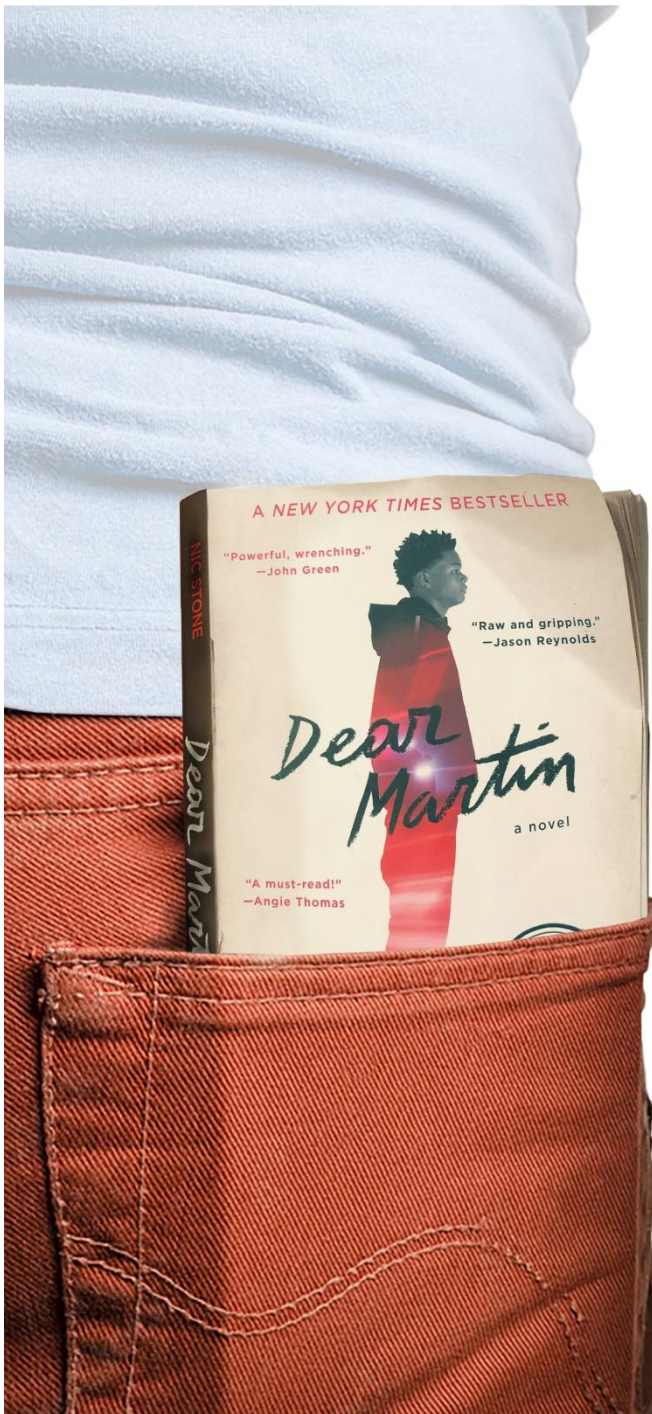


# Dear Martin: A Learning Plan



Nic Stone's novel *Dear Martin* is about the experiences of Justyce McCallister, a black teenager from Atlanta who attends a predominately white preparatory school. In response to an encounter with a police officer who unjustly arrests him when he is assumed by the officer to have criminal intent, Justyce begins a larger dialogue with himself about questions of identity and race. This dialogue is embodied in Justyce's journal which includes a series of reflective letters that the protagonist writes to Martin Luther King Jr. In these letters, Justyce attempts to draw strength from Dr. King and imagines how he would confront the reality of contemporary racism. It is this strength that Justyce will need to summon as he later confronts the consequences of an encounter with a racist police officer.



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## Essential Questions

***How do we make assumptions about the identity of others?***

***How can we overcome assumptions and implicit bias?***

## Before Reading

In preparation for reading *Dear Martin*, have students read “Straight Talk About the N-Word,” an interview by Sean Price of Arizona State University Professor Neal A. Lester. This resource is available through the website *Learning for Justice*. This interview provides a great deal of context for students in terms of the use of the “N-word” among specific populations. Both historical and contemporary associations of the word are discussed, including the use of the word among some African Americans today.

Students can also read “The ‘N’ Word: It Just Slips Out,” a first-person essay by African American high school student Allen Francis. This resource is available through the website *Youth Communication*. This frank essay explores the complexities of the use of the word among African American high school students. As the word is used frequently in *Dear Martin* it is important that students understand the difficulties associated with the word when it comes to classroom discussions. After reading this essay, ground rules should be established that discourage the use of the word in the classroom when referencing the text of the novel.

## During Reading

Students should be encouraged to keep a “dialectical journal” in which they annotate specific passages that they cite from the reading. This can be done by means of a formal journal or through the use of sticky notes. These student “conversations with the text” are useful for ensuring that students are providing responses that are text-based. Categories for responses can include the following:

1. Question – What is a question that you have about a character or a plot development?
2. Reflection - What is a comment or interpretation that you have of the text?
3. Prediction - What can you predict about what will happen based on your prior knowledge of earlier sections of the text?
4. Connection - In what way can you connect the text with something outside of the novel (current events, personal experience, other texts)?
5. Clarification - Based on later events in the novel, is there anything you said earlier in another response that you now need to clarify or revise?

## Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins with the following quote from Martin Luther King Jr.’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.” What do you think that Dr. King meant by the phrase “unarmed truth”? Can you think of examples of unarmed truth in our society today? Why might the author have begun the novel with this quote?
2. One of the structural devices that the author uses in the novel is the “epistolary” form. Epistolary novels are those written through the use of diary entries or letters. What do you think is the author’s purpose in structuring the novel partly through the use of Justyce’s journals? Is it an effective technique? What other choices could have been made?

3. One of the many challenges that Justyce faces is in trying to find his own identity as an African American who attends a prep school that is predominantly white and wealthy. What are the challenges that Justyce faces in this context, and does he overcome them?
4. What assumptions do Justyce's white classmates make about him and African Americans at large? What do their assumptions seem to be based on?
5. The author often returns to student discussions in a class called "Societal Evolution" that is taught by an instructor attempting to get his students to confront issues of inequity. What are some of the conclusions that Justyce's white classmates have come to about social equality and race as revealed in these discussions? Why do they trouble Justyce so much?
6. What is the definition of "white privilege"? How is white privilege revealed in the attitudes of Justyce's white classmates?
7. Justyce and his friend Manny reluctantly agree to a white classmate's suggestion to "dress up like stereotypes" for Halloween. Justyce dresses as a "thug" and Manny as a "token black guy." Conversely, two white students dress as "yuppie/politician" and a "Ku Klux Klan" member. What does this costuming reveal about assumptions regarding stereotypes? What conscious and unconscious bias is being reinforced by the white students?
8. One of the themes reinforced in the novel is that of upward mobility and opportunity. In what ways does the author reveal that black people have to often work harder than their white peers to achieve upward mobility? What examples from the text demonstrate this?
9. "Verisimilitude" is the quality or appearance of seeming to be true. Even though *Dear Martin* is a work of fiction, in what ways does it "seem" to be true? What are some examples from the text that bear similarity to real events?
10. Sections of the novel are in the form of media transcripts and press releases covering acts of violence against unarmed people of color. Based on your reading, what is the attitude of the media towards the black victims that are profiled? Do the media accounts appropriately report on these events? What larger point do you think the author is making about the role of the media?

## After Reading

### Research Opportunities

Opportunity #1 - *Dear Martin* was partly based on the murder of Jordan Davis, a seventeen-year-old African American male who was shot and killed by a white man in Jacksonville, Florida after the perpetrator objected to "loud music" coming from the victim's car. Over the past several years, there have been many other instances of unprovoked or unnecessary violence being used against unarmed people of color. Have students investigate one of these cases and write an informative essay in which they analyze the major elements of the case. Questions to consider include the following:



1. What is an objective summary of the case based on the most reliable sources?
2. What role did law enforcement play in the commission or aftermath of the incident?
3. What was the role of the media in covering the incident? Did the media portray the incident in a thorough manner reasonably free from bias?
4. What advocates, organizations, or other third parties were involved in responding to the incident and what role did they play?
5. What lessons were learned from the incident and were any precedents established?

Below is a list of individuals whose cases have received national visibility, but students should be encouraged to also choose from cases that aren't as visible in the media.

Daunte Wright	Andre Hill	Manuel Ellis
Rayshard Brooks	George Floyd	Breonna Taylor
Atatiana Jefferson	Stephon Clark	Botham Jean
Philando Castile	Freddie Gray	Eric Garner
Akai Gurley	Tamir Rice	Michael Brown
Trayvon Martin	Ahmaud Arbery	Terence Crutcher

Opportunity #2 - For longer research papers or multimedia projects, a list of possible research topics is provided. Students should also be encouraged to discuss ways in which *Dear Martin* deals implicitly or explicitly with these topics.

Black Lives Matter / Inception and History of the BLM Movement  
 Black Lives Matter vs. All/Blue Lives Matter  
 How Race Is Portrayed in the Media  
 School to Prison Pipeline  
 Controversy Around the N-Word  
 Resurgence of White Supremacism  
 Affirmative Action  
 Police Racial Profiling  
 Urban Renewal / Redlining Policies  
 Police Shooting of Black Americans  
 Academic Achievement Gap and Race  
 Current Effects of Jim Crow Laws  
 Racial Disparity in School Suspensions/Expulsions  
 Impact of Race on Employment

\*Note - The above list of research topics was adapted from a larger unit on *Dear Martin* created and taught by Sarah Rave at Mountain Discovery Charter School in Swain County.

### Extension Activity

Much of *Dear Martin* takes place at the fictional Braselton Preparatory Academy in Atlanta. The primacy of this setting underscores the role that schools play in engendering environments that are both safe and equitable for all students.



Have students research their individual school or school districts' anti-discrimination or anti-racist policies. Does their school district outline policies that specifically provide certain protections from discrimination for students of color? What are these protections? Do students feel as if their school reflects the principles embodied by these policies? Why or why not?

After students have had the opportunity to review their respective schools' policies, direct them to model examples of other anti-racist school policies as points of comparison. While numerous examples are available online, Albemarle County in neighboring Virginia offers a particularly strong model. Encourage students to review this policy at <<https://www.k12albemarle.org/our-division/anti-racism-policy/policy>>

After review, encourage students to answer the following questions:

1. What is the difference between an "anti-discrimination" policy and an "anti-racist" policy?
2. What are the basic characteristics of Albemarle County's anti-racist policy? What protections are offered for students of color that might not be offered under an anti-discrimination policy?
3. What is the mission and purpose of an anti-racist policy?
4. What terms need to be defined in an anti-racist policy in order for students and other stakeholders to understand how to implement such a policy?
5. What is required from school leaders to properly implement anti-racist measures?
6. What changes might be made to curriculum and instruction to encourage an anti-racist posture?
7. What is the role of students and teachers in maintaining an anti-racist environment?

After the above questions have been investigated, encourage students to think about how they might revise or rewrite their respective schools' anti-discrimination or anti-racist policies. What additions or revisions might make school policy stronger in these areas? What role do they play as students in creating anti-racist environments? How could they encourage others to join them in this mission?

## Online Resources

***Learning for Justice*** - <https://www.learningforjustice.org>

Formerly known as *Teaching Tolerance*, *Learning for Justice* seeks to uphold the mission of the Southern Poverty Law Center in being a catalyst for racial justice, strengthening intersectional movements, and advancing the human rights of all people. The site offers a trove of free educational resources including articles, guides, lessons, films, and webinars.

***Teaching for Change*** - <https://www.teachingforchange.org>

*Teaching for Change* encourages teachers and students to question and re-think the world inside and outside their classrooms, build a more equitable society, and become active global citizens. This organization offers high-quality professional development, lessons, and resources to help teachers supplement their curriculum.