Astronomer, mathematician, and writer Benjamin Banneker penned a powerful letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1791, asking him to end the injustice of slavery in post-colonial America. A son of former slaves himself, Banneker’s rhetorical approach was threefold: to have Jefferson reflect back on America’s recent past of British colonial enslavement, to connect that political oppression to the physical bondage experienced by slaves in contemporary society, and to put the pressure on Jefferson to act according to his moral and political duty.

In the first part of the excerpt, Banneker brings to mind a time when the colonies were under the tyranny of British rule. He urges Jefferson to “look back” at the “horrors of slavery’s condition” in order to recall to his mind the state of hopelessness and despair that was felt by many colonists, including Jefferson, prior to the Revolutionary War. This mindset shift is important because Banneker is about to draw parallels to the current slavery issue, and it’s critical for Jefferson to be in emotional agreement with the “abhorrence” of slavery. Banneker is also careful to convey this message with a deferential tone as he broaches this sensitive subject. He continuously refers to Jefferson as “Sir” to show respect, but also to highlight the responsibility that comes with Jefferson’s office as Secretary of State. Gaining Jefferson’s trust and acceptance of these initial claims early on will make the abrupt shift that comes next pack that much more of a punch.

How can Jefferson acknowledge the pain of political servitude while all the while tyrannically oppressing another group of Americans? That hypocrisy is what Banneker spotlights in the second part of his letter. The initial reminder of Britain’s empirical rule over the colonies was the domino set up that Banneker can now knock down as he moves closer to his real purpose – getting Jefferson to see the injustice of modern day slave practices in America. Banneker flatters Jefferson by quoting iconic lines from the “true and valuable doctrine” of the Declaration of Independence, but then he takes Jefferson’s very words and uses them as a weapon against its own creator. Banneker boldly proclaims that Jefferson is “guilty of that most criminal act [of slavery] which [he] professedly detested” when the shoe was on the other foot. In addition, by emphasizing the “groaning captivity and cruel
oppression” of his brethren, Banneker is paralleling the modern slave experience to the same fight Jefferson was willing to wage a long and bloody war over when he was the one in (metaphorical) chains.

Finally Banneker puts the ball in Jefferson’s court, reminding him at the end of the letter about his political and Christian duty to do the right thing. In quoting directly from the book of Job, Banneker chooses to attack Jefferson under the eyes of God so that he can maintain a polite air while also reprimanding Jefferson for “those narrow prejudices which [he] has imbibed.” The reprimanding carries so much more weight because it is not simply the son of former slaves passing judgment, but rather a fellow religious follower illustrating Jefferson’s sins and calling on him to fulfill his Christian duty. Additionally, Banneker downplays his role in directing Jefferson’s actions at the end of the piece when he contends that “you will need neither the direction of myself or others in what manner to proceed herein.” The implication from Banneker here is that Jefferson already knows the difference between right and wrong. It’s up to him on whether he acts on it or leaves an entire population of human beings in the same bondage from which he “mercifully received” freedom.

By addressing Jefferson’s past servitude, present hypocrisy, and future decision-making, Banneker reinforces the notion that slavery is an unjust system that must end now.