

A Close Reading of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

This unit has been developed to guide you in a close reading of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." The activities and actions below follow a carefully developed set of steps that assist you in increasing your familiarity and understanding of Lincoln's speech through a series of tasks and questions that ultimately develop your ability to interpret and interact with text that is written by an intelligent person.

This unit can be broken down into three sections of instruction and reflection, and is followed by additional activities.

SECTION 1 **What's at stake: a nation as a place and as an idea**

- You will silently read, then I will read aloud the text of the Gettysburg Address while you follow along
- You translate into your own words the first and second paragraphs
- You answer guiding questions regarding the first two paragraphs

SECTION 2 **From funeral to new birth**

- You are re-acquainted with the first two paragraphs of the speech
- You translate the third and final paragraph into your own words
- You answer guiding questions regarding the third paragraph of the Gettysburg Address

SECTION 3 ******* as national identity and personal devotion**

- You trace the accumulated meaning of the word "*****" through the text
- You write a brief essay on the structure of Lincoln's argument

President Abraham Lincoln's Speech

The Gettysburg Address, 1863

**Translation
Directions:**

The aim here for you is not to summarize, but to paraphrase, to put it in your own words. You should write no more than a couple of sentences.

Four score¹ 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 war², testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield 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 consecrate³—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 vain⁴—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.

¹ score: twenty

² civil war: a war between citizens of the same country

³ consecrate: declare a place sacred

⁴ in vain: without accomplishing anything

What's at stake: a nation as a place and an idea

Section 1 Activities

1. You first read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address silently.
2. I then read the text out loud and you follow along in the text.
3. After listening, you re-read the first paragraph of the Gettysburg Address and translate it into your own words.
4. We will then discuss a small set of guiding questions about the first paragraph of Lincoln's speech.
5. After the discussion, you will rewrite your translation of Lincoln's paragraph.
6. The teacher guides discussion of first line of second paragraph.
7. Wrap up.

Guiding Questions:

1. **In the first sentence, what does Lincoln tell us about this new nation?**

Short Answer: a lot!

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>"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."</p>	A	<p><i>What does Lincoln mean by "four score and seven years ago"?</i></p> <p><i>Who are "our fathers"?</i></p>
	B	<p><i>What does conceived mean?</i></p>
	C	<p><i>What does proposition mean?</i></p>

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>“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.”</p>	<p><i>D What is he saying is significant about America? Is he saying that no one has been free or equal before? So what is new?</i></p>	

2. What happened four score and seven years ago?

This section deepens our examination of what was at stake in the Gettysburg Address by further examining how Lincoln places his words in context. For now, the emphasis continues to be on what you can draw from the text itself to figure out an answer to this question—not to the historical context.

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>“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.”</p>	<p>A. <i>When was “four score and seven years ago”?</i></p> <p>B. <i>What important thing happened in 1776?</i></p> <p>C. <i>What does Lincoln tell us in this first sentence about what happened 87 years ago?</i></p>	

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
	D. <i>What can we know about "our fathers" from this sentence?</i>	
	E. <i>What is the impact of Lincoln referring to such a famous date?</i>	

5. **Step 5 --**

Based on what you have learned, you rewrite your more nuanced and complex translation of the first line.

6. Step 6 – I guide discussion of first line of second paragraph.

What is being tested by this war?

This question furthers the conversation of how Lincoln establishes what is at stake.

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”</p>	<p>A. <i>What effect does starting the sentence with “now” have on its meaning?</i></p>	
	<p>B. <i>When Lincoln says the nation was “so conceived and so dedicated” what is he referring to?</i></p>	
	<p>C. <i>What is the point including the phrase “or any nation so conceived and so dedicated” – what would the sentence mean without it?</i></p>	<p>Simplify Lincoln’s sentence, looking at it with and without those words:</p> <p>Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation can long endure. (simplified sentence)</p> <p>“Now we are engaged in a great civil war testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” (original sentence)</p>

D. The impact of a word choice: What if Lincoln had used the verb “start” instead of “conceive?”

7. **Wrap up:** How does Lincoln’s argument that the war is about more than a place make his speech more compelling?

SECTION 2
(1–2 days)

From funeral to new birth

Section Two Activities

1. You will read independently the third paragraph of the address.
2. Let’s establish the context and participate in a brief, but guided, discussion of the remainder of the second paragraph.
3. I will then read, or play, the text of the third paragraph out loud and you will follow along.
4. You will translate the third paragraph into your own words.
5. Next, I will ask a small set of guiding questions about paragraph three.
6. You will revise your translation of the third paragraph.
7. Wrap up.

Step 2 - What are the people who are assembled at Gettysburg there to do?

The aim of this discussion is to clarify the situation and context for the speech.

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>“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 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.”</p>	A <i>Divide the sentence into simpler parts to make the context of the speech clear and ponder what each part means.</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="779 394 1629 423">1. “We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place.”<li data-bbox="779 537 1629 565">2. “For those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.”
	B <i>What larger war is this battle a part of? If we weren't in the middle of the Civil War unit, what clues would you use?</i>	

Guiding Questions for third paragraph

1. What did those who fought at Gettysburg do that those who have gathered cannot?

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>“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.”</p>	<i>A What is the effect of starting the paragraph with “but”?</i>	
	<i>B What does Lincoln describe as the effect of those who fought at Gettysburg?</i>	

2. What is the unfinished work that those listening to the speech are asked to achieve?

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
<p>“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 vain⁵—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.”</p>	<p>A <i>What does the word “rather” mean in this sentence?</i></p> <hr/> <p>B <i>What four specific ideas does Lincoln ask his listeners to commit themselves to at the end of his speech?</i></p>	

⁵ in vain: without accomplishing anything

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Responses
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1. Step 6 --

Based on what you have learned, you rewrite your more nuanced and complex translation of the third paragraph.

2. Wrap up

How does Lincoln use the idea of “unfinished work” to assign responsibility to his listeners?

***** as national identity and personal devotion

How does the meaning of “*****” change over the course of the text, and what does this reveal about the Gettysburg address?

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Instructional Commentary
[Listen to entire speech]	A <i>Look carefully at Lincoln’s speech; which verb does he use the most (sometime he uses it in the past tense)? Circle the verb each time it appears in the text.</i>	
<p>“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.</p> <p>Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”</p>	B <i>What does the word mean the first two times Lincoln uses it, and what other verb is closely linked to it the first two times it appears?</i>	
<p>“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.</p> <p>But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground.”</p>	C <i>How is “dedicate” used the next two times, and how does it relate to the word consecrate? Who is now doing the dedicating?</i>	

Text Under Discussion	Guiding Questions	Instructional Commentary
<p>“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—.”</p>	<p><i>D How does Lincoln use “dedicate” the final two times, and how does it relate to devotion?</i></p>	
<hr/> <p>Wrap up</p> <p>Summarize how the meanings of “dedicate” accumulate from the beginning of the speech to the end, and the impact of the meaning that has built up over the course of the speech.</p>		
<hr/> <p>Mini-Essay</p> <p>The aim of the following prompt is to have you reflect on the particular genius of Lincoln’s brief speech, in which he acknowledges that his words cannot perform the task set before him and the assembled crowd, so he transforms the occasion into one that challenges his listeners to rededicate themselves to the task of preserving self-government and a new birth of freedom:</p> <p>Essay Prompt: In the last paragraph of the “Gettysburg Address,” Lincoln shifts the focus of his speech away from what he says is its purpose at the end of the second paragraph. What <i>reasons</i> does he give for the shift in focus? What does Lincoln think is the task left to those listening to his speech? Use evidence from the text to support your analysis. Formulate an answer to these questions in a thoughtful brief essay. (Approximately a page).</p> <p>When writing your mini-essay, be mindful of the work we already completed. Review your notes. The essay should be well organized and effectively support the point being made with carefully selected evidence.</p> <hr/>		