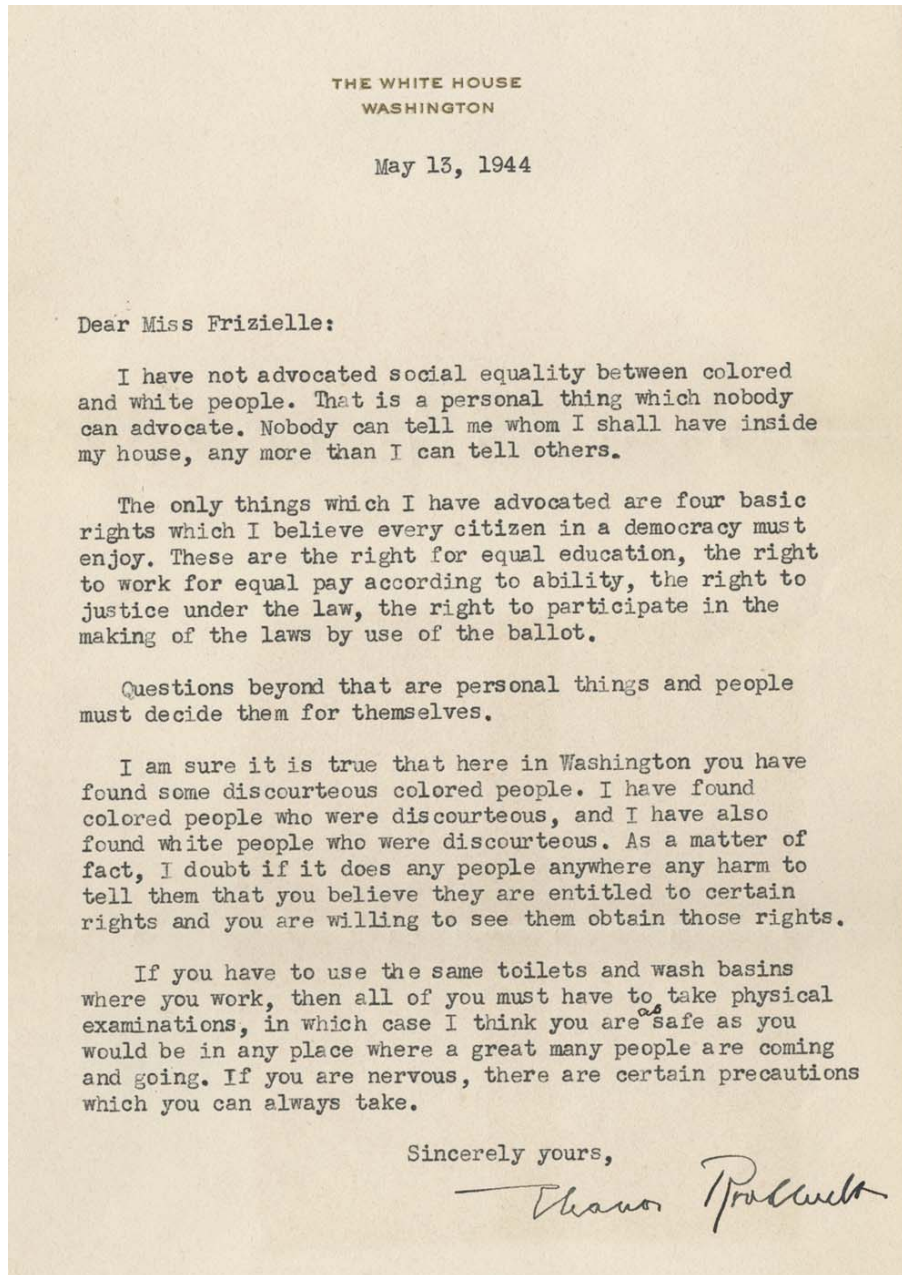


# Eleanor Roosevelt's Four Basic Rights, 1944

A primary source by Eleanor Roosevelt

*This letter is provided courtesy of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.*



*Eleanor Roosevelt to Addie Frizelle, May 13, 1944  
(Gilder Lehrman Collection)*

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a lifelong advocate of equal rights, used her position as First Lady to advocate against discrimination in the United States. However, Mrs. Roosevelt's ideas were not embraced by everyone in the pre-civil rights era when segregation and racism were institutionalized in American economics, politics, and society. In this letter from 1944 Mrs. Roosevelt responded to one of her critics, Addie Frizelle, who worried about the desegregation of restrooms and forced social interaction between the races in the government's movement toward racial equality in some spheres.

The First Lady deftly responded to the woman, dismissing her concerns about socialization and desegregation, while enumerating the "four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot."

### TRANSCRIPT

Eleanor Roosevelt to Addie Frizelle, May 13, 1944.

May 13, 1944

Dear Miss Frizelle:

I have not advocated social equality between colored and white people. That is a personal thing which nobody can advocate. Nobody can tell me whom I shall have inside my house, any more than I can tell others.

The only things which I have advocated are four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot.

Questions beyond that are personal things and people must decide them for themselves.

I am sure it is true that here in Washington you have found some discourteous colored people. I have found colored people who were discourteous, and I have also found white people who were discourteous. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it does any people anywhere any harm to tell them that you believe they are entitled to certain rights and you are willing to see them obtain those rights.

If you have to use the same toilets and wash basins where you work, then all of you must have to take physical examinations, in which case I think you are as safe as you would be in any place where a great many people are coming and going. If you are nervous, there are certain precautions which you can always take.

Sincerely yours,

Eleanor Roosevelt

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. According to Eleanor Roosevelt, who should enjoy four basic rights?

- A** women and children in a communist state
- B** members of all races in a monarchy
- C** every citizen in a democracy
- D** all people, regardless of where they live

2. How does Eleanor Roosevelt organize her letter?

- A** She first responds to specific concerns of Miss Frizelle's, then lists four basic rights which she believes every citizen in a democracy should enjoy, and finally expresses a belief about social equality.
- B** She first expresses a belief about social equality, then lists four basic rights which she believes every citizen in a democracy should enjoy, and finally responds to specific concerns of Miss Frizelle's.
- C** She first responds to specific concerns of Miss Frizelle's, then expresses a belief about social equality, and finally lists four basic rights which she believes every citizen in a democracy should enjoy.
- D** She first expresses a belief about social equality, then responds to specific concerns of Miss Frizelle's, and finally lists four basic rights which she believes every citizen in a democracy should enjoy.

3. Read this paragraph from Eleanor Roosevelt's letter.

"I am sure it is true that here in Washington you have found some discourteous colored people. I have found colored people who were discourteous, and I have also found white people who were discourteous. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it does any people anywhere any harm to tell them that you believe they are entitled to certain rights and you are willing to see them obtain those rights."

What can you infer from this information about Addie Frizelle?

- A** Addie Frizelle supported the same four basic rights that Eleanor Roosevelt did.
- B** Addie Frizelle was uncomfortable with the desegregation of restrooms in the workplace.
- C** Addie Frizelle considered the colored people and white people in Washington equally discourteous.
- D** Addie Frizelle was upset by the behavior of colored people in Washington.

4. How did Eleanor Roosevelt respond to Addie Frizelle's concern about the desegregation of restrooms in the workplace?

- A Eleanor Roosevelt argued that there is not much need to worry about the matter.
- B Eleanor Roosevelt acknowledged that Addie Frizelle's concern is a reasonable one.
- C Eleanor Roosevelt attacked Addie Frizelle's concern as racist and unfounded.
- D Eleanor Roosevelt observed that the safety of restrooms varies significantly from one workplace to another.

5. What is the main idea of Eleanor Roosevelt's letter?

- A There are discourteous colored people as well as discourteous white people in Washington.
- B Nobody has the right to tell other people whom they may have inside their houses because social equality is a matter that people must decide for themselves.
- C Physical examinations help ensure the safety of restrooms in the workplace, but people may take extra precautions if they are nervous.
- D All citizens in a democracy should have certain basic rights, and questions that do not involve those rights should be decided by people on their own.

6. Read this paragraph from Eleanor Roosevelt's letter.

"I am sure it is true that here in Washington you have found some discourteous colored people. I have found colored people who were discourteous, and I have also found white people who were discourteous. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it does any people anywhere any harm to tell them that you believe they are entitled to certain rights and you are willing to see them obtain those rights."

How can Eleanor Roosevelt's tone in this paragraph be described?

- A urgent and distressed
- B angry and combative
- C calm and thoughtful
- D warm and friendly

7. Read these sentence from the letter.

"I have not advocated social equality between colored and white people. That is a personal thing which nobody can advocate. Nobody can tell me whom I shall have inside my house, any more than I can tell others."

What is the relationship between the third sentence and the previous two?

- A** The third sentence helps to illustrate the meaning of the previous two sentences.
- B** The third sentence compares the ideas expressed by the previous two sentences.
- C** The third sentence contrasts the ideas expressed by the previous two sentences.
- D** The third sentence suggests an alternative to the ideas expressed by the previous two sentences.

**8.** What are the four basic rights that Eleanor Roosevelt believes every citizen in a democracy should enjoy?

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**9.** Addie Frizelle worried about the desegregation of restrooms and forced social interaction between the races in the government's movement toward racial equality in some spheres. Did Eleanor Roosevelt share these worries? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

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**10.** Eleanor Roosevelt believed that every citizen in a democracy should have four basic rights. Beyond that, she believed that people must decide matters for themselves. Is the matter of social interaction one that people must decide for themselves or one that is covered by the basic rights which every citizen should enjoy? Support your answer with evidence from the letter.

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## Teacher Guide &amp; Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1400

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2. How does Eleanor Roosevelt organize her letter?

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- C Physical examinations help ensure the safety of restrooms in the workplace, but people may take extra precautions if they are nervous.
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8. What are the four basic rights that Eleanor Roosevelt believes every citizen in a democracy should enjoy?

**Suggested answer:** The four basic rights are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, and the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot.

9. Addie Frizelle worried about the desegregation of restrooms and forced social interaction between the races in the government's movement toward racial equality in some spheres. Did Eleanor Roosevelt share these worries? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary, but students should recognize that Eleanor Roosevelt did not share these worries. She believed the worry about the desegregation of restrooms to be unnecessary, especially in light of the physical examinations required of people in the workplace. She also seemed unconcerned about social interaction between races, pointing out that discourteousness is exhibited by white people as well as by colored people.

10. Eleanor Roosevelt believed that every citizen in a democracy should have four basic rights. Beyond that, she believed that people must decide matters for themselves. Is the matter of social interaction one that people must decide for themselves or one that is covered by the basic rights which every citizen should enjoy? Support your answer with evidence from the letter.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary, as long as they are supported by the letter. Students may respond that private social interaction, such as people having others over at their houses, is a personal matter that individuals must decide for themselves. However, public social interaction may fall within the scope of the basic rights Eleanor Roosevelt identifies in her letter. For example, keeping certain people out of schools or limiting their access to schools would interfere with their right for equal education.