

DIVISION 4: GRADE 7 ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY PROMPT

THEME: ENCOURAGING OUR YOUTH TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE

SCENARIO

In a world overflowing with TikToks, news headlines, and viral videos, stories are everywhere. But have you ever considered that a story can be one of the most powerful tools for changing the world? To be an agent of change, you often have to win over people's hearts and minds—and that starts with the story you tell. From its very beginning, the NAACP knew that changing unfair laws wasn't enough; they also had to change the story America told itself about race.

One of their first tools was a magazine, ***The Crisis***. Founded in 1910, it was a megaphone for civil rights, refusing to let the nation ignore the horror of lynching and injustice. It also showcased the brilliance of Black writers and artists, demonstrating that a different narrative was indeed possible. The NAACP also fought back against hateful stories. In 1915, they organized nationwide protests against the film ***The Birth of a Nation***, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan, holding mass media accountable for spreading racism.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was also a master storyteller. In 1963, after being thrown in a Birmingham jail for protesting, he didn't just wait. He picked up a pen. His "**Letter from Birmingham Jail**" was a direct response to white clergymen who called his protests "unwise." In his letter, published across the nation, he powerfully defended the need for nonviolent action, famously writing, "For years now, I have heard the word 'Wait!'... This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" With that letter, he seized control of the narrative and explained the moral urgency of the movement to the entire country.

Telling the right story could even be a matter of life and death. Here in Paducah, the **Hotel Metropolitan** was a safe place for Black travelers during the dangerous Jim Crow era. It was listed in ***The Negro Motorist Green Book***, a travel guide that provided information on where it was safe for African Americans to eat, sleep, and purchase gas in a segregated America.

This leads to a significant debate that is still raging today: What is the most effective way to fight for justice?

- One viewpoint is that **changing hearts and minds with a powerful story is the ultimate strategy**. Supporters argue that true, lasting change only happens when a majority of people believe in a cause. They believe the most effective modern tools are viral social media campaigns, documentaries, and articles that educate the public and win their support—the 21st-century versions of *The Crisis* and Dr. King's letter.
- Another perspective argues that **direct action is mightier than words**. These advocates believe that protests, boycotts, and lawsuits are the most effective means of forcing powerful systems to change. They would point to the NAACP's legal victory in *Brown v. Board of Education* or the brave sit-ins by the NAACP Youth Council as proof that creating disruption is necessary to achieve results, arguing that public opinion often follows bold action, not the other way around.
- A third perspective says **it's a false choice—you need both**. This view suggests that action creates the events, but stories give those events meaning. Without the Birmingham protests, Dr. King would have had no reason to write his letter. But without the letter, the demonstrations might have been misunderstood or ignored. They believe true power comes from combining bold action with a compelling story.

YOUR TASK

The McCracken County Public Library and the Paducah/McCracken County NAACP are collaborating on a new exhibit for students titled “Agents of Change: Strategies for Justice.” They’re not just looking for any ideas; they’re looking for *your* ideas. They want to know what you, a young person living in this world today, think is the most powerful way to make a difference.

Write an argumentative essay to the Library Board and the NAACP Executive Committee. In your essay, **argue which strategy young agents of change should focus on: shaping public opinion through media and storytelling, taking direct action and legal challenges, or a combined approach where both are essential.**