

What Abraham Lincoln Can Teach Us about Clear, Concise Writing

by Philip Yaffe

Abraham Lincoln, America's iconic 16th President (1861-65), was never known as either a great writer or a great orator. Yet he penned one of the most highly praised and oft-quoted speeches in history. It was probably so good because it clearly expressed his controlled passion towards the monumental event he was talking about. Nevertheless, it is possible to dispassionately analyze it and draw some important lessons.

This great piece of oratory is known simply as The Gettysburg Address because it was delivered by President Lincoln in 1863 at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to mark a pivotal victory in the American Civil War.

Some reports suggest that he scribbled it on the back of an envelope just before arriving in Gettysburg. This is a myth, but the emotion it engenders makes the story seem more than plausible.

Let's analyze the speech sentence by sentence. But first read the whole thing - there are only 272 words - as a first approach to appreciating what a miniature masterpiece it truly is.

The Gettysburg Address (November 19, 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 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 cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot 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.

Analysis

Sentence 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.

The language of the mid-19th century was somewhat more florid than what we use today. But it appears that Mr. Lincoln purposely employed such phraseology to give his first words almost biblical importance. He could have said, "Eighty-seven years ago, our country was founded based on the idea that all men are created equal." Hardly the same thing, is it?

Sentence 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.

The sentence begins, "Now we are engaged in a great civil war . . ." This is very plain language, almost banal, suggesting that war is a mean and dirty business. The rest of the sentence then reverts to more sophisticated language to ennoble the purposes of the war. Note repetition of the words "conceived" and "dedicated" from Sentence 1. This heightens the impact of the statement, which would have been seriously weakened if Mr. Lincoln had believed it mandatory to avoid such repetition.

Sentence 3

We are met on a great battlefield of that war.

This is another banal statement. It could easily have been combined with Sentence 4 by saying "battlefield of that war in order to dedicate . . ." But notice how much stronger it is standing by itself. This is an excellent example of the "separation" technique, i.e. dividing a sentence in order to heighten its impact.

Sentence 4

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.

This sentence once again contains a repetition, or at least a near repetition: ". . . who here gave their lives that that nation might live." The words "lives" and "live" complement each other and reinforce Mr. Lincoln's thought. He could have chosen "survive", "overcome", "prosper", or a dozen other alternatives to avoid this near repetition. But none of them would have been anywhere near so effective.

Sentence 5

It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

Yet another banal statement, providing dramatic contrast between the sophisticated statement that preceded it and the sophisticated statement that follows it.

Sentence 6

But in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground.

Note the near repetition created by the words "dedicate", "consecrate", "hallow". This is almost tautological, as it was meant to be in order to emphasize the thought.

Sentence 7

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

Note the repetition of the word "consecrated": the tautology continues, further emphasizing the thought of the previous sentence.

Sentence 8

The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

Oh, what an understatement! Mr. Lincoln probably truly believed this, but he was wrong. Virtually every American schoolchild learns these words by heart, and the speech is known and recognized as a masterpiece well beyond the borders of the United States.

Sentence 9

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.

This sentence, although divided by periods in the written form, is in fact a single, unified thought. However, it is quite easy to understand thanks to repetition of the word "devotion" and use of "internal bullet points", indicated by repeated use of the word "that".

The sentence powerfully expresses Mr. Lincoln's conviction about the purposes of the war that he passionately hated yet found himself constrained to pursue. The last "bullet point" has almost become America's national motto: "That government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

The Gettysburg Address appears to be deceptively simple; however; the writing techniques it uses are impeccably professional.

To be so clear and so concise while saying so much is truly a magnificent achievement. It should be an inspiration to us all.

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