

# Reader's Theater: Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Characters

Narrator

Amanda (student)

Chris (student)

Vanessa (student)

Aaron (student)

Lamar (student)

Blythe (student)

Ms. Moore (teacher)



**Narrator:** The setting is a fifth grade classroom. Students are learning about Martin Luther King, Jr. and are tasked with working in pairs to give a presentation about his life and legacy.

**Ms. Moore:** Good morning everyone! As you all know, MLK Day is coming up, and remind me what the name of our school is?

**All students** (shouting): Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School!

**Ms. Moore:** Exactly. And since our school is named after this important American figure, we have a special project at hand! Our fifth grade class has been asked to give a presentation to the whole school about who he was. I'll explain the whole project in a minute. For now, let's do a brain dump about him and see what we already know. Tell me anything and everything you know about him! Raise your hand, please. (pulls out a marker and a blank piece of chart paper)

**Aaron:** (raises hand and Ms. Moore calls on him) He was an important black leader who fought for their rights.

**Ms. Moore:** (takes notes on the chart paper) That's correct. What else?

**Vanessa:** He was a preacher and he gave a speech about a dream.

**Ms. Moore:** Ah yes, the famous "I Have a Dream" speech from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Let's add that to the brain dump list.

**Lamar:** I know that black and white kids couldn't go to the same school and MLK helped change that.

**Blythe:** Last year, I read a book about him and the detail that stuck with me most was that he was shot and killed.

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**Amanda:** Whoa, I had no idea. I mean, I knew he's dead but didn't know how. What I want to add to the chart is that he believed in nonviolent protest but even so, I think he got arrested once. I don't remember what for though.

**Ms. Moore:** Well, we will find out soon enough. Can anyone tell me when and where all of this happened?  
(Chris' hands shoots up and Ms. Moore calls on him)

**Chris:** It was called the Civil Rights movement and I believe it happened in southern states, like in Georgia and Alabama, sometime in the sixties, right?

**Ms. Moore:** (jotting down the information on the chart paper) You got that right, in the fifties and sixties! This is great. You all seem to know bits and pieces about Martin Luther King, Jr. and why he is honored in our country. To prepare for our class presentation to the school, you will work with a partner and do research on a certain part of MLK's life. I've paired you up and assigned you a time period. Amanda and Chris will work on his childhood and family. Vanessa and Aaron, you will look into his education. And Lamar and Blythe, you two will focus on his years as an activist and leader. Your goal is to find important details that most students in our school might not know about him. Use these books and tablets as your resources. For now, just take notes of important facts in your journals. Later on we will review them to work on your final presentation. Each pair has an assignment sheet with the time period and some questions to guide you. You'll have a few class periods to work on your research and prepare your presentation. Any questions? (The students shake their heads)

**Narrator:** All the students start to pull out their journals and turn towards their partners. They get started working on tablets and flipping through the books laid out on the tables. Meanwhile, Ms. Moore walks around the classroom checking in with groups of students to see if they need guidance.

**Amanda:** (looking at a tablet) Our focus is on his family and early childhood. I found on this site that he was born in Atlanta, Georgia to a schoolteacher mom and a preacher dad on January 15, 1929. Wow, that was a long time ago!

**Chris:** Oh, yeah we definitely want to write that down. That will be our first fact. I found that he was born as Michael King, Jr., same as his dad, but after a family trip to Germany in 1934, his dad changed his name and added Martin Luther as a tribute to the Protestant leader.

**Amanda:** Huh, that is kind of weird. Being born with one name and then having your parents change it. I wouldn't want that!

**Chris:** I think that's an interesting fact to add. I also just read that he had an older sister, Willie, and a younger brother, Alfred. They had a middle class upbringing and a solid education. Their mom taught them to play the piano when they were kids. Do you think that people might not know about these facts?

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**Amanda:** Yeah, I bet you most people don't know these. I'll add them. Whoa, here it says that when Martin was little, once he started school, his white friends' parents didn't let him play with them anymore because they thought it best to keep the children segregated, or separated by race. Can you imagine being forced to go to a different school because of the color of your skin?

**Chris:** That's crazy. I think that's a fact that is really important to share in our presentation, cause it probably made him want to change the way things were.

**Vanessa:** (while pouring over a book) OK, I'm reading about how many degrees he got. He basically studied to the highest level, and got a PhD. Wow! Apparently, he was super smart.

**Aaron:** It makes sense. I think you have to be really intelligent to lead people the way he did, don't you think? This site shares that he skipped the ninth and eleventh grades at Booker T. Washington High School and entered Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1944 at the age of fifteen.

**Vanessa:** I think most people start college around eighteen.

**Aaron:** Well that's more proof that he was very smart! By skipping grades, he was way ahead of the game.

**Vanessa:** Funny enough, this book claims that he was an unmotivated student during his first two years of college, but it was a Bible class that he took his junior year that helped him better connect with his religious roots. This class encouraged his path to becoming a minister, like his dad. Do you think we should add this info?

**Aaron:** I'm not sure. Let me ask Ms. Moore. (raises his hand)

**Ms. Moore:** (walks over to Aaron) Yes, do you have a question?

**Aaron:** We want to know if this part about him being an unmotivated student in college and then one class changing him, is an important fact to share or not?

**Ms. Moore:** Well, do you think this is part of his life that contributed to him being a great leader and activist for the civil rights movement?

**Vanessa and Aaron:** (simultaneously) Yes!

**Ms. Moore:** There's your answer. Any fact that you find curious or interesting, and that will help people have a more complete understanding of who MLK was, is one you want to include in your presentation.

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**Aaron:** Thanks Ms. Moore! (turns to Vanessa) Let's also add that after he got his Bachelor's degree, and that he went to seminary school to get his ministry degree so that he could be a preacher in a church, it says here. And then he went on to get a PhD from Boston University. He got his doctorate degree in Theology, which is the study of religion.

**Vanessa:** He sure did a lot of studying! I think that all those years of education helped him become the leader he was in the fight for equal rights. We should add all these details to our notes.

**Aaron:** Agreed. (starts to take notes in his journal)

**Lamar:** Ok, I've found some important information about one of the first actions he took as a civil rights activist. He helped organize the boycott of the Montgomery public transportation system after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the bus to a white person. The boycott lasted for over a year, and during that time, MLK's house was bombed and he was also arrested. But none of those events made him give up.

**Blythe:** Wow... That's amazing. And, I'm reading about the fact that the 1955 Montgomery boycott is what made him famous as a spokesman for the civil rights movement. The boycott was successful in bringing about a law that desegregated public transportation there. I'm going to write all these facts down. I think everyone should know about his role in the boycott.

**Lamar:** Awesome. What other information should we add about his role as an activist? Hmm, this site says that after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he went on to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with sixty other black ministers. The purpose was to peacefully protest for civil rights, but also hold meetings to inform and educate about the power of voting, and to register African American voters.

**Blythe:** Oh, I didn't know about the voting rights. So black people couldn't vote then?

**Lamar:** Of course not! Things were really different back then...

**Blythe:** I can see that now. This is significant too: In February of 1960, he met with students from Greensboro, North Carolina who had begun the "sit-in" movement. That's when African Americans would sit in a place where they weren't technically allowed to be, like a "white only" restaurant" in protest of the racism they faced. MLK wanted to encourage them to continue their nonviolent demonstrations at the lunch counters in city stores in order to protest their right to eat anywhere whites could eat.

**Lamar:** That's interesting. I had heard of the term "sit-in" before but I didn't really understand what it meant. Now I know. We should totally add that to our list of important facts. I think we need to include how he was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, the peaceful leader from India who fought against British colonial rule. I'm reading here that he went to India and met Gandhi and was inspired by his commitment to making change through nonviolent protest. That's how he continued to fight

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for equal rights for African Americans back home.

**Blythe:** I feel like all I knew about MLK from previous years of books and videos is that he gave the famous "I Have a Dream" speech but I'm discovering all the work he did before he gave that speech. I mean, I'm sure the speech is important to mention in our presentation, but I'm glad to share all the other things he did.

**Ms. Moore:** Students, we are almost done with our first research session. Remember that you'll have more time to collect facts and information tomorrow as well. For now, take some time to review your notes and talk about what facts you've gathered so far. When I was walking around the class, I heard some terrific discussions about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Keep up the excellent work.

**Blythe:** I feel like we have way more information to add to our part of the presentation. I'm glad we have tomorrow too.

**Lamar:** Yeah, me too. I'm excited to share all that we discover with the younger kids in school.

**Amanda:** Our notes are a mess! Let's organize them a bit into clearer sentences.

**Aaron:** I hope the younger grades appreciate all the effort we are putting into it!

**Chris:** Oooh, I hope we can add some images or our own artwork to the presentation. It'll make it more interesting.

**Vanessa:** Let's check with Ms. Moore.

**THE END**

## Reflection Questions:

1. If you were to choose one part of MLK Jr.'s life to research, as the students in the readers' theater piece did, which would you choose and why?

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2. What two facts about MLK Jr.'s life were surprising or especially interesting to you and why? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.

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