

# Jackie Robinson and Civil Rights: Explaining Actions and Events through Text

## Duration

One class session of approximately 45 minutes

## Resources

### 1. Teacher Commentary



### 2. Student Handout



### 3. Homework



## Objectives of Lesson

- To practice analyzing texts with a particular focus on series, chronology, and causation

## Common Core Standard

- 11-12.3: "Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain."

## Student Activities

- Practice reading primary source texts and using details to support broader textual analysis
- Practice making inferences and drawing conclusions from textual sources

## How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed to give students an opportunity to learn about and practice using the details in a passage to understand broad themes and explain the author's point of view, motivation, and audience. The passages students will analyze are three letters written by Black baseball legend Jackie Robinson to Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. The lesson broadly deals with the American civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s and issues of racial inequality and racial justice. We have included a select timeline in the Student Handout to help students contextualize these letters.

## NOTES

*Write or type in this area.*

The Student Handout contains the letters to Eisenhower and Kennedy, while the Homework document contains the letter to Johnson. After reading the letters, students are asked to answer a few short questions to test their comprehension and ability to sort out the big picture themes even without necessarily having encountered such material previously.

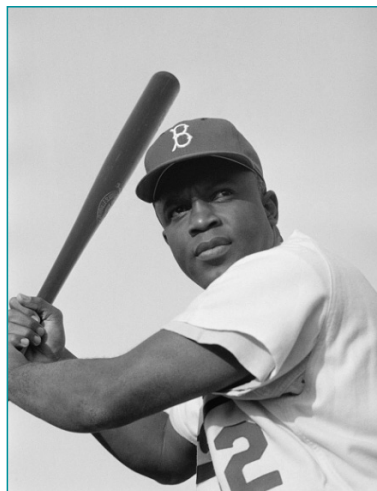


The March on Washington, August 28, 1963

## NOTES

*Write or type in this area.*

## Jackie Robinson and Civil Rights: Explaining Actions and Events through Text



Bob Sandberg, *Jackie Robinson, Brooklyn Dodgers*, 1954

### Background Information

Jackie Robinson (1919–1972) is perhaps most famous for being the first Black baseball player to join a Major League team, but he also had a huge impact on American society and culture through his political activism. Not only was Robinson a role model for young athletes, especially those from minority communities, but he also was instrumental in the fight for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s. In this lesson, we will read three letters Robinson wrote to three different American Presidents: Eisenhower (President 1953–1961), Kennedy (President 1961–1963), and Johnson (President 1963–1969).

After retiring from baseball in 1957, Robinson used his celebrity status to fight for the causes he believed in. During the 1950s and 1960s, Robinson frequently attended rallies held by Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders. King even wrote to Robinson, saying “You have made every Negro in America proud through your baseball prowess and your inflexible demand for equal opportunity for all.” While the Civil War and several important constitutional amendments had ended slavery and opened up opportunities for non-white Americans in the 19th century, discrimination against minority racial groups continued, especially in the southern states that had “Jim Crow” laws enforcing separate white and Black bathrooms, water fountains, waiting rooms, restaurants, schools, etc.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. letter to Jackie Robinson, 14 May 1962.

### Commentary

- ① The focus of this lesson is the process of using textual details to understand an author’s main point(s) and piecing together specific textual elements to explain and analyze an author’s point of view, motivation, purpose, etc. The background information here is merely informational to give students context for their readings (i.e., they are not expected to memorize these details). If you think students need more information about the Civil Rights Era to contextualize their readings, have them read the following: <https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/a-brief-history-of-jim-crow>

①

**Directions:** Review the key dates below. When you are done, read the text sources and answer the questions that follow.

② Review these dates and events with students before they read the texts.

### **Important Dates in the Civil Rights Movement (Selected)**

②

- 1947** Jackie Robinson becomes the first Black player in Major League Baseball
- 1948** President Harry Truman ends segregation of the American military through executive order
- 1954** The Supreme Court outlaws racial segregation in public schools through *Brown v. Board of Education*
- 1955** Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott
- 1957** Black students are blocked from entering Arkansas' Little Rock High School, prompting President Dwight D. Eisenhower to send federal troops to enforce school integration
- 1957** President Eisenhower signs the Civil Rights Act of 1957, granting some protections to voters being suppressed on the basis of race
- 1960** Black students in North Carolina refuse to leave a whites-only counter, inspiring similar acts of nonviolent resistance around the country
- 1961** Black and white activists from around the country took "freedom ride" bus trips throughout the South to protest segregation and were met with violent attacks from southern white protestors
- 1963** Alabama Governor George Wallace personally stands in a doorway to block Black students from registering until President John F. Kennedy sent National Guard troops to campus to enforce integration
- 1964** President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, preventing employment discrimination due to race, color, sex, religion or national origin
- 1965** Malcolm X is assassinated
- 1965** Hundreds of civil rights leaders march from Selma to Montgomery (Alabama) and are attacked by both police and civilians
- 1965** President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1965, outlawing "literacy tests" as a voting requirement
- 1968** Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated

## Exercise: Source Analysis

**Source:** A letter from Jackie Robinson to President Eisenhower, May 13, 1958

My dear Mr. President:

I was sitting in the audience at the Summit Meeting of Negro Leaders yesterday when you said we must have patience. On hearing you say this, I felt like standing up and saying, “Oh no! Not again.”

I respectfully remind you sir, that we have been the most patient of all people. When you said we must have self-respect, I wondered how we could have self-respect and remain patient considering the treatment accorded us through the years.

17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago.

As the chief executive of our nation, I respectfully suggest that you unwittingly crush the spirit of freedom in Negroes by constantly urging forbearance and give hope to those pro-segregation leaders like Governor Faubus<sup>2</sup> who would take from us even those freedoms we now enjoy. Your own experience with Governor Faubus is proof enough that forbearance and not eventual integration is the goal the pro-segregation leaders seek.

In my view, an unequivocal statement backed up by action such as you demonstrated you could take last fall in dealing with Governor Faubus if it became necessary, would let it be known that America is determined to provide—in the near future—for Negroes—the freedoms we are entitled to under the constitution.

Respectfully yours,

Jackie Robinson

<sup>2</sup> Orville Faubus was the Democratic Governor of Arkansas from 1955–1967 who attempted to block school integration after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

**Source:** A letter from Jackie Robinson to President Kennedy, February 9, 1961

My dear Mr. President:

I believe I know, understand, and appreciate better your role in the continuing struggle to fulfill the American promise of equal opportunity for all.

While I am very happy over your obviously fine start as our President, my concern over Civil Rights and my vigorous opposition to your election is one of sincerity. The direction you seem to be going indicates America is in for great leadership, and I will be most happy if my fears continue to be proven wrong. We are naturally keeping a wondering eye on what will happen, and while any opposition or criticism may not be the most popular thing when you are leading so well, you must know that as an individual I am interested because what you do or do not do in the next 4 years could have a serious effect upon my children's future.

In your letter to me of July 7, 1960, you indicated you would use the influence of the White House in cases where moral issues are involved. You have reiterated your stand, and we are very happy. Still, we are going to use whatever voice we have to awaken our people. With the new emerging African nations,<sup>3</sup> Negro Americans must assert themselves more, not for what we can get as individuals, but for the good of the Negro masses.

I thank you for what you have done so far, but it is not how much has been done but how much more there is to do. I would like to be patient, Mr. President, but patience has caused us years in our struggle for human dignity. I will continue to hope and pray for your aggressive leadership but will not refuse to criticize if the feeling persists that Civil Rights is not an agenda for months to come.

May God give you strength and the energy to accomplish your most difficult task.

Respectfully yours,

Jackie Robinson

<sup>3</sup> Many African nations gained independence from their European colonial rulers in the 1950s and 1960s.



## Questions

1. Write a 2–3 sentence summary of Robinson’s letter to Eisenhower (paraphrase in your own words—don’t simply quote the text). ③

*Write or type your response in this area.*

2. Write a 2–3 sentence summary of Robinson’s letter to Kennedy (paraphrase in your own words—don’t simply quote the text). ④

*Write or type your response in this area.*

3. In his letter to President Eisenhower, Robinson says the following: “As the chief executive of our nation, I respectfully suggest that you unwittingly crush the spirit of freedom in Negroes by constantly urging forbearance and give hope to those pro-segregation leaders.” Given the historical context of the Civil Rights movement and what you read in the letter, what do you think Robinson means? Describe what you think might be the reasoning behind Robinson’s comment in 2–3 sentences. ⑤

*Write or type your response in this area.*

③ Answers will vary. Robinson expresses his frustration at President Eisenhower’s recent remarks to Black leaders in which he encouraged them to be patient with the slow pace of change regarding civil rights and racial equality. He urges Eisenhower to take a firm stand against racist public officials such as Arkansas Governor Faubus, who at the time of the letter’s writing was attempting to prevent the federal government from integrating public schools in that state. Robinson notes that Black Americans have been patient and that it is up to the government to take action to guarantee all Americans the rights to which they are entitled by the Constitution.

④ Answers will vary. Robinson praises several aspects of Kennedy’s presidency, including his strong leadership, but urges Kennedy to do much more than he is currently doing on civil rights issues. Robinson notes that especially in light of the emergence of new, independent African nations and the fall of colonial governments, it is more important than ever for Black Americans to fight for their rights. He thanks Kennedy for Kennedy’s work on moral issues but stresses the urgency of more significant action on behalf of achieving equality for all Americans.

⑤ Answers will vary. Robinson is expressing his frustration with the government’s lack of action on civil rights, arguing that the longer the president delays, the more it will encourage pro-segregation elements within American society.

4. Identify and summarize one point of view or theme that Robinson emphasizes in BOTH letters (to Eisenhower and to Kennedy). Cite at least one sentence from each passage to support your response.

a. Point of view:

*Write or type your response in this area.*

b. Evidence for point of view (Eisenhower):

*Write or type your response in this area.*

c. Evidence for point of view (Kennedy):

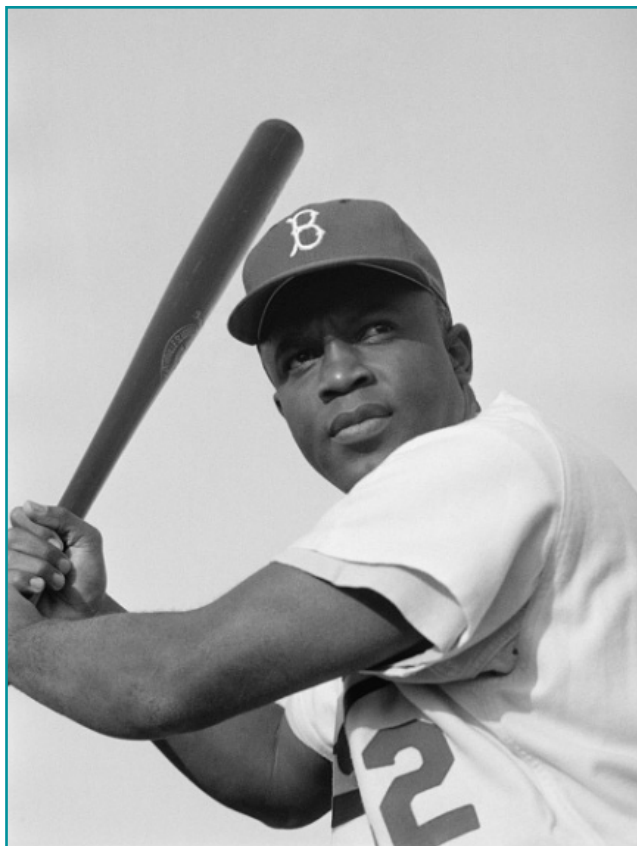
*Write or type your response in this area.*

⑥

- ⑥ Answers will vary. See answer key document for sample responses and evidence.



## Jackie Robinson and Civil Rights



Bob Sandberg, Jackie Robinson, Brooklyn Dodgers, 1954

### Background Information

Jackie Robinson (1919–1972) is perhaps most famous for being the first Black baseball player to join a Major League team, but he also had a huge impact on American society and culture through his political activism. Not only was Robinson a role model for young athletes, especially those from minority communities, but he also was instrumental in the fight for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s. In this lesson, we will read three letters Robinson wrote to three different American Presidents: Eisenhower (President 1953–1961), Kennedy (President 1961–1963), and Johnson (President 1963–1969).

After retiring from baseball in 1957, Robinson used his celebrity status to fight for the causes he believed in. During the 1950s and 1960s, Robinson frequently attended rallies held by Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders. King even wrote to Robinson, saying “You have made every Negro in America proud through your baseball prowess and your inflexible demand for equal opportunity for all.” While the Civil War and several important constitutional amendments had ended slavery and opened up opportunities for non-white Americans in the 19th century, discrimination against minority racial groups continued, especially in the southern states that had “Jim Crow” laws enforcing separate white and Black bathrooms, water fountains, waiting rooms, restaurants, schools, etc.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. letter to Jackie Robinson, 14 May 1962.

**Directions:** Review the key dates below. When you are done, read the text sources and answer the questions that follow.

### **Important Dates in the Civil Rights Movement (Selected)**

- 1947** Jackie Robinson becomes the first Black player in Major League Baseball
- 1948** President Harry Truman ends segregation of the American military through executive order
- 1954** The Supreme Court outlaws racial segregation in public schools through *Brown v. Board of Education*
- 1955** Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott
- 1957** Black students are blocked from entering Arkansas' Little Rock High School, prompting President Dwight D. Eisenhower to send federal troops to enforce school integration
- 1957** President Eisenhower signs the Civil Rights Act of 1957, granting some protections to voters being suppressed on the basis of race
- 1960** Black students in North Carolina refuse to leave a whites-only counter, inspiring similar acts of nonviolent resistance around the country
- 1961** Black and white activists from around the country took "freedom ride" bus trips throughout the South to protest segregation and were met with violent attacks from southern white protestors
- 1963** Alabama Governor George Wallace personally stands in a doorway to block Black students from registering until President John F. Kennedy sent National Guard troops to campus to enforce integration
- 1964** President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, preventing employment discrimination due to race, color, sex, religion or national origin
- 1965** Malcolm X is assassinated
- 1965** Hundreds of civil rights leaders march from Selma to Montgomery (Alabama) and are attacked by both police and civilians
- 1965** President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1965, outlawing "literacy tests" as a voting requirement
- 1968** Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated

## Exercise: Source Analysis

**Source:** A letter from Jackie Robinson to President Eisenhower, May 13, 1958

My dear Mr. President:

I was sitting in the audience at the Summit Meeting of Negro Leaders yesterday when you said we must have patience. On hearing you say this, I felt like standing up and saying, "Oh no! Not again."

I respectfully remind you sir, that we have been the most patient of all people. When you said we must have self-respect, I wondered how we could have self-respect and remain patient considering the treatment accorded us through the years.

17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago.

As the chief executive of our nation, I respectfully suggest that you unwittingly crush the spirit of freedom in Negroes by constantly urging forbearance and give hope to those pro-segregation leaders like Governor Faubus<sup>2</sup> who would take from us even those freedoms we now enjoy. Your own experience with Governor Faubus is proof enough that forbearance and not eventual integration is the goal the pro-segregation leaders seek.

In my view, an unequivocal statement backed up by action such as you demonstrated you could take last fall in dealing with Governor Faubus if it became necessary, would let it be known that America is determined to provide—in the near future—for Negroes—the freedoms we are entitled to under the constitution.

Respectfully yours,

Jackie Robinson

<sup>2</sup> Orville Faubus was the Democratic Governor of Arkansas from 1955–1967 who attempted to block school integration after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

**Source:** A letter from Jackie Robinson to President Kennedy, February 9, 1961

My dear Mr. President:

I believe I know, understand, and appreciate better your role in the continuing struggle to fulfill the American promise of equal opportunity for all.

While I am very happy over your obviously fine start as our President, my concern over Civil Rights and my vigorous opposition to your election is one of sincerity. The direction you seem to be going indicates America is in for great leadership, and I will be most happy if my fears continue to be proven wrong. We are naturally keeping a wondering eye on what will happen, and while any opposition or criticism may not be the most popular thing when you are leading so well, you must know that as an individual I am interested because what you do or do not do in the next 4 years could have a serious effect upon my children's future.

In your letter to me of July 7, 1960, you indicated you would use the influence of the White House in cases where moral issues are involved. You have reiterated your stand, and we are very happy. Still, we are going to use whatever voice we have to awaken our people. With the new emerging African nations,<sup>3</sup> Negro Americans must assert themselves more, not for what we can get as individuals, but for the good of the Negro masses.

I thank you for what you have done so far, but it is not how much has been done but how much more there is to do. I would like to be patient, Mr. President, but patience has caused us years in our struggle for human dignity. I will continue to hope and pray for your aggressive leadership but will not refuse to criticize if the feeling persists that Civil Rights is not an agenda for months to come.

May God give you strength and the energy to accomplish your most difficult task.

Respectfully yours,

Jackie Robinson

<sup>3</sup> Many African nations gained independence from their European colonial rulers in the 1950s and 1960s.

## Questions

1. Write a 2–3 sentence summary of Robinson’s letter to Eisenhower (paraphrase in your own words—don’t simply quote the text).

*Write or type your response in this area.*

2. Write a 2–3 sentence summary of Robinson’s letter to Kennedy (paraphrase in your own words—don’t simply quote the text).

*Write or type your response in this area.*

3. In his letter to President Eisenhower, Robinson says the following: “As the chief executive of our nation, I respectfully suggest that you unwittingly crush the spirit of freedom in Negroes by constantly urging forbearance and give hope to those pro-segregation leaders.” Given the historical context of the Civil Rights movement and what you read in the letter, what do you think Robinson means? Describe what you think might be the reasoning behind Robinson’s comment in 2–3 sentences.

*Write or type your response in this area.*

4. Identify and summarize one point of view or theme that Robinson emphasizes in BOTH letters (to Eisenhower and to Kennedy). Cite at least one sentence from each passage to support your response.

a. Point of view:

*Write or type your response in this area.*

b. Evidence for point of view (Eisenhower):

*Write or type your response in this area.*

c. Evidence for point of view (Kennedy):

*Write or type your response in this area.*

## Jackie Robinson and Civil Rights



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1964 Civil Rights Act as Martin Luther King, Jr. and others look on

### Background Information

See the Student Handout for background and the selected timeline of key events during the Civil Rights Era.



## Exercise: Source Analysis

**Directions:** Read the excerpt and answer the questions below.

**Source:** A letter from Jackie Robinson to President Johnson, April 18, 1967<sup>1</sup>

Dear Mr. President:

First, let me thank you for pursuing a course towards Civil Rights that no President in our history has pursued. I am confident your dedication will not only continue, but will be accelerated dependent on the needs of all Americans.

While I am certain your faith has been shaken by demonstrations against the Viet Nam war, I hope the actions of any one individual does [sic] not make you feel as Vice President Humphrey does, that Dr. King's stand will hurt the Civil Rights movement. It would not be fair to the thousands of our Negro fighting men who are giving their lives because they believe, in most instances, that our Viet Nam stand is just. There are hundreds of thousands of us at home who are not certain why we are in the war. We feel, however, that you and your staff know what is best and we are willing to support your efforts for an honorable resolution to the war.

I do feel you must make it infinitely clear, that regardless of who demonstrates, that your position will not change towards the rights of all people; that you will continue to press for justice for all Americans and that a strong stand now will have great effect upon young Negro Americans who could resort to violence unless they are reassured. Recent riots in Tennessee and Cleveland, Ohio is warning enough. Your concern based on causes and not on whether it will hurt the Civil Rights effort, could have a wholesale effect on our youth.

I appreciate the difficult role any President has. I believe, also, yours is perhaps the most difficult any President has had. I hope God gives you the wisdom and strength to come through this crisis at home, and that an end to the war in Viet Nam is achieved very soon.

Again Sir, let me thank you for your domestic stand on Civil Rights. We need an even firmer stand as the issues become more personal and the gap between black and white Americans get [sic] wider.

Sincerely yours,

Jackie Robinson

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. was publicly and personally opposed to the Vietnam War but hesitant to be too aggressive with the Johnson administration, which was making great efforts to push for civil rights legislation.

## Questions

1. Write a 2–3 sentence summary of Robinson’s letter to Johnson (paraphrase in your own words—don’t simply quote the text).

*Write or type your response in this area.*

2. Using the timeline on the Student Handout for historical context, compare and contrast the three letters Robinson wrote to Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. What similarities do you note? What differences do you note? Think especially about the fact that Robinson’s letter to President Johnson was written AFTER the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965.

*Write or type your response in this area.*

## **Jackie Robinson and Civil Rights: Explaining Actions and Events through Text**

### **WORKSHEET**

1. Answers will vary. Robinson expresses his frustration at President Eisenhower's recent remarks to Black leaders in which he encouraged them to be patient with the slow pace of change regarding civil rights and racial equality. He urges Eisenhower to take a firm stand against racist public officials such as Arkansas Governor Faubus, who at the time of the letter's writing was attempting to prevent the federal government from integrating public schools in that state. Robinson notes that Black Americans have been patient and that it is up to the government to take action to guarantee all Americans the rights to which they are entitled by the Constitution.
2. Answers will vary. Robinson praises several aspects of Kennedy's presidency, including his strong leadership, but urges Kennedy to do much more than he is currently doing on civil rights issues. Robinson notes that especially in light of the emergence of new, independent African nations and the fall of colonial governments, it is more important than ever for Black Americans to fight for their rights. He thanks Kennedy for Kennedy's work on moral issues but stresses the urgency of more significant action on behalf of achieving equality for all Americans.
3. Answers will vary. Robinson is expressing his frustration with the government's lack of action on civil rights, arguing that the longer the president delays, the more it will encourage pro-segregation elements within American society.
4. Answers will vary.
  - a. Point of view: Achieving equal treatment for all Americans is an urgent issue that must be dealt with immediately; Black Americans have been patient and demand their constitutional rights.
  - b. Evidence for point of view (Eisenhower): "17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans."
  - c. Evidence for point of view (Kennedy): "[I]t is not how much has been done but how much more there is to do. I would like to be patient, Mr. President, but patience has caused us years in our struggle for human dignity."

### **HOMEWORK**

1. Answers will vary. Robinson thanks President Johnson for his work thus far on civil rights issues, and while he expresses some misgivings about the war in Vietnam, he notes that most Black Americans support the president. Robinson urges Johnson to stand strong against segregation and to fight vigorously for equal rights, regardless of who protested the Vietnam War. Furthermore, Robinson notes that a strong stance in favor of societal changes from President Johnson will reduce the danger of violent protests in the streets.
2. Answers will vary.