

17

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X Talk It Out

Overview

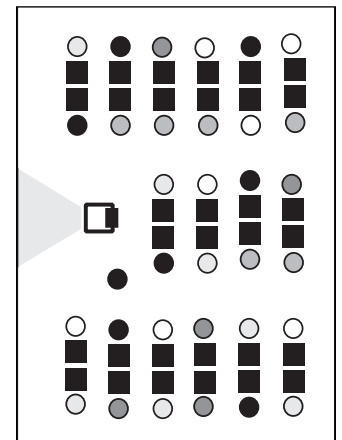
This Writing for Understanding activity allows students to learn about and write a fictional dialogue reflecting the differing viewpoints of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X on the methods African Americans should use to achieve equal rights. Students study written information about either Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X and then compare the backgrounds and views of the two men. Students then use what they have learned to assume the roles of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and debate methods for achieving African American equality. Afterward, students write a dialogue between the two men to reveal their differing viewpoints.

Procedures at a Glance

- Before class, decide how you will divide students into mixed-ability pairs. Use the diagram at right to determine where they should sit.
- In class, tell students that they will write a dialogue reflecting the differing viewpoints of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X on the methods African Americans should use to achieve equal rights.
- Divide the class into two groups—one representing each man. Explain that pairs will become “experts” on either Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X. Direct students to move into their correct places.
- Give pairs a copy of the appropriate Student Handout 17A. Have them read the information and discuss the “stop and discuss” questions.
- Next, place each pair from the King group with a pair from the Malcolm X group. Give each student a copy of Student Handout 17B to complete.
- Have students assume the roles of King and Malcolm X. Use the prompts on Information Master 17A to guide them through a debate on the methods African Americans should use to achieve equal rights.
- Pass out Student Handout 17C, review the guidelines, and have students begin writing their dialogues. Remind students to use in their dialogues issues raised in their discussions, information from Student Handout 17A, and notes from their Venn diagrams on Student Handout 17B.
- Give students feedback and allow them to complete final drafts.

Materials

- Transparency 17A
- Student Handouts 17A–17C
- Information Master 17A



Procedures in Detail

- 1 Before class, decide how you will divide students into mixed-ability pairs. Use the diagram found below the Materials List to determine where students should sit.
- 2 In class, tell students that in this activity they will write a dialogue reflecting the differing viewpoints of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X on the methods African Americans should use to achieve equal rights.
- 3 Divide the class into two groups—one representing each man—and explain that pairs will read information about and become “experts” on either King or Malcolm X. Direct students to move into their places.
- 4 Give pairs in each group a copy of the corresponding *Student Handout 17A: Background Information on [leader]*. Have pairs carefully read the information on Student Handout 17A and discuss the “stop and discuss” questions.
- 5 Next, place each pair from the King group with a pair from the Malcolm X group so that students are now seated in groups of four. Give each student a copy of *Student Handout 17B: Venn Diagram of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X*. Have groups discuss the unique and common characteristics of the two leaders and complete the Venn diagram.
- 6 Tell students they will now assume the roles of King and Malcolm X to debate the methods African Americans should use to achieve equal rights. Explain that each student will represent the views of the leader he or she has studied.
- 7 Have students move their desks so that each student representing King is facing a student representing Malcolm X. Project Transparency 17A, which shows King and Malcolm X shaking hands. To help students get into their roles, have those representing King stand up, take the hand of their partner, raise their clasped hands above their head, say “We shall overcome!” and then sit down. Then have the students representing Malcolm X stand up, raise their fists in the air, say, “By any means necessary!” and sit down.
- 8 Tell students that you will give them a series of prompts to respond to and that they will have two minutes to discuss each prompt. Project *Information Master 17A: Prompts for Discussing Methods to Achieve Equal Rights*. Cover the transparency so that only the first prompt is showing. Read the prompt aloud, and have the student in each pair who represents Malcolm X repeat it and complete the sentence to begin a discussion with the opposing student. After two minutes, signal students to stop talking.
- 9 Repeat this process with the remaining prompts, alternating those begun by King and those begun by Malcolm X. (Option: Depending on the level of student interaction, you may want to increase or decrease the amount of time students have to respond to the prompts.)



Student Handout 17A
(2 versions)



Student Handout 17B



Transparency 17A



Information Master 17A

- 10 After students have discussed all the prompts, pass out *Student Handout 17C: Guidelines for Writing a Dialogue Between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X*. Review the guidelines. Then have students begin working. Remind them to use in their dialogues issues raised in their discussions, information from Student Handout 17A, and notes from their Venn diagram on Student Handout 17B.
- 11 Give students adequate time to write their rough drafts, incorporate your feedback, and complete their final drafts. (Option: After students have completed their final drafts, you may want to allow pairs of students to perform some of the dialogues for the class.)



Student Handout 17C

Idea for Student Response

In their notebooks, have students add to their dialogues eight lines in which Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X discuss and debate one of these topics: affirmative action, gangsta rap, the Million Man March, or welfare programs. The lines of the dialogue should accurately reflect how each man would likely respond to these contemporary events and issues. Here is an example of part of a dialogue about affirmative action:

Martin Luther King Jr.: I think affirmative action is a positive step for women and people of color.

Malcolm X: Once again I have to disagree with you. What do you find so positive about it?


Martin Luther King Jr.: Well, for one thing, it helps to even the playing field for groups in American society who traditionally have been discriminated against in employment, job contracts, and admission to higher levels of education.

Malcolm X: I won't argue that African Americans and others haven't been discriminated against, but I'm not convinced that affirmative action is the way to set the issue right. One problem I see is that many whites will think blacks or women received jobs just because they are a minority, not because they are qualified.

Martin Luther King Jr.: That may or may not be true, but once people have a job or are admitted to a university, they can then prove that they are qualified by doing a good job. Typically in the past, we haven't even been given the opportunity to prove that.

Malcolm X: Precisely my point! Let's not wait around for others to give us a chance under some government program. Let's create our own opportunities for our own people. One way we can do that is to support minority-owned businesses. These businesses will provide opportunities for our people without the government telling them they have to.


Background Information on Malcolm X

When you see the  symbol, stop and discuss the questions listed beside it.

Malcolm X was born on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. The fourth of eight children, his birth name was Malcolm Little. When Malcolm was six years old, his father suffered a gruesome death, getting run over by a trolley car. Later in life, Malcolm came to believe the death was a murder. He suspected a group of white men who opposed Mr. Little's activities in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Founded by Marcus Garvey, the UNIA preached a philosophy of "black separatism" and black pride. It aimed to compel millions of blacks to return to Africa because, according to Garvey, blacks would never be treated justly in a country ruled by whites.

His father's death destroyed Malcolm's home life. His mother went insane, and her younger children, including Malcolm, were placed in different foster homes. Malcolm was a very bright student, but he was an angry and bitter child, and he lost interest in school as he grew older. At age 15, Malcolm quit school and moved to Roxbury, Massachusetts, the black section of Boston. There he lived with an older half-sister.

For the next several years, Malcolm lived the life of a street hustler. He held a few legitimate jobs, but he quit or was fired from them all. Instead, he earned money illegally. He also used drugs. Finally, in 1945, Malcolm's lifestyle—and the law—caught up with him. Police in Boston arrested him for a series of burglaries of wealthy people's homes, and a judge sentenced him to ten years in jail. Malcolm was not yet 21 years old.

-  • How and why was Malcolm Little's father killed?
- How might Malcolm's father's association with the UNIA have influenced young Malcolm's development?
- Describe Malcolm's late teenage years, after his father's death.


Malcolm served seven years in prison. During that time, he learned that four of his siblings had joined the Nation of Islam, a religious group led by a man named Elijah Muhammad. Members of the group were called Black Muslims. They preached a philosophy similar to that of Marcus Garvey's UNIA. They favored a path of racial separation for black Americans and believed in black self-determination. The group viewed white Americans with suspicion, if not outright hatred, and had no interest in integration with white society.

Black Muslims operated their own restaurants, stores, and farms. The Nation of Islam also preached a strict code of member behavior. Eating pork and using alcohol, tobacco, and drugs were prohibited.

From prison, Malcolm wrote Elijah Muhammad, inquiring about the Nation of Islam. He received a warm reply. When Malcolm was released from prison in 1952, he went to Chicago to join the Nation of Islam. As other Black Muslims had done, Malcolm changed his last name. Black Muslims considered their family names to be part of their slave past, so they rejected them in favor of the suffix "X." Malcolm Little became Malcolm X.

Malcolm rose quickly within the Black Muslim movement, becoming minister of a mosque in Harlem, New York, in 1954. There he built a strong following, and before long he became the Nation of Islam's most effective and well known spokesperson.

By the early 1960s, Malcolm began to openly condemn white racism and to advocate any means necessary to retaliate against that racism—including violence. At the same time, he publicly criticized any African American who favored cooperating with the "white establishment" in the United States, including those who sought to integrate blacks into all segments of white society.

-  • What beliefs did Elijah Muhammad and Black Muslims hold?

- What do you think drew Malcolm Little to the Nation of Islam?
- How did Malcolm X's involvement with the Nation of Islam change his beliefs? What were Malcolm's opinions on the use of violence?

His philosophy put Malcolm in opposition to African American leaders, such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who were fighting for civil rights for blacks through integration. Dr. King advocated using nonviolent protests to push Americans to eliminate segregation where it still existed. King also believed in cooperating with the white politicians who were sympathetic to the civil rights cause in order to get laws passed that would ensure that African Americans achieved equality and justice.

By 1964, Malcolm had become the most famous Black Muslim in the United States. He continued to push his radical civil rights views, which had begun to catch on in urban black ghettos across the country. Malcolm's popularity caused some resentment within the Nation of Islam, and a rift developed between him and Elijah Muhammad. As a result, Malcolm left the group in March 1964. However, he stated that he would remain a Muslim and continue to preach his separatist racial views.

In April, Malcolm made a pilgrimage to both the Middle East and Africa. In Mecca, the spiritual home of Islam, he was impressed by the harmony he saw among the various racial groups who visited there. But despite this experience, Malcolm continued to preach the philosophy of black separatism. However, he did modify his feelings about cooperating with white people. In May 1964, Malcolm stated, "we will work with anyone, with any group, no matter what their color is, as long as they are genuinely interested in taking the type of steps necessary to bring an end to the injustices that black people in this country are afflicted by."

By early 1965, Malcolm had become extremely unpopular with a segment of the Nation of Islam. He received death threats, and his house was set on fire. On February 21, 1965, three men—who were all members of the Nation of Islam—assassinated Malcolm X. A court convicted the men of murder and sentenced them all to prison. The question of who, if anyone, had ordered Malcolm's assassination remained unanswered.



- What were Malcolm X's views about Martin Luther King Jr.?
- What impact did Malcolm X's trip to Mecca have on his beliefs?
- How did Malcolm X die? Who was responsible for his death?

Quotations from Malcolm X

“Independence comes only by two ways; by ballots or by bullets. . . . historically you’ll find that everyone who gets freedom, they get it through ballots or bullets. Now naturally everyone prefers ballots, and even I prefer ballots but I don’t discount bullets. I’m not interested in either ballots or bullets, I’m interested in freedom.”

—in an interview with Claude Lewis, December 1964

“We are taught by Mr. Muhammad that it is very important to improve the black man’s economy, and his thrift. But to do this, we must have land of our own. The brainwashed black man can never learn to stand on his own two feet until he is on his own.”

—in an interview with Alex Haley, May 1963

“I don’t see how you could call rapid strides being made in the field of integration rapid when you don’t have one city in this country that can honestly say it is an example of sincere integration.”

—in an interview with radio station WUST, May 12, 1963

“I myself would go for nonviolence if it was consistent, if everybody was going to be nonviolent all the time. . . . If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I’ll be nonviolent. If they make the White Citizens Council nonviolent, I’ll be nonviolent. . . . If the leaders of the nonviolent movement can go into the white community and teach nonviolence, good. I’d go along with that. But as long as I see them teaching nonviolence only in the black community, we can’t go along with that. We believe in equality.”

—in a speech to Mississippi teenagers visiting Harlem, December 31, 1964


“Every time I hear Martin [Luther King] he’s got a dream. And I think the Negro leaders have to come out of the clouds, and wake up, and stop dreaming and start facing reality.”

—in an interview with Claude Lewis, December 1964

“[Our goal is] to bring about the complete independence of people of African descent here in the Western Hemisphere, and first here in the United States, and bring about the freedom of these people by any means necessary.”

—in a speech announcing the formation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, June 1964


Background Information on Martin Luther King Jr.

When you see the  symbol, stop and discuss the questions listed beside it.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Both Martin's father and his maternal grandfather were Baptist preachers, and Christianity played an important role in Martin's life. As a young boy, Martin attended Sunday school every week, learning the stories and morals of the Bible. From an early age, he knew that his father expected him to become a preacher. Consequently, after attending college, Martin enrolled at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania to study for the ministry.

While at Crozer, King became familiar with the philosophy and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi had led India's struggle for independence from British rule. Throughout his crusade, he had preached a message of love and nonviolent resistance. Gandhi had won independence for India through peaceful acts of civil disobedience, not violent rebellion.

In Gandhi's philosophy, King felt he had found a means of helping his own people overcome the racial injustices he saw in the United States. As a young boy growing up in the South during the 1930s and 1940s, King had witnessed racial prejudice firsthand. By the time he graduated from Crozer as a minister in 1951, he knew that he wanted to dedicate himself to fighting for social justice.


-  • What role did religion play in Martin Luther King Jr.'s youth?
- How did Gandhi's ideas influence King? What was Gandhi's appeal?
- What motivated King to become active in fighting for social justice?

In 1953, King married Coretta Scott, a music student he had met while studying for his doctoral degree. They moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where King became the pastor of a black Baptist Church. It was there that he began his struggle for civil rights.

In December 1955, Montgomery police arrested an African American woman, Rosa Parks, for refusing to obey a city law that required blacks on public buses to give up their seats to whites. In protest, King helped lead a black boycott of the city's bus system. During the boycott, blacks refused to ride the buses until legislators changed the law.

As the leader of this movement, King earned the hatred of many white people in the city. Authorities eventually arrested him and threw him in jail. Someone also bombed his house. Throughout the yearlong boycott, however, King continually urged his followers not to respond with violence to any threats or mistreatment they might receive.

Ultimately, the Rosa Parks case went before the Supreme Court. In late 1956, the Court ruled that the Montgomery law—as well as all of Alabama's laws on segregated busing—was unconstitutional. It ordered the city to integrate the buses. King and his supporters had won an enormous victory in the fight for civil rights for African Americans.

-  • How did Rosa Park's actions affect the course of King's life?
- What discrimination did King face in the Montgomery bus boycott?
- How do you think King felt about the outcome of the boycott?

In 1957, King and other black clergymen formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The group aimed to spread and coordinate nonviolent civil rights protests across the South. After moving back to Atlanta in 1960, King set out on several campaigns to desegregate all-white establishments in Southern cities.

By 1963, the movement for civil rights had grown very powerful. Thousands of African Americans—as well as many sympathetic whites—had participated in

sit-ins, marches, and other demonstrations to demand an end to segregation and other unfair racial practices.

However, the lack of federal government support for the civil rights effort disappointed King. He became convinced that a massive action was needed to bring the cause to the attention of the whole nation. He called for a “March on Washington.” On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 people attended a march and rally in the nation’s capital to show their support for civil rights.

At the rally, King gave the most memorable speech of his lifetime. In words that rang with forcefulness and spirit, he declared, “I have a dream.” His dream was that blacks and whites would live together in peace and that blacks would be able to fully participate in all aspects of American society without fear or prejudice.

For the next five years, King was the unquestioned leader of the civil rights movement in the United States. In 1964, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in honor of his work. His activities brought about major changes in federal law, including passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Yet for many African Americans who continued to face prejudice in their daily lives, progress came too slowly. Some black leaders complained that King’s insistence on nonviolent protest—when protesters were often beaten and even killed—sent the wrong message to a mostly white nation. African Americans such as Malcolm X constantly criticized King for his nonviolent stance. King, however, never changed his views. He maintained that the best—and the only—way to effect change was by peaceful means.

In April 1968, King was in Memphis, Tennessee, supporting a strike by black garbage workers. On the night of April 4, as he stood on his hotel balcony, King was shot. He died a short time later at a local hospital. Many people believed that his killer, James Earl Ray, was hired by other people who wanted to see King dead. That theory was never proven, and Ray was sentenced to prison for life.

Like King’s hero, Mohandas Gandhi, this man of nonviolence had been struck down in the most violent of ways. And, just as occurred with Gandhi, millions of people around the world mourned the death of Martin Luther King Jr.



- Describe the types of protests that King and the SCLC organized.
- What accomplishments could King be proud of? What conditions frustrated him?
- What were the circumstances of King’s death? What was sadly ironic about the way he died?

Quotations from Martin Luther King Jr.

“I want to say that we are not here advocating violence. We have never done that. . . . The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. . . . And certainly, certainly, this is the glory of America, with all of its faults. . . . the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right.”

—in a speech to supporters at the start of the Montgomery bus boycott,
December 5, 1955

“For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’”

—“Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963

“There are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. . . . [But] I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’ . . . Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. . . .

“I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham, and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.”

—“Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: . . . that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day . . . the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

—in a speech at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963

“I conclude that this award . . . is profound recognition of . . . the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.”

—in a speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, December 10, 1964

“Today I want to tell the city of Selma, today I want to say to the state of Alabama, today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world, that we are not about to turn around. We are on the move now. Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us.”

—in a speech to supporters at an antiviolenence rally
at the Alabama state capitol, March 25, 1965

“Violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice. . . . urging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief.”

—in an interview with Alex Haley, January 1965

Venn Diagram of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

In your group, discuss the information you have read about Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Then complete the Venn diagram below by writing unique characteristics of each leader in the corresponding section and characteristics common to both leaders in the section at the center of the diagram.



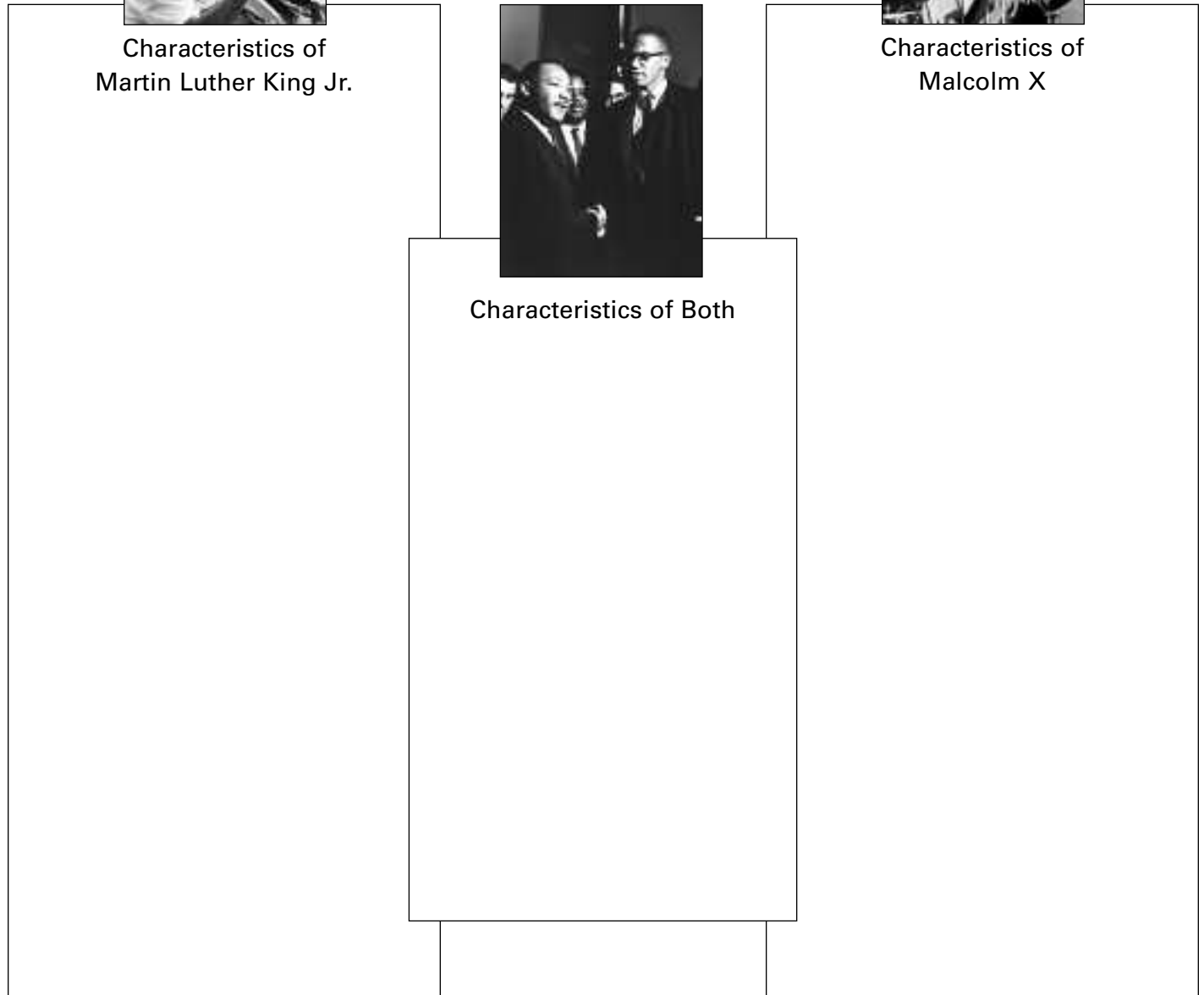
Characteristics of
Martin Luther King Jr.



Characteristics of
Malcolm X



Characteristics of Both



Guidelines for Writing a Dialogue Between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

You must write a fictional dialogue between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X that reflects their differing viewpoints on the methods African Americans should use to achieve equal rights in the United States. Follow these steps to complete your dialogue:

- 1 Begin your dialogue by copying the following lines on a piece of paper.

Malcolm X: Martin, you're going about this civil rights movement all wrong.

Martin Luther King Jr.: Is that right? Well, do you have any better ideas?

Malcolm X: As a matter of fact, I do. . . .

- 2 Use the issues raised in your discussion, the information on Student Handout 17A, and the Venn diagram on Student Handout 17B to complete the dialogue. Refer to at least four differences between the two leaders that were raised in the discussion or in the background information.
- 3 Write a rough draft of your dialogue. It should be approximately two pages in length.
- 4 Type or write your final draft neatly in ink.

Prompts for Discussing Methods to Achieve Equal Rights

- **Malcolm X:** Your “nonviolence” results in more blacks being beaten and killed.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** Your ideas of self-defense will provoke more violence against blacks.
- **Malcolm X:** Integration into a racist system won’t work.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** Separation is no different than segregation.
- **Malcolm X:** Nothing will change until black people start fighting back.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** We must not resort to the tactics that they use against us.
- **Malcolm X:** Why waste time trying to change white people’s minds?
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** Why should we create an image of blacks for whites to fear and hate?
- **Malcolm X:** I can’t love a group that has oppressed my people for more than 300 years.
- **Martin Luther King Jr.:** “An eye for an eye” will only make the whole world blind.

