

History's Promise Answer Key

1. King's Metaphor

King uses the metaphor of a **"promissory note" or "check"** to symbolize America's promises of equality. The "bad check" suggests that America has failed to deliver on its commitments to Black citizens.

2. Role of Context

In 1963, segregation, Jim Crow laws, and systemic racism were widespread. The metaphor gains urgency because Black Americans were legally denied many rights promised in America's founding documents.

3. Constitution & Declaration Resonance

These documents are **symbols of American identity and freedom**. Invoking them in 1963 highlights the hypocrisy of a nation that celebrates liberty while denying it to millions of its own people.

4. Inspiration to Listeners

The metaphor reframes civil rights not as a radical demand but as a **collecting of a rightful debt**, empowering listeners to see themselves as owed justice, not begging for it. This encouraged action and solidarity.

5. Model Paragraph

Understanding the historical context transforms the metaphor into a powerful indictment of injustice. A modern reader might see the "bad check" as a clever image, but in 1963, it spoke directly to the **broken promises of American democracy** amid segregation and racial violence. The historical backdrop reveals why King's words resonated deeply and mobilized people to demand change. Without context, the speech risks being reduced to poetry; with context, it becomes a **call to action shaped by history**.

Teacher Notes

- **Skill Development:** This task teaches students how to connect **historical conditions** to **textual meaning**, a key Grade 12 and college-level skill.
- Encourage students to bring in knowledge from U.S. History (e.g., Jim Crow laws, March on Washington, Brown v. Board).