Martin Luther King in the Standards

§113.3. Social Studies, Grade 1

(2) History. The student understands the origins of customs, holidays, and celebrations. The student is expected to:
(A) describe the origins of selected customs, holidays, and celebrations of the community, state, and nation such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Independence Day, and Veterans' Day;

§113.7. Social Studies, Grade 5

(5) History. The student understands important issues, events, and individuals of the 20th century in the United States. The student is expected to: (B) identify the accomplishments of notable individuals such as Carrie Chapman Catt, Dwight Eisenhower, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Colin Powell, and Franklin D. Roosevelt who have made contributions to society in the areas of civil rights, women's rights, military actions, and politics.

§113.32. United States History Studies Since Reconstruction.

(2) To support the teaching of the essential knowledge and skills, the use of a variety of rich primary and secondary source material such as biographies and autobiographies; landmark cases of the U.S. Supreme Court; novels; speeches, letters, and diaries; and poetry, songs, and artworks is encouraged. Selections may include a biography of Dwight Eisenhower, Upton Sinclair's The Jungle, and Martin Luther King’s letter from the Birmingham City Jail. Motivating resources are also available from museums, historical sites, presidential libraries, and local and state preservation societies.

(7) History. The student understands the impact of the American civil rights movement. The student is expected to:
(B) identify significant leaders of the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr..

National Standards, US 5-12, Standard 4A

The student understands the “Second Reconstruction” and its advancement of civil rights movement. Analyze the leadership and ideology of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in the civil rights movement and evaluate their legacies. [Assess the importance of the individual in history]
Biographical Summary

Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968), the youngest person to ever be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, is revered around the world for his leadership in the American Civil Rights Movement. He is considered the leader of the most successful decade of this movement, from 1957 to 1968, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the massive anti-discrimination protest in Birmingham Alabama, the Selma-to-Montgomery Freedom March, and his rallying call to support the sanitation workers strike, where he was assassinated in 1968. He is remembered alongside the great human rights activists of the world, including India’s Mahatma Gandhi. He is most widely renowned for his famous speech, “I have a Dream,” which he delivered as the keynote speaker during the March on Washington, in 1963. Although there are those who are invested in discrediting him with charges of academic plagiarism and marital infidelity today, his moving speeches, writings, and life-accomplishments continue to be studied as sources of inspiration for universal ideals of world peace, human rights, and democracy.

Martin Luther King was born in Atlanta Georgia. He was the son of the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. and Alberta Williams King. Both his father and grandfather served as pastors of Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King acted as co-pastor alongside his father in the early 1960s. King wrote about the great influence his father had on him as an activist for social justice, in an essay titled “An Autobiography of Religious Development”. Recent scholarship illustrates that the teachings and traditions of the black Baptist church were a greater influence on his life and work than the teachings of Gandhi, as portrayed by mass culture.

King Jr. attended Atlanta University Laboratory School and Booker T. Washington High School, where he graduated at the age of fifteen. He received a degree in sociology from Morehouse College in 1948, and then entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania to pursue a degree in ministry. His seminary studies there are considered to be the turning point from a mediocre to serious student. It is known that he was greatly influenced at this point in his life by the works of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whom wrote and studied the nature of man’s sinfulness, and Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance. He received a bachelor degree in Divinity in 1951. That same year in the fall, King enrolled at Boston University to pursue a doctorate degree in Theology and met his wife-to-be, Coretta Scott. King married Scott in 1953 and received his PhD in 1955. They gave birth to four children together.

By 1954, King was the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama, and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which is considered the most influential organization for the advocacy of African Americans at that time. As such, King was called on to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955 the year of Rosa Park’s arrest for refusing to comply with Montgomery Public Transportation’s system of segregation and the subsequent bus boycott. The bus boycott lasted 382 days, in which time King arose as a national leader of one of the first
successful African American non-violent protests. In December of 1956, the United States Supreme Court passed the landmark ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled against segregation.

The success of the bus boycott led King to draw a group of Southern ministers to meet at the Negro Leaders Conference on Nonviolent Integration in 1957. The timing allowed King to capitalize on the momentum gained from the success of the boycott. The conference was attended by about sixty ministers who divulged a manifesto to protest white treatment of blacks and encouraged blacks to seek social justice through non-violent means. This conference later became known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which functioned as an umbrella organization that aimed to coordinate chapters and local groups affiliated with the cause of racial discrimination, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the NAACP.

In 1959 King visited India, where it is popularly known that he became more influenced by the philosophy of Gandhian nonviolence. Upon his return from India, King moved to Atlanta Georgia and acted as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist church with his father Martin Luther King Sr. and became involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This was a student group led by Ella Baker that carried out direct-action, nonviolent protests against segregation of public libraries, swimming pools, parks, and lunch counters. In 1960 King was arrested for his participation in one of SNCC’s lunch counter sit-ins. After his arrest, King was sentenced to prison. His sentence garnered national media attention, and resulted in John F. Kennedy’s intervention on behalf of King, which led to his release from prison. In 1963 King led the March on Washington where he delivered his world-renowned speech, “I Have a Dream.” That same year *Time* magazine named King “Man of the Year.” The following year, King was awarded The Nobel Peace Prize and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed.

By 1965, King began to face criticism for his nonviolent approaches by civil rights groups such as the SNCC, now led by Stokely Carmichael, and other vocal leaders who challenged King’s leadership with suggestions for more radical and militant approaches for the movement. The 1965 March for Voting Rights in Selma Alabama proved to be a pinnacle event that furthered the divide between King and his nonviolent approach and African Americans who countered with the more aggressive demands of the black power movement. In Selma, King led a group of 400 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. When the marchers were confronted by state troopers on the bridge, King led the marchers into prayer rather than confrontation.

The more radicalized civil right activists such as Malcolm X chided King for his passive resistance. The black nationalism of the black power movement called for a stronger approach. King began a rapid decline of influence within this part of the movement. At the same time, he began to lose favor with the national elites in Washington D.C. Moreover, he became the target of an insidious FBI surveillance project, in which King’s marital infidelities, and ties to people associated with the communist Party were exploited, in an attempt to discredit King and force him to recede as the frontrunner of the movement.
From 1965 to 1968, King turned his attention to the struggles of the poor and downtrodden, and his anti-Vietnam War stance, which both furthered his alienation, this time from liberal democrat supporters. In 1968 King was invited to Memphis Tennessee to represent a strike by the sanitation workers there. He was shot as he stood on the balcony of his hotel. Martin Luther King Jr. became a national icon after his death. He is remembered as a one-man movement that changed America for the better, and is a symbol of the progressive development of American democracy.

Such is the narrative commonly found in the biographical accounts of Martin Luther King Jr.’s life. Narratives, such as the one re-counted here are described as restrictive, confining, over-simplistic, and sometimes even untrue. Recent scholarship invites the student to re-examine the history of the civil rights movement, and Martin Luther’s role in it.
Interpretations Over Time

Martin Luther King Day is celebrated in the spirit of hard-won advances in the American promise of equality, justice, and democracy. In this cultural narrative, Martin Luther King is mythologized as the central figure of the Civil Rights movement. A movement traditionally described as one of whites and blacks working together in the south which brought an end to racial segregation with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and then was destroyed by white backlash and the black power movement of the north. Scholars such as Jeanne Theoharis of Brooklyn College, argue that this prolific cultural misinterpretation, with King as its figurehead, distorts the significance of American racism and minimizes the persistence, solidarity, organizational abilities, political and civic participation of the people that made this movement.1 The changes in the historiography of the civil rights movement have led to changes in the historiography of Martin Luther King.

Steven F. Lawson in his article titled “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” explains that “a second generation of scholars” writing about the civil rights movement in the late 1970s and 1980s, shifted the focus from national leaders of the movement (such as martin Luther King and leaders in Washington D.C.), to a focus on the transnationalism of the grass-roots organizations and the interactions between national and local, and social and political dimensions within the movement.2 This shift in focus has manifested recent historical arguments that the African American fight for civil rights is more accurately a fight for freedom that begun during Reconstruction and persists today. It is described as more than a series of legal battles associated with King’s tenure in the movement and more of an attempt to restructure the power base and racial hierarchies of American society. It de-bunks the happy-ever-after ending that is portrayed as the aftermath of Martin Luther King’s death and subsequent trajectory into American mythology.

Michael O’Brien in his article, “Old Myths/New Insights: History and Dr. King,” observes that both Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement have largely been ignored by Conservatives, subsequently recent scholarship is conducted almost exclusively from the leftist perspective. As such, the “King scholars” continue King’s war against conservatism with an enduring emphasis on institutional discrimination and racism evidenced by the gaps between the haves and the have-nots, in education, employment, housing, and virtually every area used to measure standards of access and power in America. David Garrow, the leading King scholar today, observes that King “asked a hypocritical country to be true to its professed ideals...of justice and equality,” and yet, adds Marshal Frady, a journalist and author who contributes to the recent King scholarship, “America is still two countries...separate and unequal.”3

The eminent King scholars include David Garrow, whom has written several books about King and the civil rights movement, Clayborne Carson, who is appointed to act as the director and senior editor, of the King Papers project, which will draw King’s papers together into twelve volumes over the next fifteen years, James A. Cone, a theologian whom studies King’s intellectual development, Stephen Oates and Taylor Branch, both biographers, and Marshall Frady.

O’Brien explains that these scholars have changed our understanding of King in four ways. One interpretation argues that the primary influence on King’s work came from his work as a black Baptist preacher, and that Gandhian nonviolence was a minimal influence at best, albeit the most widely acknowledged explanation for King’s nonviolent approach. Another interpretation brings light to dimensions of King’s life that are in opposition to his sterling moral reputation. A third interpretation explores the radical and left-leaning aspects of the last years of his life, and the fourth is an emphasis on the ways that this recent scholarship illuminates “King’s personality, character, and principles [which studies], reconfirm his status as a major American hero.”

Ironically, it is the work of the King scholars, that has illuminated details of King's life that suggest that he plagiarized, committed adultery, designed shrewd calculating methods of protest that made the protesters vulnerable to police brutality in order to attract the media to the cause, and that some of his close advisors were tied to the communist party. Scholars who discovered, analyzed, and published these findings, emphasize that these revelations are the result of a deeper examination of the complexities of the movement than the one referred to in the cultural myth. They argue that careful analyses of the personal obstacles King faced, such as sabotage, illegal surveillance, and insidious threats by the FBI, other national elites in Washington, and adversaries both black and white, who wished to destroy the movement by destroying King, illuminate the profundity of goodness, strength, and courage King possessed.

One of the new debates about King’s “political sagacity” involves King's alleged shrewd tactic to bait Sheriff Jim Clark at the Selma March knowing that Clark would react with predictable racist actions, remarks, and violence. Garrow suggests that King's language of nonviolent principles and love and redemption for whites, functioned as a well-designed foil for the predictable violence that whites in the south would respond with, which is how he drew the media to publicize the struggle. Garrow argues that by the time of the Selma Marches, King had learned from the violent experiences in Birmingham Alabama, that a violent and even lethal clash would generate the kind of media coverage that could impel congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. Garrow observes that King’s strategy was exposed when it failed to produce the expected violent clash in Albany Georgia in 1961-1962. Reportedly, Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett, made the decision to treat King's non-violent protesters with a non-violent police response. According to Garrow, the media could find nothing interesting to report on here, and King's strategy became somewhat transparent. Garrow's conclusions have been criticized by Stephen Oates and others for under-playing King’s adherence to nonviolence ideology.

In Garrow’s book titled, *The FBI and Martin Luther King* (1981), he reveals the three stages of FBI surveillance of King and his associates. In 1962-1963 the focus was King's communist associates. In 1963 to 1964, after King's extramarital affairs were discovered, the FBI used the information to discredit him, break him, and as a possible way to get him to commit suicide. From 1965 to 1968, the FBI focused on King's anti-Vietnam War stance and his Poor People's Campaign. Although King's aides won a lawsuit that placed a seal on the FBI surveillance documents until the year 2027, Garrow was able to secure transcripts of extensive phone calls that King had with other people such as Stanley Levison, a known associate of the Communist Party. Although it is not likely that King sympathized with the Communist Party, it is certain that he maintained an important relationship with Levison and Jack O'Dell, also affiliated with the Communist Party. Critics argue that King's relationship with these two was very unwise as it could have had a negative impact on the support King enjoyed from the Kennedy Administration.⁵

The FBI began surveillance of King's extra-marital affairs in January of 1964 after they received secretly recorded sexual encounters of King and his SCLC colleagues with women in the Willard Hotel in Washington D.C. In November of 1964, the FBI sent a recording of some of these sexual affairs to King with a letter advising him to commit suicide before his “filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation.”⁶ There has been much speculation about the root causes of King's sexual affairs. Some argue that the enormity of his responsibility in the movement and the intensity with which he pursued his work, caused King to turn to these exploits as a form of escape. Others argue that his long episodes away from home left him lonely. Scholars and the public, both admirers and critics of King, have mostly been reluctant to focus on this topic in King's life. Indeed, scholars such as Garrow and Oates have not used any of the information on King's affairs that have leaked out illegally and unofficially, preferring not to use information that was received illegally. Moreover, King scholars wholly reject the argument that King's extramarital affairs make him less worthy of honor. There are those who do use this to discredit King, especially in the light of his fame as a preacher of the gospel.

According to most accounts, King’s radical stage began soon after he won the Nobel Peace prize in 1964, and is reflected in the last major campaign of his life, the Poor People’s Campaign. In this effort, King attempted to organize Blacks, Appalachian Whites, Puerto Ricans, Indians, and Chicanos. The goals of the campaign were to secure a “guaranteed income” for destitute people and to explore the nationalization of public industry and services. He also began to speak out against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.⁷ By this time, King had fallen out of favor with the national elite, the Black power Movement of the North was hounded incessantly by the FBI and was experiencing marital problems. It is an examination of King’s responses, decisions, and words, during this most trying stage of his life as a leader that scholars argue demonstrate the true American hero that Martin Luther King was.

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Recommendations for Teachers

Lesson Plans:

Lesson Plans & Activities (Mr. Donn's History Lesson Plans & Units)

(PBS) PreK-12

Websites

About.com: African-American History
http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/martinlutherking/a/bio_mlk.htm

Nobelprize.org

The Seattle Times: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement
http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/special/mlk/king/biography.html

Additional Resources:

Armstrong, Buckner, Susan Halt Edwards, Houston Bryan Roberson, Rhonda y. Williams, eds.,
Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song. New York:
Routledge, 2002.

This book is a collaborative of work by professors who share course and lesson
descriptions, strategies, resources, and course schedules, for teaching the civil rights
movement, in ways that “deepen the conventional understandings of the civil rights
movement.” Each part is imbued with insightful essays, authored by the contributor,
that explain angles, and approaches used in the design of their course and how these
are influenced by changes in historiography of this movement.
Select Annotated Bibliography

Secondary Sources


“Forty years after Martin Luther King Jr.'s epic speech, and nearly fifty years since the Montgomery Bus Boycott, seven leading religious and theological voices from the African American and multi-cultural community assess the past impact and present import of King's bold, yet in many respects unfulfilled, vision.”

Article- or Chapter-length Biographical Sketches


The introduction offers nine pages of valuable considerations and questions in the most recent historiographical contexts of both Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement: Did biography inflate the role of Martin Luther King in the movement?, Are the socio-political structures overshadowed by the “King-centric” focus? Did King make the movement, or did the movement make King, as Ella Baker argued?

Juvenile Biographies


Juvenile Literature: Beautifully illustrated. Ties the the plight of a Jewish boy that immigrated to the U.S. to escape the persecution in Nazi Germany to the Freedom March in Selma.


“A light introduction to civil rights explains how Martin Luther King Jr. Followed his dream of freedom for all races.”


“Pictures and easy-to-read text introduce the life of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”
About the Author

Isabel Mora teaches dual-credit U.S. History at the Early College High School in the Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso, Texas. She has taught secondary social studies for eleven years, including U.S. History, World History, World Geography, Government, and Economics. She has taught World Geography and World History in Spanish as part of the YISD Dual Language program. She is currently completing an M.A. in history at University of Texas at El Paso. She has two teenage daughters, Natasha and Elizabeth Aguirre, 17 and 14 years old.