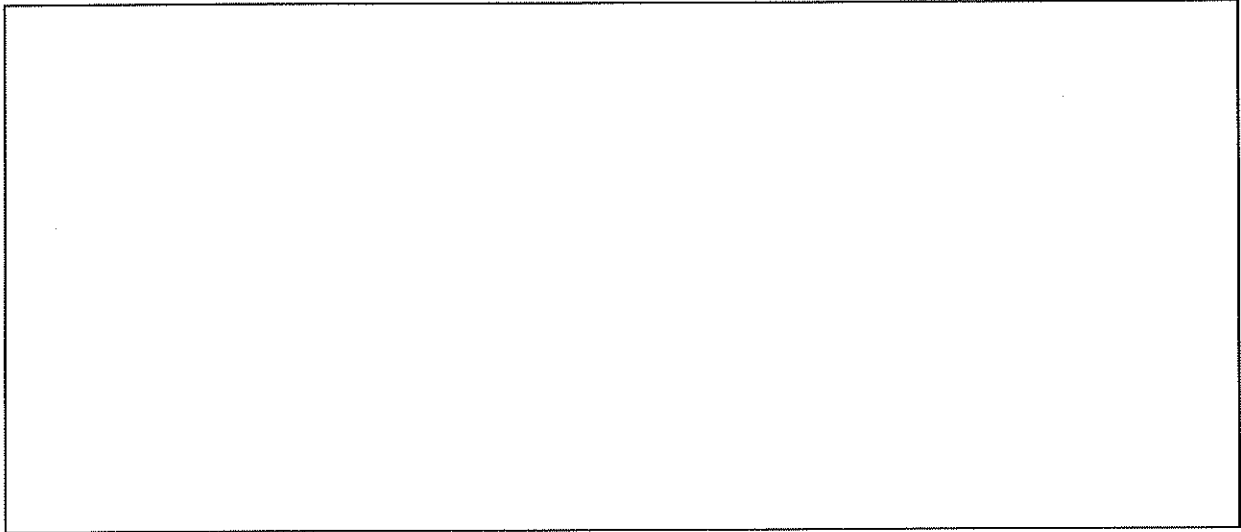
Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, TN. While standing on the balcony of his hotel, he was shot by James Earl Ray.

Interesting Facts about Martin Luther King, Jr.

- King was the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a national holiday.
- At the Atlanta premier of the movie *Gone with the Wind*, Martin sang with his church choir.
- There are over 730 streets in the United States named after Martin Luther King, Jr.
- One of his main influences was Mohandas Gandhi who taught people to protest in a non-violent manner.
- He was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.
- The name on his original birth certificate is Michael King. This was a mistake, however. He was supposed to be named after his father who was named for Martin Luther, the leader of the Christian reformation movement.
- He is often referred to by his initials MLK.

Understanding Martin Luther King Jr.

After reading this brief biography and knowing everything you already know about Martin Luther King Jr., think about what you understand about who he is. What is your CURRENT understanding of who Martin Luther King Jr. was? What do you know about him?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their current understanding of Martin Luther King Jr. based on the biography and their own knowledge.

Now take a look at the next four texts. Mark any information that feels important in helping you to better understand who Martin Luther King Jr. really was.

Pushing Beyond Our Limited Understanding of Martin Luther King Jr.

Text #1:

"If You Want to Honor Martin Luther King Jr. Stay Angry" by Jaya Saxena, published on Daily Dot: <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/martin-luther-king-angry-protest/>

"On Jan. 21, there will be a massive protest in Washington, D.C. in support of equal human rights. The protest will come on the heels of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and no doubt most of the protesters will have been inspired and influenced by Dr. King's work and legacy.

However, the public image of Dr. King has been watered down over the years. Despite the fact that he was assassinated for his beliefs and targeted by the FBI, he is often considered as peaceful and agreeable, someone white people at the time could respect. While he was those things *sometimes*, that's not the full picture, and reducing him to such dishonors his memory.

Dr. King did not politely ask for civil rights. He yelled, he disagreed, and he called out. If you want inspiration for how to move forward, remember that side of him."

Text #2:

"Martin Luther King Was a Radical, Not a Saint" by Peter Dreier, published on Huffington Post:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/martin-luther-king-was-a-1_b_6498740.htm
!

"As we celebrate his birthday, it is easy to forget that in his day, in his own country, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was considered a dangerous troublemaker. Even President John Kennedy worried that King was being influenced by Communists. King was harassed by the FBI and vilified in the media. The establishment's campaign to denigrate King worked. In August 1966 — as King was bringing his civil rights campaign to Northern cities to address poverty, slums, housing segregation and bank lending discrimination — the Gallup Poll found that 63 percent of Americans had an unfavorable opinion of King, compared with 33 percent who viewed him favorably.

Today King is viewed as something of an American saint. A recent Gallup Poll discovered that 94 percent of Americans viewed him in a positive light. His birthday is a national holiday. His name adorns schools and street signs. In 1964, at age 35, he was the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Many Hollywood films — most

recently Ava DuVernay's brilliant *Selma* — explore different aspects of King's personal and political life, but generally confirm his reputation as a courageous and compassionate crusader for justice. Politicians, preachers, and professors from across the political spectrum invoke King's name to justify their beliefs and actions."

Text #3:

"How MLK Became An Angry Black Man" by John Blake published on CNN:
<http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/16/us/king-birmingham-jail-letter-anniversary/>

"By the time Clarence Jones reached him, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was in bad shape.

He was unshaven, dirty and dejected. King had spent several days alone in solitary confinement with no mattress in a filthy dark jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama.

He had become a national figure eight years earlier after leading the successful bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, that brought Rosa Parks to fame. Yet he'd had no major victories since then, and a younger generation of activists -- sit-in protesters and Freedom Riders -- were grabbing headlines and questioning King's toughness.

"They had taken away the initiative from King," says Clayborne Carson, editor of the multi-volume "The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr." one of the most comprehensive collections of King's speeches and writings. King's late widow, Coretta Scott King, selected Carson to edit King's papers.

"Nearly everything that happens, nothing of it has anything to do with King," says Carson, director of the King institute at Stanford. "King needed a victory desperately."

King's desperation deepened after he was placed in solitary confinement in the Birmingham jail. He hated being alone. He depended on the company of people for emotional support after his many arrests. He also had been scarred by an earlier experience when he was driven to an isolated jail in rural Georgia where he thought he was going to be killed.

King also had been virtually isolated by his own community. Only about five black churches in Birmingham allowed King to use their churches for mass meetings. The rest wanted nothing to do with him, says Rieder.

"A lot of them were being cautious about politics," he says. "They were part of the professional classes and didn't want to rock the boat. And some of them didn't like the idea of the big man coming in to tell them what to do."

Depressed and angry and alone in jail, King read an ad that had been placed in a Birmingham newspaper by eight moderate white clergymen. The newspaper had been smuggled to King while he was in jail. In the ad, the clergymen called King an outside agitator and lawbreaker and counseled him to wait.

King once detested white people because of his experiences growing up in the segregated South, Rieder says. Though King grew up in the black middle class of Atlanta, he experienced all sorts of racial humiliation and saw blacks treated with viciousness.

"He went through a period of hatred toward whites, and it took him some time to get over it," Rieder says. "He would say that when he saw Malcom X on television, there would be times when he would feel that old bitterness rising."

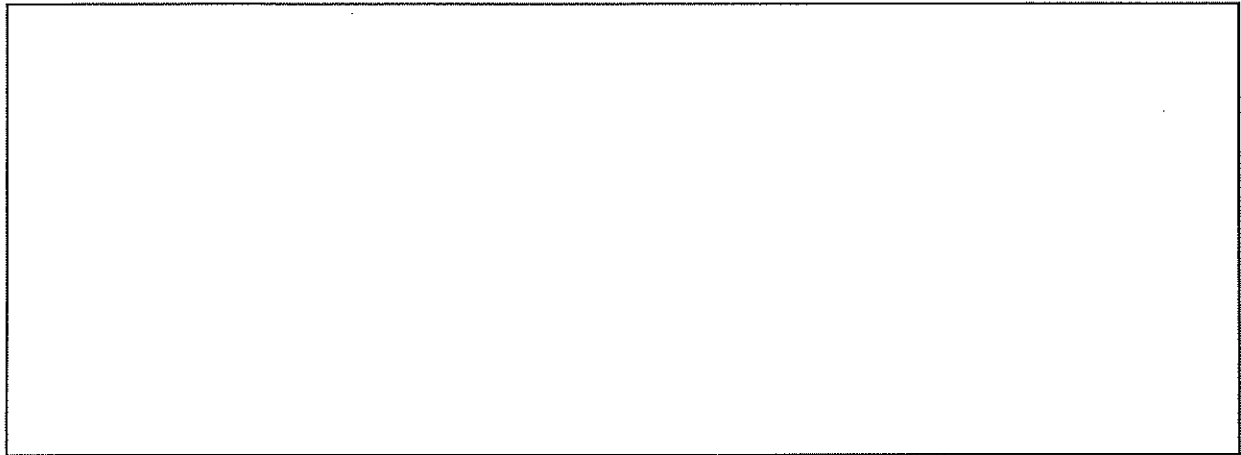
Text #4:

A Young People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn, pgs. 293 - 294

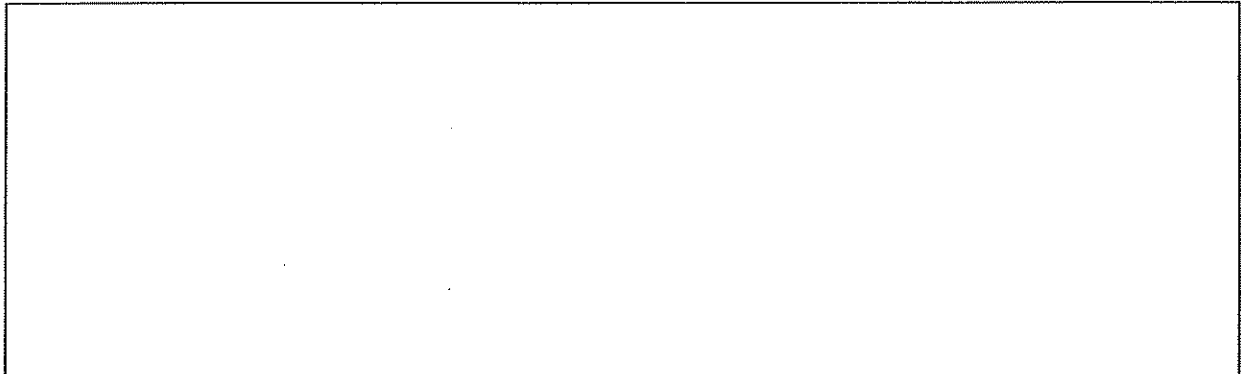
"King was growing concerned about problems that the civil rights laws didn't touch -- problems of poverty. He also began speaking out against a war the United States was fighting in the Asian nation of Vietnam. King said, "We are spending all of this money for death and destruction, and not nearly enough money for life and constructive development.

The FBI tapped King's private phone conversations, blackmailed him, and threatened him. A U.S. Senate report of 1976 would say that the FBI "Tried to destroy Dr. Martin Luther King." But destruction came when an unseen marksman shot King to death as he stood on the balcony outside his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee."

After reading these four texts, did you understand anything new about Martin Luther King Jr.? What new information and new understandings about Martin Luther King Jr. did you gain?



How were these four texts different than other texts you have read in the past about Martin Luther King Jr.?



What does this show us about our responsibility as readers when we begin to read to learn about the Civil Rights Movement and the people involved in it?

