

# Analyzing the Rhetoric of JFK's Inaugural Address

**Topic:** John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject Area:** English Language Arts

**Time Required:** 1-2 class periods

## Goals/Rationale

An inaugural address is a speech for a very specific event—being sworn into the office of the presidency. The speeches of modern presidents share some commonalities in referencing American history, the importance of the occasion, and hope for the future. Each president, however, has faced the particular challenges of his time and put his own distinctive rhetorical stamp on the address.

In the course of writing this address, John F. Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen, his advisor and main speechwriter, asked for and received suggestions from advisors and colleagues. ([See the telegram from Ted Sorensen dated December 23, 1960.](#)) In his delivered speech, Kennedy included several sections of text provided by both John Kenneth Galbraith, an economics professor at Harvard University and Adlai Stevenson, former governor of Illinois and Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956.

In this lesson plan, students consider the rhetorical devices in the address JFK delivered on January 20, 1961. They then analyze the suggestions made by Galbraith and Stevenson and compare them to the delivered version of the speech. Students then evaluate the impact of the changes on the resonance of the speech.

**Essential Question:** How can the use of rhetorical devices enhance a speech?

## Objectives

Students will:

- identify rhetorical terms and methods.
- examine the rhetorical devices of JFK's inaugural address.
- analyze the effects of the rhetorical devices on the delivered speech.

## Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

*National English Language Standards (NCTE)*

1 - Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

3- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate

texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4 - Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5 - Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

### *Common Core State Standards*

*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.

*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.

*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.

*W.9-10.2:* Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

*SL.9-10.3:* Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

*SL.9-10.4:* Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

### *Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework*

*USII.T3* - Defending democracy: responses to fascism and communism

### *Massachusetts English Language Arts and Literacy Framework*

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

RI.4-6, 9

## **Historical Background and Context**

On January 20, 1961, a clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court held the large Fitzgerald family Bible as John F. Kennedy took the oath of office to become the nation's 35th president. Against a backdrop of deep snow and sunshine, more than twenty thousand people huddled in 20-degree temperatures on the east front of the Capitol to witness the event. Kennedy, having removed his topcoat and projecting both youth and vigor, delivered what has become a landmark inaugural address.

His audience reached far beyond those gathered before him to people around the world. In preparing for this moment, he sought both to inspire the nation and to send a message abroad signaling the challenges of the Cold War and his hope for peace in the nuclear age. He also wanted to be brief. As he'd remarked to his close advisor, Ted Sorensen, "I don't want people to

think I'm a windbag.”

He assigned Sorensen the task of studying other inaugural speeches and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to glean the secrets of successful addresses. The finely-crafted delivered speech had been revised and reworked numerous times by Kennedy and Sorensen until the President-elect was satisfied. Though not the shortest of inaugural addresses, Kennedy's was shorter than most at 1,355 words in length and, like Lincoln's famous speech, was comprised of short phrases and words. In addition to message, word choice and length, he recognized that captivating his audience required a powerful delivery. On the day before and on the morning of Inauguration Day, he kept a copy handy to take advantage of any spare moment to review it, even at the breakfast table.

What many consider to be the most memorable and enduring section of the speech came towards the end when Kennedy called on all Americans to commit themselves to service and sacrifice: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” He then continued by addressing his international audience: “My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”

Having won the election by one of the smallest popular vote margins in history, Kennedy had known the great importance of this speech. People who witnessed the speech or heard it broadcast over television and radio lauded the new President. Even elementary school children wrote to him with their reactions to his ideas. Following his inaugural address, nearly seventy-five percent of Americans expressed approval of President Kennedy.

## Materials

- Handout: *Poetry and Power: John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address*
- Reading copy of JFK's Inaugural Address
- Handout: *Rhetorical Terms and Techniques of Persuasion*
- Chart: *Excerpts from Inaugural Suggestions and Delivered Speech*

## Procedure

1. Have students read *Poetry and Power: John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address* to provide them with background information about the speech.
2. Have students read through the text of JFK's inaugural address as they listen to [his speech](#).
3. Provide students with the *Rhetorical Terms and Techniques of Persuasion* handout and review the terminology of rhetorical methods.
4. Have students mark up the speech, noting where the specific rhetorical methods occur.
5. Discuss Kennedy's preferences in speechwriting, as described by Sorensen in his biography of Kennedy:

- “[S]hort speeches, short clauses and short words, wherever possible.” (Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 60).
  - “The test of a text was not how it appeared to the eye but how it sounded to the ear” (Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 61).
  - “He liked to be exact. But if the situation required a certain vagueness, he would deliberately choose a word of varying interpretations rather than bury his imprecision in ponderous prose.” (Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 61).
  - “The intellectual level of his speeches showed erudition but not arrogance.” (Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 62).
6. Explain that for many of his key speeches, Kennedy turned to several advisors for their suggestions on content.
  7. Provide students with the chart *Excerpts from Inaugural Suggestions and Delivered Speech* that shows excerpts of suggestions for the speech provided by Adlai Stevenson and John Kenneth Galbraith that were included in the delivered speech—and the revisions made to these excerpts for the delivered speech.
  8. Discuss with the class the changes made by Sorensen and Kennedy to the original suggested excerpts from Galbraith and Stevenson.

### **Assessments**

- Have students write a 2-3-page paper, responding to the question: In what ways did the additional rhetorical devices strengthen or weaken the passages in the earlier suggestions? Provide specific examples. What other improvements do you note between the suggestions provided by Galbraith and Stevenson and the delivered version of the speech? How might Kennedy’s preferences in speechwriting have influenced the changes from the suggested language to the delivered version of the speech?
- Have students choose 2-3 passages from the speech and provide their own text showing how they might improve upon the delivered passages, keeping in mind the rhetorical techniques they have studied. When they are done, have the class read through the rewritten speech in a “jigsaw,” with students providing their version of the passages in place of Kennedy’s text.

### **Sources**

Sorensen, Theodore C. *Kennedy*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965.

Tofel, Richard J. *Sounding the Trumpet: The Making of John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2005.

## Poetry and Power: John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

On January 20, 1961 a clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court held the large Fitzgerald family Bible as John F. Kennedy took the oath of office to become the nation's 35th president. Against a backdrop of deep snow and sunshine, more than twenty thousand people huddled in 20-degree temperatures on the east front of the Capitol to witness the event. Kennedy, having removed his topcoat and projecting both youth and vigor, delivered what has become a landmark inaugural address.

Cold War rhetoric had dominated the 1960 presidential campaign. Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon both pledged to strengthen American military forces and promised a tough stance against the Soviet Union and international communism. Kennedy warned of the Soviet's growing arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles and pledged to revitalize American nuclear forces. He also criticized the Eisenhower administration for permitting the establishment of a pro-Soviet government in Cuba.

Having won the election by one of the smallest popular vote margins in history, Kennedy wanted his address to inspire the nation and send a message abroad signaling the challenges of the Cold War and his hope for peace in the nuclear age. He also wanted to be brief. As he'd remarked to his close advisor, Ted Sorensen, -I don't want people to think I'm a windbag.¶

He assigned Sorensen the task of studying other inaugural speeches and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to glean the secrets of successful addresses. The finely-crafted final speech had been revised and reworked numerous times by Kennedy and Sorensen until the President-elect was satisfied. Though not the shortest of inaugural addresses, Kennedy's was shorter than most at 1,355 words in length and, like Lincoln's famous speech, was comprised of short phrases and words. In addition to message, word choice and length, he recognized that captivating his audience required a powerful delivery. On the day before and on the morning of Inauguration Day, he kept a copy handy to take advantage of any spare moment to review it, even at the breakfast table.

What many consider to be the most memorable and enduring section of the speech came towards the end when Kennedy called on all Americans to commit themselves to service and sacrifice: "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." He then continued by addressing his international audience: "My fellow citizens of the world ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

Kennedy had known the great importance of this speech. People who witnessed the speech or heard it broadcast over television and radio lauded the new President. Even elementary school children wrote to him with their reactions to his ideas. Following his inaugural address, nearly seventy-five percent of Americans expressed approval of President Kennedy.

## **Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy**

Washington, D.C.

January 20, 1961

*Vice President Johnson, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, Reverend Clergy, fellow citizens:*

We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom--symbolizing an end as well as a beginning--signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage--and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

This much we pledge--and more.

To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do--for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom--and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge--to convert our good words into good deeds--in a new alliance for progress--to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support--to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective--to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak--and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course--both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind's final war.

So let us begin anew--remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us.

Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms--and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free."

And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are-- but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.



**Rhetorical Terms and Techniques of Persuasion**  
**Fill in examples from Kennedy's Inaugural Address**

**Alliteration:** repetition of the same sound beginning several words in a sequence

Examples:

**Anaphora:** repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or lines.

Examples:

**Anastrophe:** transposition of normal word order

Examples:

**Antithesis:** contrast of ideas or words in a parallel structure

Examples:

**Assonance:** repetition of vowel sounds in non-rhyming words

Examples:

**Consonance:** repetition of consonant sounds within words or ending words

Examples:

**Metaphor:** implied comparison through a figurative, not literal, use of words

Examples:

**Parellelism:** the arrangement of words, phrases, clauses, or larger structures placed side by side, making them similar in form

Examples:

**Paradox:** a statement that seems self-contradictory, yet turns out to have a rational meaning

Examples:

**Repetition:** a word or phrase used two or more times in close proximity

Examples:

**Using Emotion-Arousing Words**

Examples:

**Using Fear**

Examples:

**Using References to the Past**

Examples:

## **Sources**

University High School, Central Valley School District, Spokane, WA, *A.P. Language and Composition - Rhetorical Terms & Glossary*, Retrieved November 4, 2010. Website:

<http://www.cvsd.org/university/classes/eng/alentz/documents/rhetorical%20vocab..pdf>

University of Kentucky, Division of Classics, *A Glossary of Rhetorical Terms with Examples*, Retrieved November 4, 2010, Web site: <http://www.uky.edu/AS/Classics/rhetoric.html>

## Rhetorical Terms and Techniques of Persuasion Teacher's Copy

**Alliteration:** repetition of the same sound beginning several words in a sequence

*“Let us go forth to lead the land we love...”*

*“Pay any price, bear any burden...”*

*“its writ may run”*

**Anaphora:** repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or lines.

*“Let both sides...”*

*“To those old allies... To those new states... To those people...”*

**Anastrophe:** transposition of normal word order

*“Ask not”*

*“Dare not”*

**Antithesis:** contrast of ideas or words in a parallel structure

*“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” “Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.”*

*“We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom...”*

*“not because... not because... but because...”*

*“Not as a call to bear arms... not as a call to battle., but a call to bear the burden...”*

**Assonance:** repetition of vowel sounds in non-rhyming words

*“...the steady spread of the deadly atom.”*

**Consonance:** repetition of consonant sounds within words or ending words

*“whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall...”*

**Metaphor:** implied comparison through a figurative, not literal, use of words

*–And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion...||*

*“the bonds of mass misery”*

*“the chains of poverty”*

**Parellelism:** the arrangement of words, phrases, clauses, or larger structures placed side by side, making them similar in form

*“United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do...”*

**Paradox:** a statement that seems self-contradictory, yet turns out to have a rational meaning

*“Only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.”*

**Repetition:** a word or phrase used two or more times in close proximity

*“For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”*

**Using Emotion-Arousing Words**

*freedom, liberty*

**Using Fear**

*“For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”*

*“...its hour of maximum danger.”*

**Using References to the Past**

*“I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.”*

*“With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds...”*

*(Lincoln: “With malice toward none, with charity toward all...”)*

**Sources**

University High School, Central Valley School District, Spokane, WA, *A.P. Language and Composition - Rhetorical Terms & Glossary*, Retrieved November 4, 2010. Website: <http://www.cvsd.org/university/classes/eng/alentz/documents/rhetorical%20vocab..pdf>

University of Kentucky, Division of Classics, *A Glossary of Rhetorical Terms with Examples*, Retrieved November 4, 2010, Web site: <http://www.uky.edu/AS/Classics/rhetoric.html>

## Excerpts from Inaugural Suggestions and Delivered Speech

Suggestions by Galbraith and Stevenson	Final Copy
<p>united for common purposes there is little we cannot do to advance peace and well-being; disunited, there is little we can do... we cannot deal with the Communist challenge divided and in disarray. (Stevenson)</p>	<p>To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do--for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.</p>
<p>We have not seen one form of colonial control superceded simply to see another far more iron and more implacable system take its place. We cannot expect them to be actively on our side. Why should they be? We do want them to be vigilantly and intelligently on the side of their own freedom and integrity. (Stevenson)</p>	<p>To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom--and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.</p>
<p>We will help these countries do so not as a part of an ideological struggle, not because they are pawns in a cold war, not to buy friendship. We will help them because to do so is right. (Galbraith) if the free way of life doesn't help the many poor of this world it will never save the few rich. (Stevenson)</p>	<p>To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.</p>
<p>We shall never negotiate out of fear. But we shall never fear to negotiate. (Galbraith)</p>	<p>So let us begin anew--remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.</p>
<p>I would like to see permanent joint commissions at work... to undertake interstellar exploration, to conquer the deserts and tap the riches of the oceans...(Stevenson)</p>	<p>Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.</p>
<p>the work of this new Administration will not be over in a hundred days, or in five hundred days, or in a thousand days. Its works will continue without surcease for all of the next four years. (Galbraith)</p>	<p>All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.</p>

Adapted from Richard J. Tofel, *Sounding the Trumpet: The Making of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2005), 61-62.