

SPEECH CONTEST - 1


Background

Your teacher has selected you to portray President Abraham Lincoln delivering his greatest speech—a commemorative address made at the Gettysburg battlefield site on November 19, 1863, only four and a half months after that crucial clash took place. At the time it was given, the newspapers gave Lincoln’s speech only mixed reviews. Today, it is considered one of the five to 10 greatest speeches in the English language, adding to the overall myth and brilliance of our sixteenth president.

Oddly, the president was asked to speak at Gettysburg almost as an after thought. The invitation to him in early November requested that he make “a few appropriate remarks.” The day’s main speaker was Edward Everett, the era’s foremost orator. Some 15,000 people were on Cemetery Hill for the solemn occasion when the speeches began. Everett spoke first; he finished two hours later. Before Lincoln stood up to make his remarks, the Baltimore Glee Club sang. Finally, Lincoln’s military attaché and friend, Ward Hill Lamon, introduced him. Two to three minutes and 272 words later, Lincoln’s address was over, leaving many of the attendees disappointed. Many had not heard Lincoln’s softly delivered monosyllabic words. Despite this, the crowd gave him a “sustained ovation.” As Lincoln returned to the White House, word gradually spread that the president’s address was destined to be the final words on the meaning of war and the Union’s noble purpose.

Your task

1. If you can, watch a videotape of The Gettysburg Address as delivered by Gregory Peck in “The Blue And The Gray” or Jason Robards in “The Perfect Tribute.” Lincoln’s voice was nasal and high-pitched, reflecting his midwestern upbringing.
2. Practice the speech several times. Ask a parent or friend to critique your delivery. Try to memorize it. Above all, deliver it with feeling, almost sadness. *Do your best!*

 (Note: Lincoln’s address is found on the next page.)

“... 272 words later ...”

The Gettysburg Address

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 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, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

