



Understanding and Analyzing the Gettysburg Address A Close Reading Activity

Objective | Students will be able to: understand the meaning and central ideas of the Gettysburg Address; cite textual evidence to analyze a primary source; examine the structure of a primary source text; memorize an important historical speech.

Length | This lesson is broken into two 45-minute sections. For some teachers this might mean spending two days on this lesson, while for others, it may be accomplished in one block. This lesson also includes extension activities.

Common Core State Standards Addressed | Literacy in History/Social Studies, Grades 9–10:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.5 Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

Literacy in History/Social Studies, Grades 11–12:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the

meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in *Federalist* No. 10).

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

Materials | Copies of the Gettysburg Address for each student

Teacher Background Information

The Battle of Gettysburg, a turning point in the Civil War, was fought from July 1-3, 1863. This battle was significant for many reasons: First, it was a turning point in the war, shifting the momentum back to the North, as they were victorious in this battle. Second, Gettysburg, PA was the furthest north that the Confederate Army had been able to reach during the war. Third, the losses suffered during this battle greatly affected the rest of the war; General Lee was never able to launch another major offensive. In just two days, 5,300 Union soldiers were killed with another 17,000 wounded and 27,000 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded.

President Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of a Union cemetery at Gettysburg. Lincoln delivered this brief 10-sentence speech in the midst of a civil war whose deepest cause was the institution of slavery, and it was in this address that he gave his most famous defense of equality. Lincoln's remarks were preceded by a two-hour-long oration by Edward Everett, a well-known speaker who had represented Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

The Gettysburg Address contains three paragraphs of progressively increasing length, which refer to time periods and actors of progressively increasing rhetorical importance:

- **Paragraph 1:** the past (“Four-score and seven years ago”; “our fathers”; 30 words);
- **Paragraph 2:** the very immediate present (“Now”; we who are engaged in a great civil war, but mainly a much smaller we who are, right here and right now, met on a great battlefield of that war and who, fittingly and properly, have come to dedicate a portion of that field; 73 words);
- **Paragraph 3:** our future in relation to our present and our past (contrasting “the brave men” who fought and died, with “us the living”; and moving from (a) our inability through speech to dedicate ground better consecrated by the deeds of the brave men, (b) to “us the living” dedicating ourselves to the great task remaining before us, (c) to “we here highly resolv[ing]” to win the war, so that

(d) certain great things will follow, both for this nation (“a new birth”) and also for people everywhere (169 words, nearly half of them in the last sentence about our dedication).

Lincoln was interested in inspiring his listeners, “us the living,” who were—despite dispiriting loss and grief—“to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced,” to “the great task remaining before us,” namely, victory in the war and the restoration of the Union.

One main theme of the Gettysburg Address is the image of the birth and re-birth (i.e., baptism) of the nation and the meaning of this new birth of freedom. Central to Lincoln’s declaration of America reborn is his own new, as-it-were baptismal, teaching on the relation between liberty and equality, crucial to our new birth of freedom.

It is especially the beginning and end of the speech that conveys Lincoln’s larger purpose: to create for future generations an interpretation of the war, and especially the war’s relation to both the once “new nation,” brought forth by “our fathers” and “conceived in liberty,” and “this nation,” which, through the sacrifice of war and our dedication, “shall have a new birth of freedom.” According to Lincoln, the original birth of America was new not only in historical fact; it was new also in principle. It was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. The rebirth of the nation rests on proving that proposition by our dedication, through deeds of war, to make equality a reality.

Thus, another major theme of the speech is of the war as a test for the United States. The speech offers Lincoln’s understanding of the war as a test of America’s founding, and his own characterization of this nation now being reborn through passing that bloody test. Lincoln knew that this denial of human equality [slavery] was the true cause of the war; and Lincoln understood that the bloody struggle over slavery was the true test of the nation. Passing the test meant winning the war, in part because winning the war meant a vindication of the proposition of equality. This new freedom will differ from the British liberty in which the nation was first conceived. Here equality will not come out of liberty. Rather, freedom will be born out of equality, because the inegalitarian principle and the practice of slavery will be repudiated and defeated as the necessary condition of rebirth. Masters as well as slaves will share in this new birth of freedom, having shed the mutual degradation that enslavement brings to them both.

Class Activity

Student Preparation | Distribute copies of the Gettysburg Address to students. Students should memorize the Gettysburg Address and be prepared to recite it in class.

Warm-Up (15 minutes) | Students will spend five minutes writing a response to the following question: *What do you think is the meaning of equality today?*

Instruct students to share their responses with a partner. Then, each partner will share with the class one or two of their main ideas.

Teacher will then provide the class with necessary background information on the Battle of Gettysburg and relevant themes of this text, providing context for analyzing the Gettysburg Address.

Examining the Primary Source (30 minutes) | To begin, ask the students the following questions: *What do you notice about the length of this address? Why do you think Lincoln made it so short?*

Instruct students to read the address and underline any words, phrases or sentences that stand out to them as being important to understanding the meaning of the text. Underline all repeated words. Note all words referring to place and time.

Ask students to discuss the answers to the following questions and instruct them to annotate the margins of their copies of the Gettysburg Address with the answers:

1. What does “Four score and seven years ago” mean? [*87 years, i.e. 1776*]
2. What sort of language is this, and why might Lincoln have used it? [*Biblical language, from Psalms 90:10; its usage is a way of stressing that the Founding—1776—is now beyond everyone’s living memory.*]
3. What is Lincoln referring to in this first sentence? [*Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution, is the birth of the nation.*]
4. What is the purpose of the address that Lincoln is giving?
5. Why does Lincoln say that “**we** can not dedicate—**we** can not consecrate—**we** can not hallow—this ground?” Cite evidence from the text in your response.
6. What then **can** we do? What does Lincoln say is the task “for us the living?” Why?
7. What was “**that cause** for which they gave the last full measure of devotion?” Do you think all of the soldiers who died fighting at Gettysburg were fighting for the same cause? Why or why not? [*Note: the cemetery was for the Union dead, only*]
8. In the last clause, what is meant by government “of the people, by the people, for the people?”

Teacher Note: For more information on the specifics of the language, see the section after the extension activities.

Analyzing a Primary Source (40 minutes) | Ask a student volunteer to recite the Gettysburg Address. [*Note: Students should have memorized this for homework. Ask the other students to assist the volunteer in case he/she stumbles with the recitation.*] Instruct students to listen for the structure of the address as well as to the language that Lincoln used.

After the recitation, ask the following questions:

1. What is the structure of the speech?
2. What is the key image in the speech, and what point does its use convey? [*Birth and rebirth—akin to birth and baptism*]
3. What words are most often repeated? Why are these words repeated?
4. Why do you think he chose to use the words that he did?

Now, remind the students of their warm-up question about the meaning of equality today. Ask them to consider and discuss:

1. What does Lincoln mean by equality?
2. What is the difference between “holding” equality as a “self-evident truth,” as we do in the creed enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, and regarding it as a “proposition” to which we are dedicated? [*The creed of the American Republic, as enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, begins with the claim, offered as a self-evident truth, that “all men are created equal.”*]
3. How does Lincoln understand the relationship between equality and freedom in America? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
4. What is the connection among freedom, equality, and government of, by, and for the people?

Exit Ticket (5 minutes) | Students will write the answer to the following question on their exit ticket: *In three sentences, sum up the significance of the Gettysburg Address. Why is this speech still read and analyzed by Americans today? Is it important for us today?*

Extension Activities | Students will create their own address for a sacred, or “hallowed” space of their choosing. Their address must capture Lincoln’s in tone and structure, but of course the content will be determined by the place they choose.

Students will write a paragraph response to the question below, citing evidence from the Gettysburg Address in their response. *Compare and contrast Lincoln’s understanding of equality and its relation to freedom with your own.*

Students will try to re-write the Gettysburg Address in their own words, using modern language.

Extra: On Language and Form in the Gettysburg Address

The Gettysburg Address is, in both language and form, a perfect text for the bible of what Lincoln elsewhere called our “political religion,” that is, a spirit of reverence for the republic, its ideals and institutions, and its laws. It is short enough to be memorized: 3

paragraphs of progressively increasing length, 10 sentences, 272 words (only 130 different words), 74% of which are monosyllables. The polysyllabic words stand out against the little words, and only a few pregnant longer words appear more than once: among the disyllabic words, only conceived, living, rather, people (three times in the last clause), and especially nation (5 times: “new nation” in paragraph 1; “that nation,” “any nation,” and “that nation” in paragraph 2; but “this nation” in the last sentence of paragraph 3, this nation that shall be reborn into freedom). Among still longer words, Lincoln uses more than once only devotion (twice), consecrate or consecrated (twice), and—the most important word in the speech—dedicate or dedicated (6 times). Noteworthy also is the echoing use of the word “here”—heard 8 times—the importance of which is made clear by the end.

The speech, in its spatial references, has an hour-glass structure, widest below: it opens “on this continent,” narrows in its center to “a great battle-field” and, even narrower, to “a portion of that field,” but finishes by suggesting that our dedication “here” can ensure that popular government will never perish from the whole earth.



Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Vocabulary:

Score: Twenty years

Proposition: something offered for consideration or acceptance; a request

Endure: to remain firm under suffering

Consecrate: dedicated to a sacred purpose

Hallow: to make holy; to respect greatly

In vain: without success or result

Perish: cease to exist