

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

(1809-1865)

"It must have been [a] Frenchman who turned Lincoln's attention to literature and beautiful women. But it is true that his sense of style was developed to a high degree. His own style was cunning in its cadences, exact in its choice of words, and yet also instinctive and natural; and it was inseparable from his personality in all of its manifestations. This style pervades Lincoln's speeches, his messages to Congress, his correspondence with his generals in the field as well as with his friends and family, his interviews with visitors to the White House and his casual conversation.

Lincoln's editor, Mr. Roy P. Basler, in a study of Lincoln's style prefixed to a volume of selections from his writings, explains that the literary education of Lincoln was a good deal more thorough than used to be thought. 'A careful examination,' he says, of the books on elocution and grammar 'which Lincoln studied both in and out of school will not impress anyone with Lincoln's poverty of opportunity for the study of grammar and rhetoric. It is safe to say that few children today learn as much through twelve years of formal schooling in these two subjects as one finds in the several textbooks which Lincoln is supposed to have studied.' For it is true that the schoolbooks of the early nineteenth century taught not only the mechanics of writing--that is, of grammar and syntax--but also the art of rhetoric--that is, of what used to be called 'harmonious numbers' and of dramatic and oratorical effectiveness.

Here is a passage from a private letter dealing with personal matters which was written by Lincoln in his thirty-third year: 'The second [cause of his correspondent's melancholy] is, the *absence* of *all business* and *conversation of friends*, which might divert your mind, and give it occasional rest from that *intensity* of thought, which will sometimes wear the sweetest idea threadbare and turn it to the bitterness of death.' Here, in the final phrases, the balance of vowels and consonants, the assonance and alliteration, the progression from the long 'e's of 'sweetest idea,' over which one would want to linger, to the short and closed vowels of 'bitterness of death,' which chill the lyrical rhythm and bite it off at the end--all this shows a training of the literary ear that is not often taught in modern schools.

The satirical *Letter from the Lose Townships*, written in 1842, which nearly cost Lincoln a duel, handles colloquial language with a similar sense of style: it is quite a successful experiment in the vein of homely frontier humor that Mark Twain was to bring to perfection; and the poems that Lincoln wrote four years later, when he revisited his old home in Indiana, show even a certain skill in a medium in which he was less at home. He is describing a neighbor who had gone insane and whose daft doleful singing he now remembers:

I've heard it oft, as if I dreamed,
Far-distant, sweet, and lone;
The funeral dirge it ever seemed
Of reason dead and gone.

To drink its strains, I've stole away,
All silently and still,
Ere yet the rising god of day
Had streaked the Eastern hill.

Air held his breath; the trees all still
Seemed sorr'wing angels round.
Their swelling tears in dew-drops fell
Upon the list'ning ground.

In his *Eulogy on Zachary Taylor*, delivered in 1850, in striving for a loftier eloquence, he resorts, with less successful results, to a kind of constricted blank verse. Yet in prose, as in verse, he is working for the balance of eighteenth-century rhythms, and he learns to disembarass these of eighteenth-century pomposity. He will discard the old-fashioned ornaments of forensic and congressional oratory, but he will always be able to summon an art of incantation with words, and he will know how to practice it magnificently--as in the farewell to Springfield, the Gettysburg speech and the Second Inaugural Address--when a special occasion demands it. Alone among American Presidents, it is possible to imagine Lincoln, grown up in a different milieu, becoming a distinguished writer of a not merely political kind. But actually the poetry of Lincoln has not all been put into his writings. It was acted out in his life. With nothing of the deliberate histrionics of the Roosevelts or of the evangelical mask of Wilson, he created himself as a poetic figure, and he thus imposed himself on the nation."

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War
(Oxford 1966) 120-23

"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.'

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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 the repetition 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."

Philip Yaffe
"What Abraham Lincoln Can Teach us about Clear, Concise Writing"
freelancewriting.com (2004)

"Lincoln is a master of brevity. 'The Gettysburg Address' is 272 words long. It is a simple speech, yes, but he wrote with style. He sums up history, war, sacrifice, and the American democratic ideals in an eloquent fashion that manages to relay the urgency and importance of what was at stake in the war. It's a rallying cry and a promise--democracy will stand.

Good writing is often economical and to the point....The main idea isn't clouded by verbosity and word choice....The definition of compression is 'the reduction of volume causing an increase in pressure.' Lowering the word count raises the power of each word....That's what writing is all about. Conveying an idea, be it factual or fictional, that strikes a chord in the audience's hearts and minds.

The opening of "The Gettysburg Address" is etched into our minds: 'Fourscore 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 entire speech is a masterclass on brevity. The sentence, however, is far from basic. It builds like a snowball rolling down a hill. Each clause adds power and meaning, allowing the strongest piece of information to drive home the point. Lincoln fit a three-act structure into one sentence.

Now, look at the closing: '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 here 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.' That's one monster sentence--83 words and nine clauses. Despite the length, the focal point is never lost: those who gave their lives and those pushing forward are both pursuing the continued existence of a democratic nation. It's another snowball sentence. Lincoln was an adept prose stylist. He knew how to twist the language to suit his purpose. He balanced the needs of clear communication with finding a desirable tone and meter.

Concision and style are not competing functions. The former does not mean to always write in simple sentences containing one or two clauses, while the latter does not entail using erudite diction and many, many words rather than a few. As William Strunk Jr. writes in *The Elements of Style*: 'A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.' Play with language, give it a rhythm, something only you can give it, just make every word tell."

Winston Bribach
"What Abraham Lincoln Can Teach You about Good Writing"
freelancewriting.com (29 May 2004)

"Abraham Lincoln, the greatest American president, was also in my view the best of all presidential speechwriters. As a youngster in Lincoln, Nebraska, I stood before the statue of the president gracing the west side of the towering state capitol and soaked up the words of his Gettysburg Address, inscribed on a granite slab behind the statue....Two decades later, in January 1961, President-elect John F. Kennedy asked me to study those words again, in preparing to help him write his inaugural address. He also asked me to read all previous 20th-century inaugural addresses. I did not learn much from those speeches (except for FDR's first inaugural), but I learned a great deal from Lincoln's ten sentences....

Lincoln was a superb writer. Like Jefferson and Teddy Roosevelt, but few if any other presidents, he could have been a successful writer wholly apart from his political career. He needed no White House speechwriter, as that post is understood today. He wrote his major speeches out by hand, as he did his eloquent letters and other documents. Sometimes he read his draft speeches aloud to others, including members of his cabinet and his two principal secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, and he occasionally received suggestions, particularly at the start of his administration, from his onetime rival for the presidency, Secretary of State William Seward. On the first occasion on which Seward offered a major contribution--Lincoln's first inaugural--the president demonstrated clearly that he was the better speechwriter. Seward's idea was worthy, principally a change in the ending, making it softer, more conciliatory, invoking shared memories. But his half-completed proposed wording, often cited by

historians, was pedestrian: 'The mystic chords which proceeding from so many battle fields and so many patriot graves pass through all the hearts...in this broad continent of ours will yet again harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angel of the nation.'

Lincoln graciously took and read Seward's suggested ending, but, with the magic of his own pen, turned it into his moving appeal to 'the mystic chords of memory,' which, 'stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.'

Lincoln was a better speechwriter than speaker. Normally, the success of a speech depends in considerable part on the speaker's voice and presence. The best speeches of John F. Kennedy benefited from his platform presence, his poise, personality, good looks and strong voice. William Jennings Bryan moved audiences not only with the extravagance of his language, but also with the skill of his movements and gestures, the strength of his voice and appearance. Democratic Party leaders not attending the 1896 National Convention at which Bryan delivered his 'Cross of Gold' speech, and thus not carried away by the power of his presence, later could not understand his nomination on the basis of what they merely read. Franklin Roosevelt's speeches, for those who were not present for his performance, were merely cold words on a page with substantially less effect than they had for those who were present to hear them.

But Lincoln's words, heard by comparatively few, by themselves carried power across time and around the world. I may have been more moved by his remarks at the Gettysburg cemetery when I read them behind his statue at the state capitol in Lincoln in 1939 than were some of those straining to hear them on the outskirts of the audience at Gettysburg in 1863. The Massachusetts statesman Edward Everett, with his two-hour speech filled with classical allusions, had been the designated orator of the day. The president was up and quickly down with his dedicatory remarks in a few short minutes. Some newspapers reported: 'The President also spoke.'

Lincoln's voice, reportedly high, was not as strong as Bryan's, nor were his looks as appealing as Kennedy's. (Lincoln himself referred to his 'poor, lean, lank face.')

His reading was not electronically amplified nor facilitated by a teleprompter, which today almost every president uses to conceal his dependence on a prepared text. (Why? Would we have more confidence in a surgeon or a plumber who operated without referring to his manual? Do we expect our presidents to memorize or improvise their most important speeches?) Lincoln also spoke with a Midwestern inflection that--in those days, before mass media created a homogenized national audience and accent--was not the way folks talked in Boston or New York, making him difficult for some audiences to understand.

But Lincoln's success as an orator stemmed not from his voice, demeanor or delivery, or even his presence, but from his words and his ideas. He put into powerful language the nub of the matter in the controversy over slavery and secession in his own time, and the core meaning for all time of this nation itself as 'this last best hope of earth.' Such great and moving subjects produce many more great and moving speeches than discussions of tax cuts and tariffs.

With his prodigious memory and willingness to dig out facts (as his own researcher), he could offer meticulous historical detail, as he demonstrated in his antislavery Peoria speech of 1854 and in the 1860 Cooper Union address, which effectively secured for him the Republican nomination for president. But most Lincoln speeches eschewed detail for timeless themes and flawless construction; they were profound, philosophical, never partisan, pompous or pedantic. His two greatest speeches--the greatest speeches by any president--are not only quite short (the second inaugural is just a shade over 700 words, the Gettysburg Address shorter still), but did not deal in the facts of current policy at all, but only with the largest ideas.

A president, like everyone else, is shaped by his media environment, and if he is good, he shapes his communication to fit that environment. Lincoln lived in an age of print. Oratory was important political entertainment; but with no broadcasting, his words reached large audiences outside the immediate vicinity only by print. His speeches were published in the newspapers of the day and composed by him with that in mind. He spoke for readers of the printed page, not merely for those listening. His words moved voters far

from the sound of his voice because of his writing skills, his intellectual power, his grip on the core issue of his time and his sublime concept of his nation's meaning.

Franklin Roosevelt mastered the fireside chat on radio, Kennedy the formal address on television, Bill Clinton the more casual messages. Of course, modern American television audiences would not tolerate the three-hour debates Lincoln had with Stephen Douglas, or his longer speeches--but that was a different age. Lincoln was adaptable enough that he could have mastered modern modes of political speech--today's sound-bite culture--had he lived in this era. He had a talent for getting to the point.

Lincoln avoided the fancy and artificial. He used the rhetorical devices that the rest of us speechwriters do: **alliteration** ('Fondly do we hope--ferverly do we pray'; 'no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet'); **rhyme** ('I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views'); **repetition** ('As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew'; 'We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground'); and--especially--**contrast** and **balance** ('The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present'; 'As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master'; 'In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free').

He used **metaphors**, as we all do, both explicit and implicit: think of the implied figure of birth--the nation 'brought forth,' 'conceived'--in the Gettysburg Address. He would quote **the Bible** quite sparingly, but to tremendous effect. See how he ends the monumental next-to-last paragraph of the second inaugural: 'Yet, if God wills that [the Civil War] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are True and Righteous Altogether".'

But the triumph of this greatest example of American public speech did not come from devices alone. Lincoln had in addition two great qualities infusing his use of those devices. First, he had a poetic literary sensibility. He was aware of the right **rhythm** and **sound**. An editor of the Gettysburg Address might say that 'Eighty-seven years ago' is shorter. Lincoln wrote instead, 'Four score and seven years ago.'

And, finally, he had the root of the matter in him. The presidents greatest in speechcraft are almost all the greatest in statecraft also--because speeches are not just words. They present ideas, directions and values, and the best speeches are those that get those right. As Lincoln did."

Theodore C. Sorenson
former speechwriter and special counsel to President John F. Kennedy
Smithsonian Magazine (October 2008)

"In a speech of only 10 sentences and 272 words, Lincoln struck a chord that would resonate through time. Why is this short speech so memorable? First, it is important to remember the context. America was in the midst of a bloody civil war. Union troops had only recently defeated Confederate troops at the Battle of Gettysburg. It was a the turning point in the war. The stated purpose of Lincoln's speech was to dedicate a plot of land that would become Soldier's National Cemetery. However, Lincoln realized that he also had to inspire the people to continue the fight.

'Four score and seven' is much more **poetic**, much more elegant, much more noble than 'Eighty-seven.' The United States had won its freedom from Britain 87 years earlier, embarking on the 'Great Experiment.' Lincoln reminds the audience of the founding principles of the country: liberty and equality. In so doing, he sets up his next sentence perfectly: 'Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.' Here, Lincoln signals the challenge: the nation is under attack. He extends the significance of the fight beyond the borders of the United States. It is a question of whether any nation founded on the same principles could survive. Thus does the war--and the importance of winning it--take on an even greater significance.

'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.' Lincoln turns to recognize those who have fallen for their country. He uses

contrast effectively. By stating 'those who here gave their lives that this nation might live' Lincoln makes what is the ultimate **contrast**: life vs death. **Contrast** is compelling. It creates interest. Communicating an idea juxtaposed with its polar opposite creates energy. Moving back and forth between the contradictory poles encourages full engagement from the audience.

He uses **consonance**--the repetition of the same consonant in short succession--through words with the letter 'f': battlefield; field; final; for; fitting. 'But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground.' Notice the use of a '**tricolon**': 'can not dedicate...can not consecrate...can not hallow.' A **tricolon** is a powerful public speaking technique that can add power to your words and make them memorable. Say the sentence out loud and hear the powerful cadence and **rhythm**.

'The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.' This sentence is full of solemn respect for those who fought. It is an eloquent way of saying that their actions speak louder than Lincoln's words. There is an **alliteration**: 'poor power.' 'The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.' There is a double **contrast** in this sentence: 'The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here' / 'but it can never forget what they did here.' Note the appeal to something larger. It is not the United States that will never forget, but the entire world. Ironically, Lincoln was wrong on this point. Not only do we remember his words to this day, we will continue to remember them in the future.

'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.' The final two sentence of the address sound a **call to action**, a resolve to complete 'the unfinished work.' They are full of inspirational words such as 'dedicated,' 'nobly,' 'great,' 'honored,' 'devotion,' 'highly resolve,' 'God,' 'birth' and 'freedom.' There are a couple of **contrasts** here: 'the living' with "he honored dead"; and 'these dead shall not have died in vain' with 'this nation...shall have a new birth of freedom.' Earlier, Lincoln said that, in a sense, they could not [consecrate] the ground. Here, he tells the audience to dedicate themselves to 'the unfinished work' and 'the great task remaining before us.' He finishes with his famous **tricolon**: 'of the people, by the people, for the people.'

In an excellent analysis of the Gettysburg Address, Nick Morgan offers an interesting perspective on Lincoln's **repetition** of one word throughout the address: "And buried in the biblical phrasing there's a further device that works unconsciously on the audience, and the reader, to weave some incantatory magic. I've discussed this speech many times with students, with clients, and with colleagues, and I always ask them what simple little word is repeated most unusually in the speech. No one ever spots it. ... When they look, people notice that the word 'we' is repeated 10 times. But that's not unusual, or surprising, given that Lincoln was trying to rally the nation. The speech was all about 'we'. No, what is unusual is the **repetition** of the word 'here'.... Eight times in 250 words--two minutes--Lincoln invokes the place--the hallowed ground of Gettysburg--by repeating the word 'here.' As a result, he weaves some kind of spell on listeners, then and afterward, that is not consciously noticed, but unconsciously seems to have a powerful effect. **Repetition** is an essential aspect of great public speaking. The trick is knowing what and how to repeat. Take a lesson from Lincoln. Sometimes its the little words that have the most power."

We can learn a lot about public speaking by studying the great speeches of history. The Gettysburg Address is one of the greats. Lincoln took his audience on a journey. It began with the founding of America and ended at a crossroads. He wanted to make sure that Americans chose the right path. And he did."

"The Gettysburg Address: An Analysis"
mannerofspeaking.org (19 November 2010)

"After 150 years, the Gettysburg Address remains one of the most powerful speeches ever delivered, and yet it is also one of the most surprising. In just 270 words, a self-educated, frontier lawyer managed to convey a sense of national loss and give purpose to America's civil war. He also produced as fine a work of

prose as any American has ever created. In 1959, historian Jacques Barzun invited *Post* readers to take a closer look at 'Lincoln the Literary Genius.' If you only knew Lincoln from his Gettysburg speech...you might get the impression of a man who sat down one day and wrote a masterpiece. But Lincoln had been working on his unique style for a lifetime before he spoke at the Gettysburg cemetery.

But his years of riding the court circuit in Illinois had taught him how to capture and hold the attention of strangers. He learned how to translate questions of law into simple, clear choices. He spoke in a comfortable, familiar style, which narrowed the emotional distance between himself and his audience. And when necessary, he could drop into joking talk, mimicking the drawl and twang spoken by Illinois farmers. Lincoln learned to write standing up; that is, he developed his clear, powerful style while he honed his oral arguments for court. As a result, his writing and his speeches have a similar clarity and cadence. But Lincoln had a special genius for order and brevity, Barzun claimed; he presented his thoughts in the most convincing sequence using the least words.

Barzun also stressed Lincoln's gift for rhythm, illustrating it with a fragment from a lecture by Lincoln. 'There is a vague popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest. I say vague, because, when we consider to what extent confidence and honors are reposed in and conferred upon lawyers by the people, it appears improbably that their impression of dishonesty is very distinct and vivid. Yet the impression is common, almost universal. Let no young man choosing the law for a calling for a moment yield to the popular belief--resolve to be honest at all events; and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to honest without being a lawyer.' 'The paragraph moves without a false step,' Barzun observed, 'neither hurried nor drowsy; and by its movement, like one who leads another in the dance, it catches up our thought and swings it into willing compliance. The ear notes at the same time that none of the sounds grate or clash: The piece is sayable like a speech in a great play.'

This advertisement for the printed copy of Edward Everett and President Lincoln's Gettysburg speeches appeared in the *Post* in 1864. Everett's speech was deemed 'eloquent' while Lincoln's was 'excellent and appropriate,' an example of the preference for the more verbose, lofty style of speech-making at the time.... Lincoln never mastered the florid, wordy style that kept 19th Century audiences enraptured for hours. The admirers of fine oratory found Lincoln's speaking style 'flat, dull, lacking in taste,' Barzun wrote. When they came to the dedication ceremony at the Gettysburg cemetery, November 19, 1863, they were more interested in hearing the keynote speaker, Edward Everett.

The difference between Lincoln's and Everett's speeches that day illustrates the changes taking place in American thought and style. Lincoln spoke for two minutes. Everett spoke for two hours. Lincoln's opening sentence, 'Four score and seven years...' was a concise statement of American principles. Everett began his speech with this windy fanfare: 'Standing beneath this serene sky, overlooking these broad fields now reposing from the labors of the waning year, the mighty Alleghenies dimly towering before us, the graves of our brethren beneath our feet, it is with hesitation that I raise my poor voice to break the eloquent silence of God and Nature. But the duty to which you have called me must be performed;--grant me, I pray you, your indulgence and your sympathy.'

In Everett's defense, he knew what made a good speech. He wrote Lincoln on the following day, telling him, 'I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes.' The lean but powerful beauty of Lincoln's prose impressed itself on Americans' minds as generations of schoolchildren committed it to memory. It helped influence American writers to favor clarity over ornamentation. And its lean style, free of sentimentality and romanticism, brought a new honesty to the way Americans thought about the Civil War."

Jeff Nilsson

"The Genius in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address"
saturdayeveningpost.com (25 May 2013)

"Perhaps no speech in the canon of American oratory is as famous as the 'Dedicatory Remarks' delivered in a few minutes, one hundred and fifty years ago, by President Abraham Lincoln. Though school children may no longer memorize the conveniently brief 272 words of 'The Gettysburg Address,' most American can still recall its opening and closing phrases. It has received abundant and usually reverent critical

attention, especially from rhetoricians who take a functional view of discourse by always asking how an author's choices, deliberate or not, achieve an author's purposes. Of these many studies, the greatest is Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (Simon & Schuster, 1992). It leaves little unsaid about the genre, context, and content of the speech, or about the grandeur and beauty of its language, the product of Lincoln's long self-education in and mastery of prose composition.

But while the rhetorical artistry of Lincoln's speech is uncontested, it can also be said that its medium, the English language, was and is an instrument worthy of the artist. Among all the ways that this speech can be celebrated for its author, its moment in history, and its lasting effects, still another way is as monument to the resources of the English. In its amazing lexicon, the largest of any living language in Lincoln's time or ours, English is, thanks to the accidents of history, a layered language. The bottom layer, containing its simplest and most frequently used words, is Germanic. The Norman invasion added thousands of Latin words, but detoured through French to create, according to eighteenth-century British rhetoricians like Hugh Blair, a distinctive French layer in English.

Throughout its history, but peaking between 1400 to 1700, words were stacked on directly from Latin and Greek to form a learned and formal layer in the language. (English of course continues borrowing from any and all languages today.) It is therefore not unusual in synonym-rich English to have multiple ways of saying something, one living on from Anglo-Saxon or Norse, another a French-tinctured option, and still another incorporated directly from a classical language. Consider the alternatives *last/endure/persist* or *full/complete/consummate*. Of course no English speaker would see these alternatives as fungible since, through years of usage, each has acquired a special sense and preferred context. But an artist in the English language like Lincoln understands the consequences in precision and nuance of movement from layer to layer. He chose the French-sourced *endure* at one point in his Remarks and the Old English *full* at another.

Lincoln's awareness of this synonym richness is also on display in his progressive restatement of what he and his audience cannot do at Gettysburg: they cannot *dedicate--consecrate--hallow* the ground they stand on. All three verbs denote roughly the same action: to set apart as special and devoted to a purpose. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first two came into English in the fourteenth century as adjectives and in the fifteenth as verbs, both formed from the past participle of Latin verbs. The second of these, however, has a twelfth century French cognate, *consacrer*, in use when French was the language of England's rulers. The third word, *hallow*, comes from the Old English core and carries the strongest association of a setting apart as holy. Lincoln's progression then goes from the Latinate layer to the core, a progression in service of the greatest goal of rhetorical style--*to amplify*, to express one's meaning with emotional force. Lincoln's series of synonyms, simply as a series, distances the living from the dead, but as a progression it rises from the formulaic setting apart with words of *dedicate*, to the making sacred as a church or churchyard are of *consecrate*, to the making holy in martyrdom of *hallow*. Forms of *consecrate* and *dedicate* appear again, but *hallow* only once, mid-speech.

Lincoln's deftness in word choice is matched by his artistry of sentence form. Among the often-noticed features of Lincoln's sentence style is his fondness for antithesis. This pattern is hardly Lincoln's invention. It is one of the oldest forms recommended in rhetorical style manuals and in Aristotle's *Topics* as the purest form of the argument from contraries. The formally correct antithesis places opposed wording in parallel syntactic positions: '*little note nor long remember/ what we say here / never forget/ what they did here.*' A figure like antitheses can be formed in languages that carry meaning in inflectional endings as well as in English where word order is crucial, but other figures do not translate as easily. For example, the figure *polyptoton* requires carrying a term through case permutations. Had Lincoln been writing in Latin, the great concluding tricolon of the speech could have been the jangle *populi, populo, populo*, the genitive *of the people*, the ablative *by the people*, and the dative *for the people*. But English requires prepositional phrases to do what Latin does in case endings, and in this case a constraint yields a great advantage in prosody. For once listeners pick up the meter of the first and second phrase, they are prepared for the third and their satisfied expectation is part of the persuasiveness of the phrasing.

In all languages, rhetorical discourse springs from situations fixed in time and space. It responds to pressing events, addresses particular audiences and is delivered in particular places that can all be referred to with *deictic* or 'pointing' language linking text to context. Much of the Gettysburg Address defines its

own immediate rhetorical situation. Lincoln locates 'we,' speaker and audience, on a portion of a great battlefield in a continuing war, and he dwells on the immediacy of this setting in space and time by repeating the word *here* six times (a seventh in one version, an eighth in another). This often-noted repetition is critical in Lincoln's purpose. The speech opens in the past and closes in the future, but most of it is in the speaker and listeners' 'here' and 'now' so that, held in that place and moment, a touching, a transaction can occur between the dead who gave their last full measure of devotion, and the living who take increased devotion from them.

The Gettysburg Address is profoundly the speech of a moment in our history and it is altogether fitting and proper to remember its anniversary. Yet whenever it is read or spoken it seems to belong to that moment. How is that possible? Because languages like English not only express the situation of an utterance, they also recreate that situation when the language is experienced anew. In this way, read or heard again, the Address once more performs a transaction between America's honored dead, its author now included, and its living citizens affirming their faith in government of, by and for the people, repeating its language into the future."

Jeanne Fahnestock
"Lincoln's Rhetoric in the Gettysburg Address"
blog.oup.com (19 November 2013)

"Abraham Lincoln's speech, the Gettysburg Address, is considered the most influential speech in the history of the United States. In the era where leaders commonly delivered a long speech for about two hours or more, Lincoln speech provided a different path of an effective speech: less than three minutes and not more than 300 words. What makes this speech is so influential? Based on my own observation, it is simply because he used a lot of **parallel structures**--repetition of grammatical pattern to convey similar ideas. Let see closer how this speech is constructed in term of parallel structures.

In the first paragraph, he opens his speech with fancy but uncommon **diction**; 'Score' in the phrase 'four score and seven years ago.' The word 'score' means twenty years, and this choice is kind of an attractive way to impress the audience's attention. It then continues with the first **parallel structure**: 'Our father brought fourth on this continent as a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal'....

The second paragraph begins with a similar **structure**: we are engaged in a great civil war, and we are meet on a great battlefield of war. He uses two sentences to state the same message... He also describes the war by using two powerful words: a great civil war, and a great battlefield of war. Some **repetition** also occurs in the words 'conceived and dedicated,' which he used in the first paragraph. 'So conceived' and 'so dedicated' are employed to reemphasize the meaning of the words. Like the speech of Kennedy's inauguration, I also figure a **chiasmus** employed to polish Lincoln's statement: '...for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live'... He also uses a **synonym** to accentuate his point for getting involved in Civil War: 'Fitting and proper.'

The third paragraph introduces the same pattern of **parallel structure**: 'we cannot dedicate, we cannot concentrate, we cannot hallow this ground.' The new pattern is employed in this part when he used the **antonym** to underline his message: 'the brave men, living or dead,' 'far above our poor power to add or detract,' and 'the world will little note nor long remember'.... He closed his speech by restating... 'people': 'of the people, by the people, for the people.' I can say that the last statement is the most enduring statement of his speech since it is widely used by leaders and media to show the importance of people's participation in developing a nation."

"A Rhetorical Analysis: Parallel Structures of Abraham Lincoln's Most Influential Speech"
wendiwijarwadi.wrodpres.com (18 February 2016)

"The Gettysburg Address is one of the most famous speeches in American history. Despite being only 272 words, President Abraham Lincoln's speech was filled with **allusions** to other famous works, including the Declaration of Independence, the Bible, and Pericles' Funeral Oration. Lincoln spoke of overarching **themes** like equality, freedom, and representative government. He included **metaphors** of people's lives:

the nation was 'conceived,' the nation 'might live,' the government 'shall not perish.' He spoke to honor the dead but reminded his listeners of the 'unfinished work' that, although it had been 'nobly advanced,' was also a 'great task remaining.'

The speech begins with a wider lens, taking listeners back to the beginning of the country, one that was 'conceived in liberty.' The idea was at the time thought to be revolutionary not only by people in other countries but also by most Americans, not just the ones who professed their loyalties to the 'mother country.' The revolutionaries had fought a war to maintain the independence that they had declared and another one (in 1812) to cement it. Now, in the Civil War, the idea of **liberty** was threatened again, Lincoln argued, **liberty** not only on a national level but also on a personal level. Significantly, he referenced the Declaration of Independence, with its statement that 'all men are created equal,' not the Constitution, which included the Three-fifths Compromise for how to count slaves in the overall population.

The war was a test of the nation's and the government's ability to survive a severe constitutional crisis. The Constitution, so forged because the Articles of Confederation had proved too divisive, clearly stipulated a strong federal government as sovereign over state governments; yet the Southern states had divorced themselves from that Constitution and formed their own country, governmental framework, and standing army. Yet Lincoln would not recognize this Confederacy as a 'new nation' in the way that the United States of America was a 'new nation.' Clearly, America was all-or-nothing.

Union armies invaded Southern states in order to preserve the 'all.' The results were deaths by the thousands, as exemplified at Gettysburg. Many observers would have thought Gettysburg a Union 'victory' because the Southern troops retreated. Gettysburg was not a victory for the soldiers who died in that battle, except in the sense that, Lincoln argues, they were a part of something larger than themselves. For Lincoln, the Union troops who died at Gettysburg--and at Antietam and Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville and Shiloh and all the other battles in the war so far and until it was finished--'gave their lives that that nation might live,' advancing the cause of the whole American nation, indivisible.

Harkening to Pericles (who, in his famous Funeral Oration during the Peloponnesian War said 'it is both just and proper that they should have the honor of the first mention...'), Lincoln intoned that 'it is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.' He repeated this **theme** in the next few sentences, speaking of the consecration of, the hallowing of the ground on which the soldiers struggled. Here, Lincoln elevates the soldiers' efforts above anything that anyone who didn't fight might say, while also including the ones who survived: 'the brave men, living and dead.'

Lincoln's argument is that the soldiers, in taking up the cause of defending the Union and its founding principles of liberty and equality for all, had 'so far nobly advanced' the cause, with some giving 'the last full measure of devotion' (their lives) to that cause. Their efforts should be honored, Lincoln said, by not only remembering their struggles but also by continuing their struggles, embracing 'the great task remaining before us' by taking 'increased devotion to that cause,' so that the efforts of the 'honored dead' will have meant something, that they 'shall not have died in vain.' And here, Lincoln again echoed Pericles, who said, 'You, their survivors, must determine to have as unflinching a resolution.'

The Address has **Biblical allusions** as well, beginning with the first six words: 'Four score and seven years ago.' Language such as this was common in the *King James Bible*, notably in the Psalms. Other words commonly found in religious texts or discussions appear: *devotion, hallow, consecration, new birth*. In the last sentence, Lincoln uses the words 'under God.'

Lincoln is also careful to use inclusive language: '**our** fathers brought forth'; '**we** are engaged in a great civil war'; '**We** are met on a great battle-field; '**We** have come to dedicate'; 'It is...proper that **we** should do this'; '**We** can not dedicate, **we** can not consecrate, **we** can not hallow this ground'; '**our** poor power to add or detract'; 'It is for **us** the living'; 'the great task remaining before **us**'; '**we** here highly resolve.' Careful not to elevate himself above his audience or above the 'honored dead,' Lincoln includes himself in those uses of '**we**.'

Lincoln is also careful to ground his listeners in the immediate. He uses the word 'here' eight times in two minutes, keeping the focus on what happened, what it means for the country, and what it means for the people and their future. The Address is definitely prose, but it contains elements of poetry as well. **Alliteration** can be found: 'our fathers brought forth'; 'new nation'; 'our poor power to add or detract'; 'little note, nor long remember.' **Repetition** is also evident: 'conceived in liberty...dedicated to the proposition ...created equal'; 'so conceived and so dedicated'; 'we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow'; 'government of the people, by the people, for the people.'

Lincoln finishes by closing the loop, echoing the beginning of his speech and of the country by envisioning 'a new birth of freedom'--for slaves as well as nonslaves. The final idea is another echo of an earlier part of the speech, the concept of representative government and the idea that it 'shall not perish from the earth.' If the Southern states were to emerge victorious, their secession allowed to stand, then it would undermine the entire premise of the Constitution, that the republic, created and empowered by the people, is the ultimate authority. Lincoln warned that such a government, the authority of which could be superseded by its own elements, would not be strong enough to survive on a global stage."

"The Gettysburg Address: Style and Structure"
socialstudiesfor kids.com (25 May 2020)

Rhetorical Devices Used in the Gettysburg Address

Allusion: The phrase 'four score and seven' is an **allusion**, or reference to another person or document. Here Lincoln is echoing the Bible's language for the life of a human. *Psalms* 90 gives the standard life as 'threescore years and ten.' Lincoln uses other **allusions** throughout his speech. He concludes his first sentence with a more explicit **allusion** to the Declaration of Independence by using the line 'that all men are created equal.' This is also an appeal to a shared value, the value of equality.

As Lincoln opens his speech with an **allusion** to the Declaration, he closes it with an **allusion** to the Constitution. The Preamble to the Constitution begins with the words 'We the people.' By using 'the people,' Lincoln **alludes** to that crucial document. He thus links the two great founding documents of the United States as he is trying to link the splintered country. Lincoln also uses his **allusions** to create structural unity in his speech. He opens with an **allusion** to the Bible, and in his final sentence refers explicitly to God. Opening and closing with religious references, and opening and closing with references to the country's foundational documents, creates an especially strong sense of unity.

Archaic Language: Lincoln opens the speech with archaic language, the phrase 'four score and seven.' Using **archaic language**, or language older than is used in daily life, is a rhetorical marker. This phrase signals that what follows will be distinct from daily discourse because the language used is special and elevated.

Call to Action: As he moves to the end of his speech, Lincoln issues a **call to action**, urging his audience to act. Lincoln valued actions over words in previous lines; that was one of his contrasts. If the audience joins him in this action, they will be joining the fallen dead in action (an elevated state). The action he calls his audience to join is carrying out the mission of the Declaration of Independence. In using the term 'new birth of freedom,' Lincoln creates **structural unity**, one that blends imagistic unity with conceptual unity. He brings the speech full circle and enlists his listeners in the act of creation Washington and Jefferson had engaged in. By rhetorically restarting the nation and enlisting the thousands of listeners present in the act, Lincoln is transforming anyone who hears and agrees with his words into a much larger generation of the nation's founders.

Contrast: Lincoln uses **contrast** in his second paragraph: some died so that others, and the entire nation, could live. The specific structure of this **contrast**, starting with the negative element and ending with the positive, is a rhetorical tradition. It is a way of emphasizing the second term. Lincoln continues his use of **contrasts** in the third paragraph: 'living and dead,' 'add or detract,' and so on. He follows these simple contrasting pairs with a larger **contrast** or **antithesis**, arguing the world won't remember what he says, but it will remember what the dead soldiers did. This section combines multiple contrasting concepts:

living and dead, speech and deed, remembering and forgetting, which moves from simple **contrast** to a larger **rhythm**.

Classical Rhetorical Authority: Classical rhetoric identified three primary sources of **rhetorical authority**: **ethos**, **logos**, and **pathos**. When Lincoln refers to the Declaration of Independence, he appeals to shared values, namely the value of equality. By starting with a statement his entire audience perceives to be true, Lincoln borrows the **authority** of that assumed truth for the rest of his speech. This generates and applies **ethos**: rhetorical authority that depends on the identity and character of the speaker. He also introduces a logical argument--**logos**--in this first paragraph: the idea that the nation was dedicated to a specific proposition. Lincoln's second paragraph applies the other classical source of **rhetorical authority**, **pathos**, or an appeal to emotion. By addressing emotionally charged topics (death, bravery, struggle, sacredness), Lincoln evokes emotion in his audience. He ends the second paragraph with another reference to shared values: the idea that it is appropriate to honor those killed in war.

His first paragraph also applies the rhetorical quality of **kairos**, being timely or particularly appropriate for a specific audience and place: Lincoln locates his speech in a specific place and time and draws persuasive power from that particular setting. The simplest element of **kairos** is often overlooked: Lincoln is giving a speech during war. He intends this speech to rally support for his cause; however, he goes beyond this. In establishing this specific position, Lincoln redefines it. Lincoln and his audience are not just at Gettysburg to dedicate a national cemetery, important as this task may be. They are there to establish a relationship with the Declaration of Independence: these men fought and died to carry out the mission of the Declaration.

Euphemism: Lincoln uses **euphemism** in his second paragraph when he calls a cemetery a 'final resting place.' The battlefield he was dedicating as a cemetery had been more like a slaughterhouse. When the Battle of Gettysburg was done, the corpses of more than 7,000 men and 5,000 horses or mules lay rotting in the field.

Inclusive Language: Lincoln follows his opening phrase with **inclusive language**, using the phrase 'our fathers.' Given the rate of immigration to the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, this was not literally true for many of Lincoln's listeners, whose fathers and mothers would have moved to North America after the founding of the republic; however, by using **inclusive language**, he invites everyone to join a shared American heritage. Lincoln opens his second paragraph with more **inclusive language**, stating, 'We are engaged in a great civil war.' Though Lincoln was president at the time he gave this address, and his fellow speaker was one of the most famous in America, in referring to his audience as 'we' he elevates them all to the same level.

Metaphor: **Metaphor** means using language in a nonliteral fashion, linking two things in a way that shows they share some characteristic. **Metaphor** often uses a physical image to illustrate a more abstract concept. Lincoln uses **metaphor** when he speaks of the nation's fathers conceiving the nation, or bringing it forth: this starts an extended biological **metaphor** of conception and birth that Lincoln continues through the speech. He returns to this biological **metaphor** in his final line, referring to a 'new birth of freedom.' This provides yet another source of structural unity.

Repetition: Through his second paragraph, Lincoln uses 'we,' repeating it several times. This establishes a pattern of **anaphora**, a rhetorical technique in which the same word starts several clauses, verses, or sentences. It also establishes the first of Lincoln's several triads or triplets in the speech: the first three sentences in the second paragraph all start with 'we.' Grouping ideas this way gives Lincoln the chance to emphasize this concept. In the middle of a civil war, when the nation is sharply divided, repeating 'we' emphasizes and creates a shared national unity.

In his third paragraph Lincoln uses **anaphora** again, starting each clause with 'we can not.' In doing so, Lincoln constructs another triad/triplet. This one emphasizes what he and the audience 'can not' do, underscoring its importance. Using multiple verbs to express the same concept, as Lincoln does here, is a rhetorical technique called **disjunction**. Speakers use it to slow a speech and guide listeners to dwell on a concept.

Shared Knowledge: In his opening line, Lincoln refers to **shared knowledge** (another rhetorical technique, also called a commonplace), as he alludes to another document. He assumes his audience will know the Declaration of Independence was signed 87 years before the ceremony at Gettysburg.

Speech Structure: Greek Funeral Oration: Though his audience could not have known it, Lincoln applied rhetorical devices to this famous speech before he spoke a word through his choice of **structure**. Lincoln organized his speech using the **classical rhetorical structure of the Greek funeral oration**. In those speeches it was common for speakers to spend the first portion praising the dead (the **epainesis**), and the second portion giving advice to the living (the **parainesis**). Lincoln does this here."

"Rhetorical Devices Used in "The Gettysburg Address"
coursehero.com

Abraham Lincoln is the most noble soul and by far the best writer among American presidents. In the wilderness of the western frontier he educated himself by firelight, developing a prose style influenced by the Bible, Aesop, Shakespeare, John Bunyan, and Thomas Paine. He began as a humorous storyteller and a lawyer who excelled at persuasion and became the most effective public speaker in American political history. His campaign debates with Stephen Douglas remain classics of argumentation.

Lincoln combines the traits of a folksy western humorist, the Neoclassical mind of a lawyer, and the Transcendental sensibility of a deeply religious poet. His writing is economical, simple, clear, logical, and enhanced by parallelism, antitheses, and wit. It is poetic in its measured cadences, patterned rhythms, metaphors, alliteration, assonance, repetition, inverted syntax, archaic language, elegiac tone, and spiritual resonance. His major works are his "House Divided" speech, his "Cooper Union Address," his "Farewell Address" at Springfield, his inaugural addresses, and, of course, "The Gettysburg Address" (1863), one of the masterpieces in world oratory.

Michael Hollister (2020)