

High School Reading Analysis Activity:
Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” and
Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech
(Aligned with the Common Core Standards)

Documents

The Gettysburg Address, by Abraham Lincoln, 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.



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"I Have a Dream," by Martin Luther King, 1963 (Excerpts)

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. . . .

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. . . .



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There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Questions

1. What is the meaning of the word "resolve" in the last sentence of The Gettysburg Address?
 - a. Figure out
 - b. Conclude
 - c. Promise
 - d. Combat

2. What phrase in the final paragraph gives the best clue about the meaning of "resolve"?
 - a. To be here dedicated
 - b. A new birth of freedom
 - c. Perish from the earth
 - d. Above our poor power

3. According to Lincoln, on what principle was the new nation founded?
 - a. Liberty
 - b. Equality
 - c. Justice
 - d. Bravery



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4. What is the “promissory note” to which King refers in the third paragraph of “I Have a Dream”?
 - a. The Gettysburg Address
 - b. The guarantee of the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"
 - c. The Constitution
 - d. The promise that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

5. Determine the central idea in King’s speech, as well as specific details that help develop that idea over the course of the speech. From the list of possible central ideas, drag the **best** statement to the “Central Idea” box in the table. Then drag and drop **three** supporting details in order to show how that idea is developed over the course of the poem.

Central Idea:

Supporting detail:

Supporting detail:

Supporting detail:



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Possible Central Ideas
1) African Americans will never be satisfied with the freedom that America can provide for them.
2) This is the end of a hundred-year period of achieving freedom for African Americans.
3) African Americans will struggle until they are free in America.
4) America should be ashamed of the plight of African Americans.



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Possible Supporting Details
5) "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."
6) "This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice."
7) "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation."
8) "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."
9) "The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."
10) "We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities."
11) "One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."



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6. Move into the box at the bottom the phrases below that reflect King's use of financial imagery in his speech:

Cash a check
Vast ocean of material prosperity
Signing a promissory note
Sacred obligation
Bank of justice
Bad check
Insufficient funds
Exile in his own land
Majestic heights
Cup of bitterness
Blow off steam
Great vaults of opportunity



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Phrases that reflect King's use of financial imagery

7. Use what you have learned from reading “The Gettysburg Address” and “I Have a Dream” to write an essay that provides an analysis of how King’s speech is a continuation of Lincoln’s speech. Develop your claims with evidence from both texts. As a starting point, you may want to consider how King responds to specific parts of Lincoln’s speech, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.



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Answers to Questions

1. What is the meaning of the word “resolve” in the last sentence of The Gettysburg Address?
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 - b. Conclude
 - c. **Promise**
 - d. Combat

2. What phrase in the final paragraph gives the best clue about the meaning of “resolve”?
 - a. **To be here dedicated**
 - b. A new birth of freedom
 - c. Perish from the earth
 - d. Above our poor power

3. According to Lincoln, on what principle was the new nation founded?
 - a. Liberty
 - b. **Equality**
 - c. Justice
 - d. Bravery

4. What is the “promissory note” to which King refers in the third paragraph of “I Have a Dream”?
 - a. The Gettysburg Address
 - b. **The guarantee of the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"**
 - c. The Constitution
 - d. The promise that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.



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5. Determine the central idea in King’s speech, as well as specific details that help develop that idea over the course of the speech. From the list of possible central ideas, drag the **best** statement to the “Central Idea” box in the table. Then drag and drop **three** supporting details in order to show how that idea is developed over the course of the poem.

Central Idea:	African Americans will struggle until they are free in America.
Supporting detail:	“No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”
Supporting detail:	“The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.”
Supporting detail:	“We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.”



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6. Move into the box at the bottom the phrases below that reflect King’s use of financial imagery in his speech:

Phrases that reflect King’s use of financial imagery
Cash a check
Signing a promissory note
Bank of justice
Bad check
Insufficient funds
Great vaults of opportunity

7. Use what you have learned from reading “The Gettysburg Address” and “I Have a Dream” to write an essay that provides an analysis of how King’s speech is a continuation of Lincoln’s speech. Develop your claims with evidence from both texts. As a starting point, you may want to consider how King responds to specific parts of Lincoln’s speech, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.

Students should note that King refers directly to Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation. They should comment on the fact that King, like Lincoln, refers to the American Founders and to the principles of the American republic. Students should also note that King talks about the Emancipation Proclamation as the beginning of an incomplete process of achieving full rights and freedom for African Americans. Students should discuss what King means by the “promissory note” and how African Americans should go about seeking to “cash” this note.



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