

ENGLISH 101 ASSIGNMENT

This essay is designed to encourage the students to explore the essays they've read and consider the implications of the ideas (at the time they were each written and implications for today as well). This is a four-part assignment. First, there is group work they do before we discuss the essays; then we have the actual essay discussion; third, we do group work after the essay discussion; and finally, the students do the writing assignment itself. The first round of group work was designed to be fun—to loosen the students up for discussion—and NOT related *directly* to the content of the essays (though the theme certainly is). This work is in conjunction with “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (Martin Luther King) and “Civil Disobedience” (Henry David Thoreau). The assignment also asks them to consider information from several other essays they've read throughout the semester (Plato's “Allegory of the Cave,” Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Arthur Koestler's “The Yogi and the Commissar,” and Nietzsche's “The Apollonian and Dionysian”).

PART I: PRE-ESSAY GROUP WORK

Group 1: What would you be willing to go to jail for? For how long? What law would you be willing to pay a fine for if you don't obey? The “authorities” are now regulating music listening. If you want to listen to music, they have it all picked out for you. Your choices are barbershop quartet music, children's nursery rhymes (two—played over and over), or a new kind of music that consists of lengthy recordings of cats in heat, cats coughing up hairballs, and dogs coughing up something inedible. Will you listen to the music, live in silence and feel sorry for yourself and others who wish they had more music choices, or listen to whatever you like and risk a fine or jail time?

Group 2: What would you be willing to go to jail for? For how long? What law would you be willing to pay a fine for if you don't obey? Men, you're being made to wear fussy, frilly pink tutus on *all* dates before you get married; ladies, you're being made to wear fake noses & moustaches on *all* dates before you get married. It's the LAW. Will you obey the law? Quit dating? Go to jail?

Group 3: What would you be willing to go to jail for? For how long? What law would you be willing to pay a fine for if you don't obey? You will go to jail if you refuse, at airport security, to go through the karaoke test—in order to board the plane, you must sing karaoke to cheesy songs from the 1970s. Your refusal to sing is tantamount to admitting you have dark motives. Will you sing or go to jail?

Group 4: What would you be willing to go to jail for? For how long? What law would you be willing to pay a fine for if you don't obey? It's the year 2050. At this time, EVERYONE has to be entertaining; if someone is NOT entertaining, he or she must stay home. Therefore, the “authorities” say that in order to go to the beach, to a restaurant, or even to the doctor's office, one must have a routine: a stand-up comedy piece, a choreographed dance piece, a dramatic rendition of a famous scene from reality TV, etc. Will you oblige the authorities and come up with something every time you leave your house, stay home a lot, or go to the beach “unprepared” and face jail time?

PART II: ESSAY DISCUSSION OF KING & THOREAU

We discuss the works as a whole and then examine specific passages to consider the intent of the author and the implications of the passages.

PART III: POST-ESSAY DISCUSSION GROUP WORK

Discuss the following questions in your group. Prepare a 15-minute presentation for class tomorrow. Be sure to explore all questions. Please offer your PERSONAL response to these issues:

GROUP 1: FRICTION IN SOCIETY: King cites “tension” in paragraph 10 and elsewhere as a beneficial force. Do you agree? What kind of tension does he mean? Is King an extremist? Is Thoreau an extremist? Do we need extremists? If so, why?

How is injustice “part of the necessary friction of the machine of government” (para. 18, Thoreau)? King discusses tension (paragraph 10); compare this to the discomfort experienced by Socrates’ students, as Plato explains in “Allegory of the Cave.”

GROUP 2: UNJUST LAWS: Martin Luther King ponders the difference between a just law and an unjust law (paragraph 16) and describes an unjust law as a “code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself” (para. 17). Explain King’s ideas on this and add some of your own. Devise one or two other definitions of an unjust law. What unjust laws currently on the books do you disagree with? What would you be willing to do to see that they’re rectified?

King cites St. Augustine end of paragraph 15: “An unjust law is no law at all.” Thoreau asks the following question: “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” (para. 16). Thoreau reminds us that the law has been created by the majority and to disobey would put him in a minority—a “wise minority.” Why should the wise minority have the right to disobey laws created by the majority?

GROUP 3: CONSCIENCE: Thoreau insists, “Law never made men a whit more just” (para. 4) and introduces the concept of conscience as a monitor of law and government. How can “conscience” help create justice? Consider what both Thoreau & civil rights activists did, and think about examples today (whistle-blowers in large companies, for instance). Both King (esp. paragraph 20) and Thoreau deal with willingness to face consequences, and it does seem to come down to conscience vs. consequences when people are deciding on the “right thing” to do. In *Walden*, Thoreau notes that “civilization’s comforts sometimes rob a person of independence, integrity, and even conscience.” Discuss ways that this has manifested in society. In this question, you may also want to consider Plato’s idea of leaving the cave for a “higher” understanding of justice and returning to share with those “unenlightened” souls.

GROUP 4: CONSCIENCE / ENDS & MEANS: In paragraph 43, King says, “I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.” What exactly does he mean by this? Define the ends he seeks and the means he approves. Do you agree with him on this point? Contrast this view with that of Machiavelli. Which view seems more reasonable to you? Consider also the social spectrum in Arthur Koestler’s “The Yogi and the Commissar” regarding differences between the importance of ends vs. means.

King quotes Tillich: “Sin is separation” from others (paragraph 16)—compare this idea to the “us/them” dichotomy of the Koestler’s yogi and commissar and Nietzsche’s Apollonian & Dionysian forces. In contemplating separation and/or connectedness, consider the following quote in your answer:

First they came for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up, because I wasn’t a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up, because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me.
Rev. Martin Niemoller, 1945)

After discussing the issues and presenting their ideas to the class (and the group is free to call on other class members as well), the class writes the following paper:

PART IV: THE ESSAY

Write a five-paragraph essay (or longer) to explain three reasons that “disobeying” the law may be the “right” thing to do. Please bring King and Thoreau into the conversation (whether you agree or disagree with what King and Thoreau say), but offer your own personal reflections (without using first person). In your paper, whether part of the body or in your introduction or conclusion, consider at least two of the issues you discussed in your groups:

- ☞ tension as a “beneficial” force and possibly even “necessary friction of the machine of government” (and whether those who create tension are extremists),
- ☞ the difference between just and unjust laws,
- ☞ the rightness of the minority and following one’s conscience vs. blindly obeying the law,
- ☞ separation from or connectedness with others in our society, and
- ☞ how “civilization’s comforts sometimes rob a person of independence, integrity, and even conscience.”

Write a minimum of 850 words, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides. Be sure to be mindful of what we’ve covered this semester:

- ☞ ease in and out of your argument with a compelling introduction and a conclusion that harkens back to that introduction
- ☞ write a clear thesis stating your argument and laying out the major points (remember that you’re a lawyer arguing a case!)
- ☞ offer clearly stated topic sentences
- ☞ provide specific details, including quotes and paraphrases from the essays you’re discussing
- ☞ be mindful of clear and precise wording
- ☞ proofread for irrelevant details, mechanics errors, and stylistic awkwardness
- ☞ use direct and powerful vocabulary and sentence variety ~ you’re an artist as well as a lawyer!