

## **“I Have a Dream” Speech**

### *Author(s)*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with assistance from Stanley Levison and Clarence Benjamin Jones

### *Date created/enacted*

Delivered on August 28, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as part of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.  
Some sections delivered earlier in 1963 in Detroit.

### *Content summary*

(Note: Until 2038 the King estate has the copyright to this speech. In keeping with fair use doctrine, reproduce only the portion of the speech needed for discussion.)

Much the same way that Lincoln had hearkened back to the Revolution by saying, “Four score and seven years ago,” King reaches back to the Emancipation Proclamation by opening with, “Five score years ago...” He then continues by pointing out that the promise of the Emancipation has not been reached—that black Americans still languish without full rights. Dr. King looks forward to a day of equality for all people.

Some highlights:

- “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.”
- “But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free.”
- “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
- “There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights.”
- “In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”
- “[. . .M]any of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny.”

- “I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.”
- “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”
- “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”
- “This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, ‘My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.’”

The speech makes extensive use of anaphora, the repetition of a phrase to open successive sentences. Dr. King uses anaphora in two main ways: with “I Have a Dream” and “Let Freedom Ring.”

Dr. King also makes many biblical, geographical, and historical references throughout the speech. His words, although infused with emotion, still resonate with information and knowledge.

Below are the lyrics to the negro spiritual that Dr. King mentioned at the speech’s close. (From “American Songs” by J.W. Work)

Free at last, free at last  
 I thank God I'm free at last  
 Free at last, free at last  
 I thank God I'm free at last

Way down yonder in the graveyard walk  
 I thank God I'm free at last  
 Me and my Jesus going to meet and talk  
 I thank God I'm free at last

On my knees when the light pass'd by  
 I thank God I'm free at last  
 Tho't my soul would rise and fly  
 I thank God I'm free at last

Some of these mornings, bright and fair  
 I thank God I'm free at last  
 Goin' meet King Jesus in the air  
 I thank God I'm free at las

### *Teacher's Activities*

The following are some activities or questions that might be helpful in teaching the "I Have a Dream Speech."

1. Dr. King makes many biblical allusions in his speech. Find some and match them up to the chapter and verse from the Bible.
2. Find and discuss Dr. King's use of literary devices (like *anaphora* and *allusion*).
3. Watch the speech or listen to an audio recording of it. Discuss the emotions it arouses in the audience.
4. Have students select a portion of the speech and read it aloud. Try to duplicate Dr. King's vocal technique.