

2026–27 FREDRICKIA HARGROVE POSTER AND ESSAY CONTEST

DIVISION 4 — GRADE 7 ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY PROMPT

Theme: “Blueprint for Tomorrow: Constructing Your Character”

Anchor Passage: “I Am Black, But Beautiful” and the commitment to beauty, love, and justice

READING PASSAGE

Students will read the full transcript of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech “What Is Your Life’s Blueprint?”

As they read, students should pay special attention to two passages. First, the section where Dr. King tells students not to be ashamed of their color or their “biological features,” and warns them that they “need not be lured into purchasing cosmetics advertised to make you lighter,” nor to “process your hair to make it appear straight.” **Second**, the closing section, where he tells students, “Don’t allow anybody to pull you so low as to make you hate them,” and commits them to “the eternal principles of beauty, love, and justice.”

Official contest text: the full transcript, printed in this manual. Listening support and the full source note appear under “Official Contest Text and Listening Access.”

SCENARIO

In 1967, Dr. King stood in front of a room of junior high students and warned them about an industry.

He told them not to buy cosmetics advertised to make their skin lighter. He told them they did not need to process their hair to make it appear straight. He described companies that made money by convincing young people that the face they already had was the wrong one—and then selling them the correction. His answer was to say out loud, and believe it: “I Am Black, But Beautiful.”

Read that passage again and recognize what it's really saying. Dr. King is pointing out that someone is exploiting your insecurity, and you don't have to fall for it.

That industry did not disappear. It moved onto your phone.

Today, a filter can lighten your skin, narrow your nose, and reshape your jaw before you have finished deciding whether to post. An app can tell you, in numbers, how many people approved of your face this afternoon. The pressure Dr. King described has not just survived — it has been automated, personalized, and made free of charge.

The rest of the digital world raises his other warning too. Dr. King told students, “Don’t allow anybody to pull you so low as to make you hate them.” Anyone who has watched a comment thread turn into a pile-on knows how hard that instruction is when the other person is a username. A post can lift someone up. A comment can tear someone down. A rumor can travel faster than anyone can correct it.

Paducah has examples of people who kept their character under pressure. **Dr. William Stuart Nelson**, who grew up in Paducah and graduated from Lincoln High School, studied nonviolence with Gandhi in India in 1946 and later marched with Dr. King at Selma. **Rev. W.G. Harvey**, the first Black person elected

to public office in western Kentucky, once led a group to confront a Ku Klux Klan meeting in Paducah — and did not become what he opposed.

Kentucky and national history offer the same lessons through the student sit-ins, the Freedom Riders, and John Lewis, who practiced nonviolence in public when the pressure to answer hate with hate was overwhelming.

The King Center is asking the **Paducah Human Rights Commission** to help gather student ideas for teaching digital dignity and nonviolent courage to young people today.

This raises a critical question: How should young people build true character in a digital world?

VIEWPOINT 1: TEACH DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY

Supporters argue that students need practical rules and habits: privacy, cyberbullying, misinformation, screen time, respectful communication, and the real consequences of online cruelty. A digital world without responsibility becomes unsafe quickly, and you cannot ask a twelve-year-old to philosophize their way out of a harassment campaign. Teach the rules first; the character can grow inside them.

VIEWPOINT 2: TEACH INNER CHARACTER

Supporters argue that online problems begin with a deeper question: who told you that you needed fixing? Dr. King did not tell students to use skin-lightening cream responsibly. He told them not to want it. Rules can stop a student from posting something cruel, but only somebodiness can stop a student from believing the lie that their real face is not enough. A self-aware student doesn't rely on filters or seek strangers' approval to the point of cruelty.

VIEWPOINT 3: TEACH DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP FOR JUSTICE

Supporters argue that safety and self-worth are not enough — they are both defensive. Dr. King's third blueprint principle was a *commitment*, an obligation to act. He told students that however young they are, they have a responsibility to make the nation better. Supporters argue that students should be taught to use these tools courageously: to tell the truth, protect someone being targeted, correct a rumor, organize service, and build community. Anything less leaves the most powerful communication tools in history in the hands of everyone except the people trying to do good with them.

YOUR TASK

The Paducah Human Rights Commission is planning a community forum on how young people can keep their dignity and their character online, and The King Center wants student thinking to shape it. Write a formal argumentative essay to them that answers one question:

How should young people build true character in a digital world?

Argue for the approach you believe matters most:

1. **Teach digital responsibility** — students need safety, privacy, and respectful habits.
2. **Teach inner character** — students need a strong foundation of “somebodiness.”
3. **Teach digital citizenship for justice** — students should use technology to protect dignity and build community.

Be sure to:

- State your claim clearly in the introduction.
- Support your claim with reasons and evidence from Dr. King’s speech transcript.
- Use facts and details from the digital scenario.
- Include a local Paducah example of courageous character.
- Include a Kentucky or national example of nonviolent action for justice.
- Acknowledge and respond to a counterclaim with logical reasoning and evidence.
- Organize your essay with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Use a formal tone appropriate for The King Center and a city commission.

Word Count: 300–750 words.

RESEARCH EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

Local History

- Dr. William Stuart Nelson — Lincoln High School to Gandhi’s side in 1946
- Rev. W.G. Harvey — Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame
- Paducah Human Rights Commission — paducahky.gov

Kentucky History

- Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame
- Kentucky leaders who challenged segregation and discrimination

National History

- John Lewis and SNCC
- The Freedom Rides
- The student sit-ins
- The Little Rock Nine

Digital Citizenship and Current Context

- Research on social media use and adolescent well-being
- Media literacy and misinformation
- Cyberbullying prevention
- Youth civic engagement online

KSA ALIGNMENT FOR DIVISION 4

KSA Focus Area	What It Means	How to Show It
Clarity & Coherence	Write arguments supporting claims with clear reasons and evidence	“Students should be taught ____ because...”
Support/Development	Introduce claims, acknowledge opposing claims, organize evidence logically	Use King, digital examples, and history
Counterclaims	Acknowledge and respond to an opposing claim	“Some may argue that _____. However, _____.”
Organization	Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion	Use transitions like furthermore, however, consequently
Audience & Purpose	Establish and maintain a formal style	Write respectfully to The King Center and Human Rights Commission
Language & Conventions	Demonstrate command of standard English	Use precise language and varied sentences

TEACHER'S TOOLKIT FOR DIVISION 4

Activity 1: “1967 Advertisement, 2027 Filter”

Objective: Make the anchor passage land.

1. Read aloud only King’s lines about cosmetics and processed hair. Do not mention phones.
2. Ask: “What is he describing? Who is making money here?”
3. Then ask: “Does anything today do this?” Let students get there themselves.
4. Discuss: “King’s answer was five words — ‘I Am Black, But Beautiful.’ Why did he think saying it out loud mattered?”

KAS Alignment: RI.7.1.

Activity 2: Profile vs. Blueprint

Objective: Compare online identity and real character.

Students create a two-column chart: *What a profile can show / What a profile cannot show.*

Discussion question: “Can a person’s online image become a false blueprint?”

KAS Alignment: RI.7.1.

Activity 3: Digital Nonviolence Scenarios

Objective: Apply nonviolence to online conflict.

Students analyze short scenarios: a cruel comment thread, a rumor spreading, a friend being mocked, a misleading post. For each, students identify a harmful response, a silent response, and a *nonviolent* response — and discuss why the second and third are not the same thing.

KAS Alignment: SL.7.1.

Activity 4: Paducah’s Nonviolence Scholars

Objective: Connect local history to digital courage.

Students research Dr. William Stuart Nelson and Rev. W.G. Harvey. They answer: *What injustice did this person confront? How did they show courage? How did they resist without becoming hateful?*

KAS Alignment: RH.7.2.

Activity 5: Counterclaim Paragraph Workshop

Objective: Strengthen argumentative writing.

Students write a paragraph that fairly introduces an opposing view, rebuts it with evidence, and explains why their claim is stronger. Peer reviewers check one thing: *was the other side represented fairly, or was it made easy to knock down?*

KAS Alignment: W.7.1b.

Activity 6: Socratic Seminar — Is Online Courage Real Courage?

Discussion questions:

- Is it easier or harder to be nonviolent online?
- What does “somebodiness” mean when a number is attached to your face?
- King told students not to let anyone pull them so low as to make them hate them. Is that harder when you cannot see the person?
- If King had a phone in 1967, would he have used it?

KAS Alignment: SL.7.1.

HOME & COMMUNITY CONNECTION: A PARTNER’S GUIDE FOR GRADE 7

Family Activity: Digital Dignity Conversation

Ask:

- When does online attention help a person?
- When does it hurt character?
- What should never be posted about another person?

Family Activity: The 1967 Passage

Read King’s lines about cosmetics and hair together. Ask:

- Who was profiting from that?
- Does anything today do the same thing?
- What would it take to say “I am enough” and mean it?

Community Activity: Watch a Public Meeting

Watch a city commission, school board, or public meeting. Ask:

- Who speaks respectfully?
- Who disagrees without insulting?
- What would digital dignity look like in public life?

Local History Activity

Research Dr. William Stuart Nelson. Ask:

- Why should more people in Paducah know his story?
- What can students learn from someone who studied nonviolence before it became nationally famous?