

The Gettysburg Address, 1863

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.

Abraham Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*, 1863. Bliss [White House] copy, March 1864.
(White House Collection)

The Gettysburg Address, 1863

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2014, updated in 2024)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Four 45-minute class periods (You may choose to assign more than one section of the speech each day if it is appropriate for your students.)

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources.

The four lessons in this unit explore Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Students will select keywords from the text, write succinct summaries of selections from the text, and restate those summaries in their own words. You will assess students’ understanding through an essay.

Students will be able to

- Understand the meaning of a densely constructed historical text that features unfamiliar vocabulary
- Identify and explain keywords and important phrases in a historical text
- Summarize the meaning of a historical text on both literal and inferential levels
- Develop a historical interpretation and write a persuasive (argumentative) essay supported by evidence
- Identify a key document in American history (e.g., Gettysburg Address)

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did President Abraham Lincoln describe the nation’s origins?
- According to Lincoln, why was the founders’ vision in jeopardy in 1863?
- What was Lincoln’s explanation for why the Civil War should matter to non-Americans?
- What words and phrases in the Gettysburg Address are about slavery?
- What did Lincoln claim was the best way to honor members of the military who had been killed in battle?
- How did Lincoln compare the contributions of the “honored dead” to those of other citizens?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.5: Describe how a text presents information (e.g., sequentially, comparatively, causally).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

MATERIALS

- Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, Bliss or White House copy handwritten by Lincoln in March 1864. Available from the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/document_transcripts/Gettysburg_Address_small.pdf.
- Summary Organizers 1–3
- Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address (highlighted)
- Preparing to Write an Essay
- Projector, Smartboard, or similar device

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

by Ronald C. White

On the first three days of July 1863, 160,000 Union and Confederate soldiers fought a momentous battle at the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The battle left 50,000 dead and wounded.

Within days, Gettysburg lawyer David Wills began plans for establishing the first national cemetery. Edward Everett, who had served as president of Harvard, was invited to offer the main address at the dedication of the cemetery. Only seventeen days before the event, Wills wrote to President Lincoln, asking him to offer "a few appropriate remarks."

On November 19, 1863, Everett spoke for two hours and eight minutes. As Lincoln was introduced, a photographer adjusted his camera to get a photograph of the President.

Lincoln began: "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." The President asked his audience to calculate backward eighty-seven years, stating that the nation's starting point was not the Constitution, nor the election of President George Washington, but the Declaration of Independence.

Lincoln constructed his address in the past, present, and future. He started in the past, placing the dedication within the larger story of American history.

In speaking of "our fathers," he asked his audience to accept a common heritage.

After his introductory sentence, Lincoln traveled forward quickly from the American Revolution to the Civil War. Unlike Everett, he did not describe any details of the battle. His purpose was rather to define the purpose of the "nation," a word he would use five times. He stated the Civil War was a "testing" of the nation's founding ideals to see whether they could "endure."

Before lifting his eyes from the battlefield, Lincoln told his audience what they could not do: "we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground." Continuing his use of the negative, he combined it with a positive. "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

In the last three sentences of his address, Lincoln shifted his focus a final time. He spoke to the responsibility of the hearers. "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."

Now he made his only extemporaneous addition to his text, adding "under God." "Under God" pointed backward, for Lincoln always insisted that the nation's origins drew from both political and religious sources. "Under God" also pointed forward. In the Civil War Lincoln found himself wrestling in new ways with the purposes of the nation, especially its heritage of slavery.

In the climax of his address, he uttered the words most remembered: "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln finished in less than three minutes. His "few appropriate remarks" totaled 272 words. He concluded before the photographer could record the event.

On the following day Everett wrote, "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself, that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours, as you did in two minutes."

Today the words of the Gettysburg Address are enshrined in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

Ronald C. White is the author of several books on Abraham Lincoln including A. Lincoln: A Biography and The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln through His Words. He has spoken about Lincoln in England, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and New Zealand.

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW

Students will be asked to “read like a detective” and gain a clear understanding of the content of President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address of 1863. Through reading and analyzing the original text, the students will learn what is explicitly stated, draw logical inferences, and demonstrate their knowledge by writing a succinct summary of the text. In the first lesson this learning process will be completed as a whole-class exercise.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did President Abraham Lincoln describe the nation’s origins?
- What words and phrases in the Gettysburg Address are about slavery?

MATERIALS

- Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, Bliss or White House copy handwritten by Lincoln in March 1864. Available from the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/exhibitions/document_transcripts/Gettysburg_Address_small.pdf.
- Summary Organizer 1
- Projector, Smartboard, or other display method

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute copies of the Gettysburg Address. Resist putting the speech into historical context as the students should draw conclusions directly from the text itself.
2. “Share read” the address with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
3. Distribute Summary Organizer 1. This contains the first paragraph of the Gettysburg Address. Display Summary Organizer 1 in a format large enough for all the students to see and explain that in this lesson the whole class will work together to read and summarize the text.
4. Share read the excerpt with the class as described in Procedure 2 above.

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. The four lessons in this unit explore Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

5. Explain that the first step is to select “keywords” from the text.

Guidelines for selecting keywords: Keywords are important to the meaning of the text. They are usually nouns or verbs. The students should not select “connector” words (*are, is, the, and, so, etc.*). The number of keywords chosen depends on the length of the text. This selection is only 30 words, so you can pick 4 or 5 keywords. Tell the students that they must know the meaning of the words they choose. You can take the opportunity to teach students how to use context clues, word analysis, and dictionary skills to discover word meanings.

6. Students will now select 4 or 5 words from the text that they believe are keywords. You may have the students circle the keywords or write them in the Keywords section of the organizer.
7. Survey the class to find out what the most popular choices are. You can write them down and have the class discuss the options and vote on the final choice, based on guidance from you. For example, the class might decide on the following words: *new nation* (you can allow a very short phrase if it makes sense as a unit), *liberty, men, and equal*. Now, no matter which words the students had previously selected, have them write the words agreed upon by the class into the Keywords section.
8. Explain to the class that they will use the keywords to write a sentence that summarizes what Lincoln was saying. This should be a whole-class negotiation process. For example, “They created a new nation of liberty where all men are equal.” The students might decide they don’t need some of the words to make the sentence even more streamlined. This is part of the negotiation process. The final negotiated sentence is copied into Keyword Summary section of the organizer.
9. Now work with the students to restate the summary sentence in their own words. For example, “They started a country where everyone would be free and treated the same.”
10. Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. The students could make note of these words and their meaning on the back of their organizer or a separate vocabulary form.

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will continue reading and analyzing the text of President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Through reading and analyzing the original text, they will know what is explicitly stated, draw logical inferences, and demonstrate these skills by writing a succinct keyword summary and then restating that summary in their own words. In this lesson the students will work with partners and in small groups.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- According to Lincoln, why was the founders’ vision in jeopardy in 1863?
- What was Lincoln’s explanation for why the Civil War should matter to non-Americans?
- What did Lincoln claim was the best way to honor members of the military who had been killed in battle?

MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer 2
- Projector, Smartboard, or similar device

PROCEDURE

1. Discuss what the class did in the previous lesson and what they decided the first paragraph of the Gettysburg Address means.
2. Tell the class that they will be looking at the second paragraph of the text in this lesson, working with partners and in small groups.
3. Distribute Summary Organizer 2 and display it in a format large enough for the class to see.
4. Share read the second paragraph with the students as described in Lesson 1.
5. Review the procedure from Lesson 1, reminding students that they will select keywords from the text, use those keywords to summarize the meaning of this paragraph of the Gettysburg Address, and then restate the summary in their own words. Because this paragraph is 72 words, they can pick 6 to 8 keywords.
6. Pair the students up and have each pair negotiate which keywords to select. After they have chosen their words, both students will write them in the Keywords section of the organizer.
7. Now put two pairs together. This group of four will go through the same negotiation process to come up with their final keywords. Be strategic in how you make your groups to ensure the most participation by all group members.

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GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

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8. Each group will use their keywords to build a sentence that summarizes what Lincoln was talking about. Try to make sure that everyone contributes to the process. It is easy for one student to take control and for the other students to let them. All of the students should write the negotiated sentence into their organizers.
9. Ask the groups to share out their keyword summary sentences. This should start a teacher-led discussion that points out the qualities of the interpretations of Lincoln's meaning. How successful were the groups at understanding Lincoln's text and were they careful to use the keywords in summarizing the text?
10. Each group will now restate the summary in their own words. Again, this is a group negotiation process. After they have decided on a sentence, they should write the final version into their organizers.
11. Have the groups share out their sentences and discuss the clarity and quality of the groups' interpretations of Lincoln's meaning.
12. Wrap-up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. They can keep a record of these words and their meaning on the back of the organizer or a separate vocabulary form.

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will continue reading and analyzing President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Through reading and analyzing the original text, they will know what is explicitly stated, draw logical inferences, and demonstrate these skills by writing a succinct keyword summary and then restating that summary in their own words. In this lesson the students will work individually.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What words and phrases in the Gettysburg Address are about slavery?
- What did Lincoln claim was the best way to honor members of the military who had been killed in battle?
- How did Lincoln compare the contributions of the “honored dead” to those of other citizens?

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MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer 3

PROCEDURE

1. Briefly discuss the summaries of Lincoln’s text that the class came up with for the first and second paragraphs of the Gettysburg Address.
2. Distribute Summary Organizer 3, which contains the third paragraph from the speech, and tell the students that they will be working on their own on this part of the text.
3. Share read the paragraph with the class as described in Lesson 1.
4. Remind students that they will select keywords from the text, use the keywords to summarize Lincoln’s text, and then restate the summary in their own words. Because this paragraph is 166 words, the students can pick up to 10 keywords. After choosing their words, they will write them in the Keywords section of their organizers.
5. Once they have selected their keywords and written their summaries and restatements, have the students share out their restatements and discuss the clarity and quality of the different interpretations of Lincoln’s meaning.
6. Wrap-up: Discuss vocabulary that the students found confusing or difficult. They can keep a record of these words and their meaning on the back of the organizer or a separate vocabulary form.

LESSON 4

OVERVIEW

This lesson has three objectives. First, the students will synthesize the work of the last three lessons and demonstrate that they understand what Abraham Lincoln was saying in the Gettysburg Address. Second, the students will analyze Lincoln’s writing craft by examining his use of the word “dedicate” in this document. Third, the students will answer a question that requires them to make inferences from the text and support their conclusions with explicit information from the text. They can write their answer in the form of a short argumentative essay during this lesson, for homework, or during the next class.

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GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. The four lessons in this unit explore Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

MATERIALS

- The Gettysburg Address (from Lesson 1)
- The Gettysburg Address (highlighted)
- Preparing to Write an Essay
- Projector, Smartboard, or similar device

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute copies of the Gettysburg Address and ask the students to read it silently to themselves.
2. Ask the class for the best summary of the first paragraph. Write this sentence in a place that is visible to the whole class. Follow the same procedure for paragraphs two and three. Once this process is complete, the students will have a brief summary of the entire speech.
3. Explain that Lincoln used one particular word six times in this short speech, and as the speech develops so does the meaning of the word. He used it once in the first paragraph, twice in the second paragraph, and three times in the third paragraph. Have the students figure out that the word is “dedicate.”
4. Display the highlighted copy of the Gettysburg Address so that all of the students can see it, but cover up the definitions at the bottom of the page for now. Ask the students to figure out how the meaning of the word changes from paragraph to paragraph. After this discussion, reveal the definitions at the bottom of the page and match the definitions with the highlighted words.
5. Ask the students the following questions to generate discussion:
 - a. How does the use of the word “dedicate” change the meaning of the message in the paragraph?
 - b. Why did Lincoln choose to use the same word over and over in this short speech instead of picking different words that mean the same thing?
 - c. How does the use of “dedicate” change who Lincoln is talking to or about?

6. The students will write a short essay addressing one of the following prompts. You may choose to hand out the Preparing to Write an Essay activity sheet to help them organize their thoughts. If they are not familiar with the writing process, you can conduct a brief lesson on constructing an argumentative essay, and you can assign the essay for homework or for the next lesson. Remind the students that any arguments they make must be backed up with words taken directly from the Gettysburg Address. The first prompt is designed to be the easiest.

Prompts

1. How did President Abraham Lincoln describe the nation's origins? How does this compare with his description of the nation's future?
2. This speech does not include the word "slavery." What words and phrases nonetheless make this a speech about abolishing slavery?
3. What was President Lincoln's explanation for why the Civil War was worth fighting, despite the lives lost?

Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, 1863

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.

Source: Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863, The Bliss or White House copy handwritten by Lincoln in March 1864.

NAME

PERIOD DATE

Summary Organizer 1

Original Text

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. . . .

Keywords (4–5)

Keyword Summary

In Your Own Words

NAME

PERIOD DATE

Summary Organizer 2

Original Text

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. . . .

Keywords (6–8)

Keyword Summary

In Your Own Words

NAME _____

PERIOD DATE _____

Summary Organizer 3

Original Text

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.

Keywords (up to 10)

Keyword Summary

In Your Own Words

The Gettysburg Address, by Abraham Lincoln (highlighted)

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.

ded·i·cate

1. to set apart and consecrate to a deity or to a sacred purpose: The ancient Greeks dedicated many shrines to Aphrodite.
2. to devote wholly and earnestly, as to some person or purpose: He dedicated his life to fighting corruption.
3. to offer formally (a book, piece of music, etc.) to a person, cause, or the like in testimony of affection or respect, as on a prefatory page. The author dedicated the book to his wife, who had supported him throughout the writing process.

NAME _____

PERIOD DATE _____

Preparing to Write an Essay

Step 1: Select one of the following prompts. Circle the number next to that prompt.

1. How did President Abraham Lincoln describe the nation's origins? How does this compare with his description of the nation's future?
2. This speech does not include the word "slavery." What words and phrases nonetheless make this a speech about abolishing slavery?
3. What was President Lincoln's explanation for why the Civil War was worth fighting, despite the lives lost?

Step 2: What is your answer to the prompt's question?

Step 3: Select quotations from the text as evidence to support your answer:

Quote 1:

Quote 2:

Quote 3: