

Research Reflection

As a student of communication, I have learned that open discussion is vital in order to allow more thoughts and ideas to be shared for dialogue to expand. When thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s massive contribution to Civil Rights history, I wanted to add to the conversation myself, but considering the sheer wealth of information and discussion already present and explored, I was faced with quite a challenge: How could I add to scholarly conversation surrounding Dr. King in such a way that is fresh? This question in mind, I felt that the best place to start was to select a specific work of his to analyze. At first, I chose his famous "I Have A Dream" speech, though through advice from my professor and cursory research, I found that work to be extensively discussed already, so choosing another rhetorical piece by Dr. King would better succinctly increase the breadth of existing dialogue. As such, I settled on his letter he wrote when incarcerated in Birmingham Jail, an extremely important piece in American history, but with more avenues to explore. Naturally, I wanted to read it, and because his letter has been published and archived in many places, I was able to find it with a quick internet search. Upon reading it a few times, I wanted to explore current scholarly discussion surrounding the letter so far. More specifically, why it was so powerful as a rhetorical work.

Utilizing the CSUSM Library website, I accessed databases that held a wealth of existing dialogue surrounding Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. I found that searching databases by subject granted me a more focused scholarly context more relevant to my topic of discussion. As mentioned before, my goal was to understand why scholars believed Dr. King's letter was so rhetorically powerful, so I narrowed my search with the "communication" subject. Admittedly, I had my own assumptions of what existing scholarly dialogue entailed. However, I was aware of my own biases, and understood that keeping my searches open would expose me to more

viewpoints and explanations, thus giving me more material to think about and refer to. So I began with broad searches, gradually changing and adding different terms in my search to get as many results as possible while filtering out scholarly works that, while well-researched, are not exactly relevant to my topic. This research strategy was quite useful for me, for it not only assisted me in seeing past my own assumptions, but also discovering what has been underexplored: analysis of Dr. King's letter through rhetorical perspective. Equipped with both a solid understanding of different viewpoints and the discovery of a budding avenue of discussion, I knew how I was going to contribute to scholarly dialogue. All that remained for me was to research the historical context within and surrounding Dr. King's letter to reference and complete my entry.

Surface-level research of King's letter revealed to me that his letter was a response to another open letter by eight clergymen who disapproved of the civil demonstrations by Black Americans and their allies. This presented me with three areas to research: Dr. King, the problems faced by Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, and finally the voices the eight clergymen represented. Once again, I utilized the CSUSM Library's access to many databases, broadening my search with more subjects like economics and history. In lieu of only using peer-reviewed and scholarly pieces, my criteria of quality source material to reference expanded to allowing primary sources and news articles current and/or relevant to Dr. King's letter. This is because the scope in what Dr. King's letter addresses are then-current events, so understanding the viewpoints and exigences that both support and combat his message is critical. While there was quite a bit of information on those three areas, I had to be diligent in only referencing source material that maintained credibility. Many times, I stumbled across what were supposedly good pieces of reference, only to find that information within it was either incorrect

or written by someone whose credentials are questionable at best. Discerning these credentials and source trustworthiness is a skill learned thanks to curated and thorough guidance from CSUSM library staff.

In summary, my journey in researching context for my entry to the discussion around Dr. King's letter was quite an interesting one. I had to revisit and refine my searches many times to ensure my sources were diverse in dialogue, as well as accurate and relevant to academic exploration. Many things were learned through this scholastic exercise. However, I am most grateful that through it, I have found a way to add and expand a dialogue on what will never cease to be relevant: the racial struggles faced by Black Americans today and the history that precedes them.