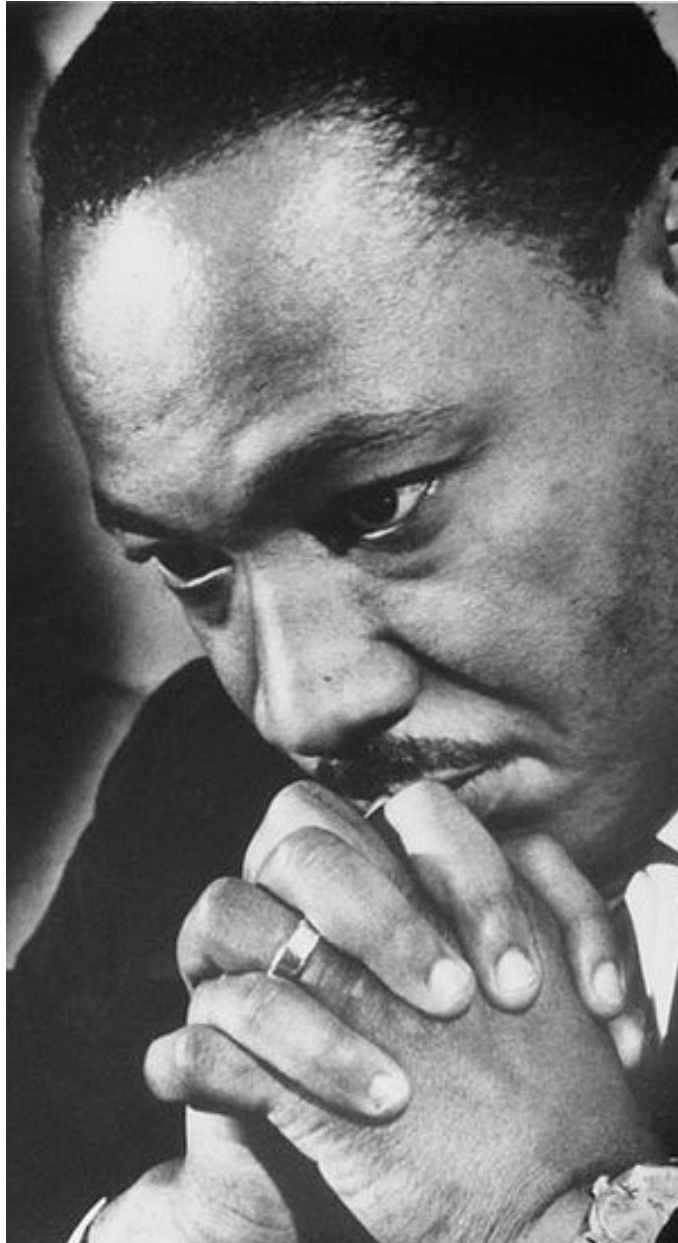




# Sensitive Topic Resource **Disclaimer**

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. This resource contains potentially sensitive and/or upsetting topics that may emotionally impact on students you use it with due to their experiences in their past. It is your responsibility to consider whether it is appropriate to use this resource with your students. If you do use this resource, it is your responsibility to ensure that appropriate support is available for anyone affected.





## Martin Luther King Jr Extraordinary Lives

**'Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.'**

On January 15 1929, Alberta King gave birth to her second child, Martin Luther King Jr in Atlanta, Georgia. Originally named Michael King, his Baptist father, following an experience visiting Germany, changed both his own and his son's names to Martin Luther. Their namesake was the 16th century Protestant theologian whose courage and beliefs led to him being excommunicated from the Catholic Church and going down in history as one of the most significant Christian figures of all time. Martin Luther King Jr, born across the Atlantic four centuries later, would go on to carve out his own place in history as one of the most significant figures of the Black Civil Rights Movement.

### Childhood

MLK's childhood was one of strong morals, family love and the brutality of segregation. King would recall how, at six years old, one of his white friends told him that they could no longer play together. This was one of many formative experiences for King. His father,

### Segregation in the South

This was the enforced separation of whites and people of colour. Everything from parks, schools, swimming pools and buses were segregated.

a pastor, also had a significant impact on him, publicly denouncing segregation and leading a voting rights protest march. He also educated King on the history of slavery and discrimination and encouraged his son to rise above the hate he felt towards white people and demonstrate Christian love to all. This non-violent philosophy would be developed and championed by King later in life.



**Segregated water fountains in 1939.**

## A Precocious Talent

Even as a child, King was known for being an exceptional student. Despite a strong disregard for grammar, he was a voracious reader with a vast vocabulary. He was known for being an excellent orator and when his grandfather and father's alma mater, Morehouse College, began accepting younger students, King, only 15, enrolled there too.

King's time at college enabled him to study for his degree in Sociology, which he graduated with at only 19. Moreover, the experience of living in the integrated north of the USA had a profound effect on him. Writing home to his parents, he told them, "The white people here are very nice. We go to any place we want to and sit any where we want to." He spent his free time socialising and going to the theatre, eating at restaurants and attending a church that welcomed all, regardless of skin colour.

King went on to study at Crozer Theological Seminary, during which time he fell in love with a white woman whom he wished to marry. The prospective marriage was criticised by his friends, who claimed an inter-racial marriage would destroy King's career as he would end up being despised by both Black and white people. King did find another love though, Coretta Scott, who he married in 1953 and shared four children with.

## Activism, Civil Rights, Buses and Boycotts

King and his family moved to Montgomery, Alabama, a hotbed of racial inequity where the Jim Crow Laws impacted the lives of everyday people. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been campaigning against discrimination since 1909 and, in 1952, filed a lawsuit that would lead to a landmark court case: *Brown vs Board of Education*. In 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren of the Supreme Court ruled, 'in the field of public education the doctrine of *separate but equal* has no place,' as segregated schools are 'inherently unequal.'



NAACP protest march

Photo by Seattle Parks and Recreation (CC BY 2.0) - (Cropped)

This ruling was highly significant in finally challenging the institutionalised injustice and maltreatment of people of colour in the southern states of America and led to the desegregation of all schools and the ramping up of the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1955, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old student and member of the NAACP Youth Council, was arrested after refusing to give up her seat on a bus for a white woman. Her charges included 'disturbing the peace, breaking segregation laws, battery and assault of a police officer.' Martin Luther King was responsible, along with other community figures, for organising her bail and supporting her throughout the trial. Nine months later, Rosa Parks, Colvin's NAACP mentor and another Montgomery resident, also refused to move to the 'colored section' of the bus. Parks, being older, was deemed a more suitable figurehead for the Civil Rights Movement and her arrest led to the coordinated bus boycotts that lasted over a year.

## Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Spurred on by the impact of the economic bus boycotts, a group of ministers and leaders, that included King, formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957. Their motto, 'not one hair of one head of

### Economic Boycotts

Protestors demonstrate their power by refusing to give their money to a particular person, business or service.

It is estimated the Montgomery Bus Boycotts cost the city \$3,000 per day. That amounts to over a \$1 million, or about \$10.5 million in today's money!

one white person shall be harmed' was used to galvanise peaceful non-violent protests. As part of his involvement with the SCLC, King had the opportunity to travel to India where he learnt more about the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi - an activist, lawyer and politician in India - practised and encouraged the use of satyagraha in campaigning for India's independence from Britain. Satyagraha wasn't just about non-violent protest, it was a philosophy that encouraged protestors to see the power of truth and love, even in their oppressors. King was deeply moved by this, writing, 'my scepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform.'

### Threats, Violence and Intimidation

Publicly supporting the boycotts led to King becoming the figurehead for the Civil Rights Movement. However, it wasn't without its dangers. Throughout and following on from the boycotts, King and his family were subjected to numerous intimidations and attempts on his life, including a shot gun fired into his home, a burning cross left outside his house, a bomb scare at Fisk University where he was due to speak, and multiple attempted bombings of his home.

While signing copies of his book *Stride Toward Freedom* at Harlem department store Blumstein's, King was stabbed with a letter opener in 1958. He was rushed to hospital and given life-saving emergency surgery; the doctors there said the blade was so close to his aorta that he was 'a sneeze away from death'.

In 1963, the continued peaceful protests and economic boycotts were interrupted by the police's use of force, dogs and fire hoses. King and many of his supporters, including hundreds of school children, were arrested and jailed. Alone in solitary confinement, he wrote his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail wherein he reiterated his belief in direct action and non-violent protest, citing moments of civil

disobedience throughout history in support of his argument.

As well as the constant violence directed towards him, King was treated with hostility by the FBI. From 1955, King was on their watchlist and under constant surveillance. J. Edgar Hoover, the Director of the FBI, was particularly concerned that King was working with communists at a time when America was gripped by the Red Scare and McCarthyism, and so King's phone was tapped; his privacy violated. The FBI were unable to find any evidence of King's supposed communist associations and turned their approach to defamation. Their spying had proven fruitful in producing evidence of King's extra-marital affairs and following his *I Have a Dream Speech* the FBI were determined to quash him.

Hoping to intimidate him by threatening to expose the upstanding pastor's 'salacious' sex life, the FBI sent an anonymous letter to him in 1964. They refused to address him properly, saying 'your last name calls to mind only the type of King as King Henry VIII and his countless acts of adultery and immoral conduct lower than a beast.' Using repetition and direct address to attack King, the letter calls him 'a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that',

along with repeated use of the words “beast” and “abnormal”. However, the final paragraph is arguably the most shocking, with the anonymous writer calling upon him to commit suicide: ‘King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. You have just 34 days.’

**“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.”**

Unfortunately for the FBI, the societal attitudes of the 1960s differed to the gossip-driven tabloids of today and, even though the evidence was sent to the press in the hope the papers would publish the reputation-destroying accounts, there was no uptake. The press wouldn’t publish anything so scandalous. King stood his ground and went on to solidify his place in history.

### **Dreams, Prizes and Man of the Year**

How could a civil rights leader, campaigning for equality in a non-violent manner, drive the FBI to such desperate, bullying behaviour? On August 28 1963, 250,000 protestors marched

peacefully to Washington calling for equal rights, pay and housing. However, President Kennedy was concerned about the potential for the peaceful protest to turn violent. On standby were 4,000 army troops and 15,000 paratroopers. The protest however, was a huge success. With celebrity support, TV broadcasting and King’s iconic *I Have a Dream Speech*, it is considered a catalyst in driving legislation changes, namely the Voting Rights Act 1965 and the Fair Housing Act 1968, as well as encouraging changes to immigration reform, the war on poverty and Medicare and Medicaid. In 1964, King’s impact was reflected in Time magazine’s decision to feature him as the first African American *Man of the Year* as well as him being the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.



Photo by National Park Service ([CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)) - (Cropped)

### **WHAT WE DEMAND\***

Comprehensive and effective *civil rights legislation* from the present Congress – without compromise or filibuster – guarantee all Americans

- Access to all public accommodations
- Decent housing
- Adequate and integrated education
- The right to vote

Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.

*Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.*

Enforcement of the *Fourteenth Amendment* – reducing Congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.

A new *Executive Order* banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.

Authority for the Attorney General to institute *injunctive suits* when any constitutional right is violated.

A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers – Negro and white – on meaningful and dignified jobs of decent wages.

A national *Minimum Wage Act* that will give all Americans a decent standard of living. (Government surveys show that anything less than \$2.00 an hour fails to do this.)

A broadened *Fair Labor Standards Act* to include all areas of employment which are presently excluded.

A federal *Fair Employment Practices Act* barring discrimination by federal, state, and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies and trade unions.

\*Support of the March does not necessarily indicate endorsement of every demand listed. Some organizations have not had an opportunity to take an official position on all of the demands advocated here.

**The list of demands as printed in the March on Washington’s program.**

## Assassination, Death and Legacy

Families tuning in to the evening news on April 4 1968 were shocked by the tragic headline: **Martin Luther King Assassinated**. At just after 6pm, King had stepped onto a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Tennessee. He was there to lead a march protesting for the rights of the Memphis Sanitation Workers but, by 7:05pm, had been pronounced dead after being shot. An escaped fugitive, James Earl Ray, was arrested two months later at Heathrow Airport and was extradited back to the United States where he confessed to the murder of King. However, three days after his confession he recanted it, stating that he had entered a guilty plea to avoid the death sentence. His story was investigated and, in 1997, King's son met with him to explain that he and the King family believed Ray's innocence. Furthermore, in 1999, a friend of King's, William Pepper, represented the King family in a wrongful civil death trial. The jury found Ray had been part



### Did You Know?

Stevie Wonder's 1981 song *Happy Birthday* was written as part of a campaign for Martin Luther King's birthday to become a national holiday in the USA. In 1983 President Ronald Reagan approved the holiday.

of a conspiracy and set up to take the blame on behalf of the Mafia, local, state and federal government. Ray was also acquitted on a televised mock trial. Despite these findings, Ray spent the rest of his life behind bars, dying aged 70 in a maximum security prison.

King's death sparked huge civil unrest. Over 40 people died during rioting across America. King's two obituaries in the New York Times said 'We pledge ourselves anew to try even harder to bring about a world in which all men will truly be brothers' and 'A victim of white racism. May America repent.'



# Martin Luther King Jr Extraordinary Lives Vocabulary Sheet

What do the following words from the article mean? Can you figure out their meaning from the text or do you need to use a dictionary?

alma mater

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defamation

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discrimination

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formative

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inequity

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inherently

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namesake

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orator

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philosophy

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prospective

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spurred

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scepticism

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violated

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# Martin Luther King Jr Extraordinary Lives

## Vocabulary Sheet - Answers

alma mater **The school, college or university that one formerly attended**

defamation **The action of damaging of someone's good reputation**

discrimination **To treat someone differently on the grounds of a superficial characteristic such as race or gender**

formative **Having a significant influence on a person's development**

inequity **Lack of fairness or justice**

inherently **Exists as a natural or basic part of someone or something**

namesake **Someone or something with whom a name is shared**

orator **Public speaker, especially one who is particularly skilled in the art of rhetoric**

philosophy **Way of thinking or set of values**

prospective **Expected in the future**

spurred **Given incentive or encouragement**

scepticism **Doubt; unwillingness to believe**

violated **Intruded upon**



# Martin Luther King Jr Extraordinary Lives Comprehension Questions

1. What name was Martin Luther King given when he was born?

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2. Why did his father change both of their names?

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3. What childhood memory had a lasting impact on King?

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4. How did King's father inspire him?

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5. Who else did King find inspiring? Why?

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6. What surprised King about living in the integrated north of the USA?

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7. Which landmark court case took place in 1954?

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8. What was Claudette Colvin arrested for in 1955?

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9. What was the motto of the SCLC?

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10. What were the dangers of being a civil rights figurehead?

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11. Why is the March on Washington considered to be so important?

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12. What lasting impact do you think Martin Luther King has?

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13. How do you think King would perceive the Black Lives Matter movement?

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# Martin Luther King Jr Extraordinary Lives

## Comprehension Question Answers

1. What name was Martin Luther King given when he was born?

**Michael**

2. Why did his father change both of their names?

**He was inspired by learning about Protestant theologian Martin Luther during a visit to Germany.**

3. What childhood memory had a lasting impact on King?

**Being told that he could no longer play with a white friend.**

4. How did King's father inspire him?

**Any of the following: he was a pastor who denounced segregation and led civil rights marches; educated King about the history of slavery; encouraged his son to practise a non-violent philosophy.**

5. Who else did King find inspiring? Why?

**Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of satyagraha, which also promoted non-violence.**

6. What surprised King about living in the integrated north of the USA?

**King was surprised at the freedom Black people experienced where they could occupy the same spaces as whites.**

7. Which landmark court case took place in 1954?

**Brown vs Board of Education.**

8. What was Claudette Colvin arrested for in 1955?

**Answers could include: refusing to give up her seat; disturbing the peace; breaking segregation laws; battery; assault of a police officer.**

9. What was the motto of the SCLC?

**Not one hair of one head of one white person shall be harmed.**

10. What were the dangers of being a civil rights figurehead?

**Answers could include: threats, violence, intimidation, bombings, shootings, stabbing, a burning cross outside of King's home, arrests, surveillance.**

11. Why is the March on Washington considered to be so important?

**Answers could include: it was a successful peaceful process that was broadcast to millions around the world; it demonstrated the inequality of life in the USA and is considered to have been a catalyst in driving legal changes, e.g. the Voting Rights Act 1965 and the Fair Housing Act 1968, changes to immigration reform, the war on poverty and Medicare and Medicaid.**

12. What lasting impact do you think Martin Luther King has?

**Answers are subjective; please credit any valid and well argued opinion.**

13. How do you think King would perceive the Black Lives Matter movement?

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**Letter from Birmingham Jail.**

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