

## Four Score and Seven Years Ago: Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg Address, and Identity

- **Compelling Question**
  - Why are identity and equality important values?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will analyze Abraham Lincoln’s identity as a writer, speaker, and president related to the Gettysburg address.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will read a narrative about Abraham Lincoln about the writing and recitation of the Gettysburg Address.
  - Students will analyze the significance of the Address as related to identity and equality.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of identity and equality to their own lives.
  - Students will help to protect freedom for themselves and others through identity and equality.
- **Background**
  - The American Civil War began in April 1861, when the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter. In September 1862, after the battle of Antietam, President Abraham Lincoln finally felt he had the victory he needed to issue a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in states then in rebellion. Despite gaining the moral advantage politically, the bloody war raged on into 1863. In early July, the Union and Confederate armies clashed at a small town in the sleepy Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg and out west at the Mississippi river port of Vicksburg. Both resulted great victories for the Union. However, these victories were still not enough to bring the war to a conclusion. The cost of victory in both these battles was high. To provide a final resting place for many of these honored dead, a new cemetery was created in Gettysburg. This cemetery was dedicated at a ceremony in November of 1863, only four months after the battle. President Abraham Lincoln accepted an invitation to speak and offered a reflection on the battle, war, and principles that continue to shape American ideals.
- **Vocabulary**
  - Preliminary
  - Dedicated
  - Reflection
  - Casualties
  - Commemorate
  - Voraciously
  - Elocution
  - Rhythm
  - Cadence
  - Musings
  - Renown
  - Composition
  - Oration
  - Natural rights
  - Republic
  - Proposition
  - Veracity
  - Perished
  - Dedicate
  - Triplets
  - Consecrate
  - Rhetorical
  - Humility
  - Hallow
  - Nobly
  - Expositors

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - How was Lincoln’s identity reflected in this episode of his life?
  - What was Lincoln’s purpose for delivering the Gettysburg Address?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - Gettysburg Address: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/gettyb.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp)
  - Gettysburg National Military Park: <http://www.nps.gov/gett/index.htm>
  - Lincoln, Abraham. Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865 : Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings Presidential Messages and Proclamations. Library of America, 2009.
  - Wills, Gary. *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*. Simon & Schuster, 2006.
  - Borritt, Gabor. *Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech that Nobody Knows*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008.
  - Wilson, Douglas L. *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*. New York: Vintage, 2006.
  - White, Jr., Ronald C. *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words*. New York: Random House, 2006.

## Handout A: Four Score and Seven Years Ago: The Gettysburg Address and American Identity

### Background

The American Civil War began in April 1861, when the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter. In September 1862, after the battle of Antietam, President Abraham Lincoln finally felt he had the victory he needed to issue a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in states then in rebellion. Despite gaining the moral advantage politically, the bloody war raged on into 1863. In early July, the Union and Confederate armies clashed at a small town in the sleepy Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg and out west at the Mississippi river port of Vicksburg. Both resulted great victories for the Union. However, these victories were still not enough to bring the war to a conclusion. The cost of victory in both these battles was high. To provide a final resting place for many of these honored dead, a new cemetery was created in Gettysburg. This cemetery was dedicated at a ceremony in November of 1863, only four months after the battle. President Abraham Lincoln accepted an invitation to speak and offered a reflection on the battle, war, and principles that continue to shape American ideals.

### Narrative

In the late autumn of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln faced many public and personal crises. The Civil War raged on despite several Union victories. At the Battle of Gettysburg alone, there were more than 51,000 American casualties from North and South. Those deaths weighed heavily on him, as did the burdens of his office. In addition, his son, Tad, was ill, and his wife terribly concerned. With all of this, Lincoln agreed to deliver a speech in Gettysburg to commemorate the war dead to be interred at the new cemetery.

When he was a young man, Lincoln had scant formal schooling, but he voraciously read any book he could get his hands on out on the frontier. In fact, his father scolded him several times for reading instead of completing his chores. He devoured classic novels and anthologies of ancient and American speeches. He read Parson Weems's biographies of George Washington and other Founders. He picked up several volumes of grammar and elocution to sharpen his thinking and writing. The most important books that shaped his love of words and language were the poets John Milton, Robert Burns, and Alexander Pope, the plays of Shakespeare, and above all, the King James version of the Bible. The books stimulated his reflections on the human condition and moral principles.

Lincoln's appreciation of language was demonstrated in several of his activities as a young man. He enjoyed composing doggerel for friends, engaged in storytelling, and joined a debating society. Lincoln chose the law as a career. This helped sharpen his logical thinking and ability to develop a clear line of reasoning. The courtroom also afforded Lincoln an arena for him to craft his words and arguments to persuade juries and match wits with competing attorneys. Over time, Lincoln developed a plain style of delivery, but one that was characterized by a sharp logical edge, an economy of words, and a beautiful rhythm and cadence. His words had the unlikely coupling of poetry and mathematical precision. His identity as a writer and speaker began to grow.

Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, noted that Lincoln could often be found in their law office stretched out on the leather sofa reading with his long legs hanging over the edge. Lincoln could be heard mumbling to himself, turning a phrase over and over in his head. He would jot down his musings onto scraps of paper and put them in his hat to develop at another time.

Lincoln built his political career on several notable speeches, but he gained his greatest renown in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Lincoln competed with Stephen Douglas for a Senate seat for the state of Illinois. They debated each other seven times across with state with tens of thousands of observers in the three-hour marathons. Douglas won the seat, but Lincoln's brilliant use of words brought him to the attention of a larger national audience and helped catapult him to the presidency.

President Lincoln delivered many important eloquent speeches during the Civil War. He composed his own speeches with the same care and desire to communicate reasonably and poetically as he had throughout his life and public career. Although many were important and meaningful political speeches, none was more beautiful and representative of Lincoln's life as a wordsmith and writer as the Gettysburg Address.

On November 18, 1863, Lincoln rode a special train from Washington up to Gettysburg with some ideas and jottings in mind to begin his composition. He continued writing on the train, rolling his ideas around in his mind until he arrived in the evening. He finalized his remarks that evening and the next morning when he had a few spare moments away from adoring crowds. On November 19, Lincoln delivered all 272 words of the Gettysburg Address in a mere two minutes. The audience may have been disappointed not to hear a longer oration from the president, but his intended audience may have been the millions of newspaper readers who would read the speech in the coming days and weeks. Speaker Edward Everett delivered a learned, but very lengthy, oration on the meaning of America preceding Lincoln's speech, and would later congratulate the president: "I should be glad...that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes." The result of the brief speech was one of the most profound, and most poetic, reflections upon the meaning of America.

Evoking the language of the King James Bible, Lincoln begins with the immortal words:

"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."

Lincoln took his audience back to 1776 and the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Throughout his public career, he appealed to the Declaration of Independence dozens of times to denounce the evils of slavery and praise the American natural rights republic in which all individuals were created equal with the same rights.

Lincoln purposefully altered the Declaration's "self-evident truths" to that of a "proposition" because the Civil War was being fought over the now-contested idea that slaves were human beings with natural rights. From an axiom in the day of the Founders, the idea that "all men are created equal" had become a debatable proposal. Lincoln still believed equality was a universal principle, but he is acknowledging the fact that men were fighting and dying over its veracity.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

In the next paragraph, Lincoln brought listeners to the present—an awful, bloody present in which thousands of Americans perished at this one battlefield over three horrific days. He honors their ultimate sacrifice for the country and its principles.

"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."

Lincoln repeats the word "dedicate" over and over again—a nation dedicated to the principle of equality, a president dedicating a battlefield, a people dedicated to seeing the bloody civil war through to its end to complete its work towards equality.

Lincoln included poetic triplets in the concluding paragraph when he says, "We can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow," and "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." This rhetorical device gives the speech its magical cadence and rhyme.

The closing also ends on a note of humility, that the brave actions of the dead soldiers mean more than mere words. Lincoln takes his reader to the future, warning that the fighting and sacrifices must continue to achieve the rebirth of the nation that would fulfill its principles from its inception.

"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.”

With that, Abraham Lincoln, one of our greatest expositors of the ideas of the American Founding reminds us that America was created as a nation of ideas—liberty, self-government, and equality of all humans. Lincoln’s identity revolved around his passion for the power of words in both his writing and speaking in order to help bring about a more equal and just society.

## Handout B: Gettysburg Address Groups

### Group 1:

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.

### Group 2:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.

### Group 3:

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.

### Group 4:

It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.

### Group 5:

The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.

### Group 6:

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.

### Group 7:

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

### Group 8:

--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.