

**Civil Rights Strategy Unit**

**Argumentative Claim Construction Activity**

Debatable Issue

**The Civil Rights movement ultimately proved that Martin Luther King’s strategy of non-violence was more effective than a radical ‘any means necessary’ strategy would have been.**

Overview

One sequence of argument construction is to read and research and build up from evidence that can be grouped into support for a claim on a debatable issue. Another is to brain-storm argumentative claims and then research to find supporting evidence. Often these methods are combined..

Strong, well-developed arguments must include clear and concise claims. In this exercise students create three argumentative claims on our debatable issue regarding Civil Rights strategy, which they then share with other students. Following a four-step process, students analyze their opponents’ argumentative claims, by ranking them, rating them on ACE criteria for argumentative claims, assess their reasearchability, and come up with counter-argument claims.

Procedure and Method

1. Students should be paired together into teams of two-student pairs.
2. Once students are paired off, they should be assigned either the affirmative or the negative.
3. Students on both the affirmative and negative sides will each construct three argumentative claims on their side of the debatable issue.
4. Student pairs will then swap their argumentative claims. They will then work together to rank their peer’s argumentative claims, from 1-3, where (1) is the most effective claim.
5. Second, using the rating system below, student pairs will work together to rate the argumentative claims collectively on each of the four ACE criteria for argumentative claims.
6. Students will then assess the researchability of the argumentative claims, which is the predicted likelihood that evidence can be researched to support the claims.
7. Student pairs will then generate 1-2 possible counter-arguments for each claim. For this exercise the counter-arguments will also consist only of claims.

1. The activity will conclude in a class-wide discussion, in which each pair ‘shares-out’ some of its analysis of the argumentative claims it worked with.

Rating System

You will be giving a rating to your partner’s writing on each of the criteria for effective argumentation. The ratings are on a 5-point scale, so you will put a number in each criteria box. The rating descriptors are as follows:

**5 -- Highly effective, impressive, persuasive, needs little to no improvement**

**4 -- Effective, solid satisfaction of the criterion, but some improvement possible**

**3 -- Mixed, partially effective, partially ineffective, something to build on but in**

**need of significant revision/improvement**

**2 -- Minimally effective, flawed, insufficient satisfaction of the criterion, should be**

**substantially revised/improved**

**1 -- Highly ineffective, highly flawed example of argumentation, should be fully**

**re-written or re-worked**

Argumentative Claims

In the boxes below, rate your partner’s argumentative claims, on the basis of these criteria:

**Clarity** Are the argumentative claims clear? Are the writer’s points made precisely? Do the claims clearly support the writer’s overall argumentative position?

**Focus**  Are the argumentative claims each focused on a single point? Are they properly balanced between the detail of evidence and the generality of the overall argumentative position?

**Separation**  Are the argumentative claims separate and distinct from each other? Or do they overlap with or repeat each other?

**Consistency**  Are the argumentative claims consistent with each other? Or do they contradict each other? Are they parallel with each other, or do they seem unmatched?

**Researchability** Given what you know about the issue, are the argumentative

claims likely to be supportable by researched evidence? Will

researched evidence likely be credible and sufficient?

Evidence

The passages below are quotations or paraphrases from the primary documents or media list sources that we have studied. Each can be used to support a distinct argumentative claim either for the civil disobedience strategy or for the radical militancy strategy.

As the models demonstrate, formulating an argumentative claim built up from a piece of evidence requires that students infer a generalizable point, a specific reason that the evidence suggests the overall position they are taking on the debatable issue is true.

Students should include reference to the evidence on which the claim is based by citing the number of the passage in parenthesis on the argumentative claim creator form.

Note that when building arguments students will need to supply **two** pieces of evidence to support each argumentative claim they use to develop and advance their position. That said, the argumentative claims that this activity produces can be used in the structured argumentation activities to follow.

**Civil Disobedience Was a More Effective Strategy (Affirmative)**

**Model**

Evidence:

Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Power of Non-Violence Speech,” April 4, 1957

“Nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence. This method is nonaggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually.”

Claim:

Civil disobedience’s spiritual aggressiveness matches radical militancy’s physical aggressiveness.

Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Power of Non-Violence Speech,” April 4, 1957

(1) “The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. A boycott is never an end within itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption.”

(2) “Our self-respect is at stake; the prestige of our nation is at stake. Civil rights is an eternal moral issue which may well determine the destiny of our civilization in the ideological struggle with communism.”

(3) King connects civil disobedience in the Civil Rights movement to a “maladjustment” to what a moral conscience cannot accept in society. He refers to the biblical figure Amos’s demand for justice and righteousness, Lincoln’s refusal to accept slavery, Jefferson’s bold decree that “all men are created equal,” and even Jesus Christ’s radical view that God loves every human being equally and that all mankind are brothers.

Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” Excerpt, April, 1963

(4) “[W]hen you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?". . . . There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream Speech,” Washington D.C., Capitol Mall, August 28, 1963

(5) “In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.”

(6) “The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.”

Martin Luther King, “Debate” with Malcolm X, 1964

(7) Civil disobedience appeals to the conscience of the white power structure. By making the white power structure feel guilty, it makes the white power structure uncomfortable. When people feel guilty they seek to allay the feeling of guilt.

**Radical Militancy Would Have Been a More Effective Strategy (Negative)**

**Model**

Evidence:

Malcolm X, “The Battle or the Bullet Speech,” Cleveland Ohio, April 3, 1964

“Well, I am one who doesn't believe in deluding myself. I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American.”

Claim:

Civil disobedience will always fail since blacks cannot work for change within an American system that has never accepted them.

Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots [Excerpt],” a speech to the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, New York City, November 10, 1963

(8) “You are nothing but an ex-slave. You don’t like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the ‘Mayflower.’ You came here on a slave ship – in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the ‘Mayflower.’ You were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers.”

Malcolm X, “The Battle or the Bullet Speech,” Cleveland Ohio, April 3, 1964

(9) All African-Americans are united in their suffering as a result of political, economic, and social oppression imposed by the white power structure.

Malcolm X, Video “Debate” with Martin Luther King, 1964

(10) Martin Luther King is supported by white people, and like other Uncle Toms before him, Martin Luther King has the effect of keeping black people powerless in the face of white oppression of black people.

(11) Civil disobedience is psychologically unrealistic. And since its means and methods are aimed in the wrong direction, it can never hope to attain its goals of integration.

“The Black Panther Party Program,” 1966

(12) “We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense.”

Stokley Carmichael, Chairman, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, “What We Want,” *New York Review of Books*, 1966

(13) “One of the tragedies of the struggle against racism is that up to now there has been no national organization which could speak to the growing militancy of young black people in the urban ghetto. There has been only a civil rights movement, whose tone of voice was adapted to an audience of liberal whites. It served as a sort of buffer zone between them and angry young blacks. None of its so-called leaders could go into a rioting community and be listened to.”

Gil-Scott Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Song Released April, 1971

(14) “The revolution will not be right back  
after a message about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.  
You will not have to worry about a dove in your  
bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.  
The revolution will not go better with Coke.  
The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.  
The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.”