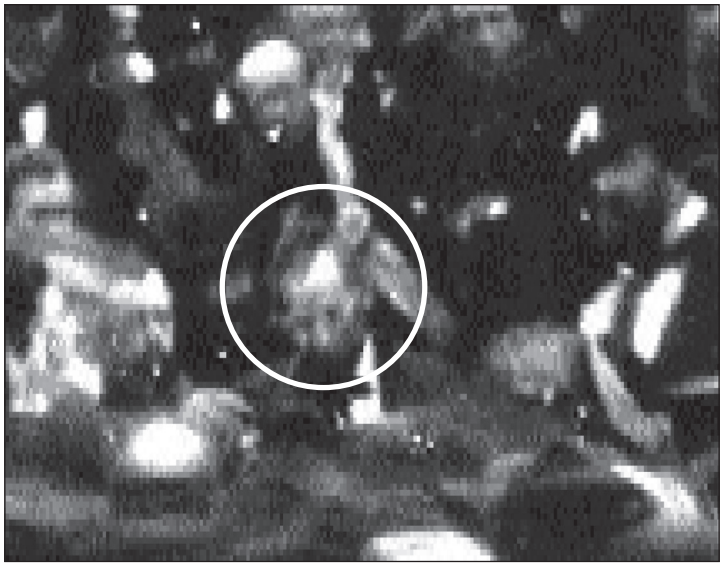
Royal Fireworks Language Arts by Michael Clay Thompson

Lincoln's Ten Sentences

The Gettysburg Address

Michael Clay Thompson



This image is an extreme blow-up of the only known photo of Lincoln (circled) at Gettysburg. See complete photo on p.10.

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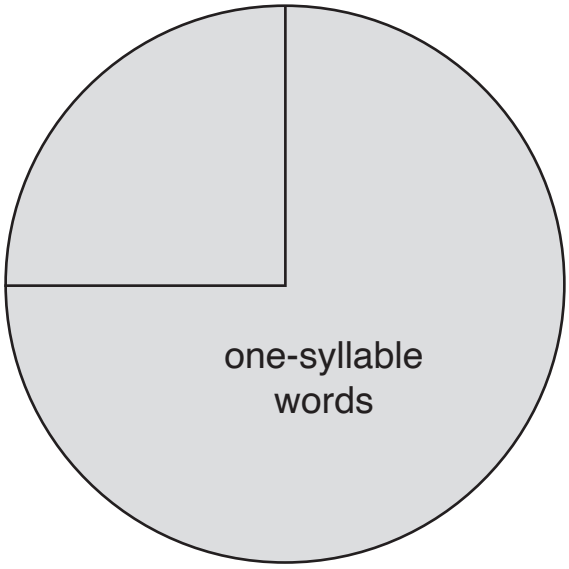
The Language of Lincoln's Speech

Lincoln's few appropriate remarks were filled with silences, with things unsaid. Contrary to—even in defiance of—the expectations of such a moment, there were things that Lincoln strikingly omitted. He did not proclaim the triumph of the North or trumpet the victory of good over evil. He did not create disparaging comparisons of Northern troops or officers over their Southern foes. He did not use the word *enemy*, or the word *victory*, or the word *confederacy,* or the word *Gettysburg*. Even though he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st, he did not mention slavery, or abolition, or emancipation.

He did use the words *proposition, testing, new, unfinished, men*, *equal*, *people*, and *here*. Unlike the orators of the day, Lincoln avoided high prose and impressive words; he kept the words simple. Of the 267 words in the address, 194 of them—73%—were only one syllable:



194 One-Syllable Words

Four score and seven **years** ago **our** fathers **brought forth** upon **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**.

Lincoln's longer words, even the most scholarly of them, are common public words that include everyone: *continent*, *conceived*, *dedicated*, and *proposition*—an idea that has been *proposed*—*engaged*, *civil*, *whether*, and *endure*. We see *battlefield*, *portion*, *final*, *altogether*, *consecrate*, *hallow*, *struggled*, and *detract*. Lincoln also used *forget*, *unfinished*, *advanced*, *remaining*, *honored*, *increased*, *devotion*, *measure*, *resolve*, *nation*, *freedom*, *government*, and *people*—good words that people understood and cared about. Lincoln grounded his language on the core of the people's understanding.

Lincoln also grounded his few appropriate remarks in allusions to the two great documents of American history, the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. Both documents begin with the first person plural subject pronoun *we*. Lincoln began by summoning the self-evident truth used by Thomas Jefferson to declare the independence of the American colonies from British oppression:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident: **that all men are created equal**; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness....

In Lincoln's view, our new nation is dedicated to Jefferson's proposition that all men are created equal. In truth, the fathers had asserted a number of propositions, but Lincoln focused on the proposition of equality, giving a power to his vision that a more complex argument would have diffused.

It is difficult to grasp how new the nation created by Jefferson and described by Lincoln really was. As Lincoln spoke, there were people, eighty-seven years old or more, who had been alive when Jefferson and his colleagues had written the Declaration of Independence. Both Jefferson and Adams were still alive thirty-five years before the battle. Lincoln emphasized this newness: "four score and seven years ago"—a score being twenty.

Lincoln's Use of Poetic Technique

Although the *Gettysburg Address* is not a poem, Lincoln used poetic techniques to increase the power of his words. It is not universally known that Lincoln wrote poetry, but his 1844 poems show a clear understanding of meter, end rhyme and internal rhyme, consonance, assonance, and alliteration:

I range the fields with pensive tread
And pace the hollow rooms,
And feel (companion of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs.

The *Gettysburg Address* shows Lincoln's poetic attention to detail in sound, grammar, and diction. Lincoln kept his Gettysburg speech in his hat while he was working on it and would take it out to make changes.

Our new nation was conceived just eighty-seven years ago, Lincoln wanted people to see; our nation is still a proposition, still being tested. He gave force to that fact with the poetry of his consonants, moving from the bassoon-like *oh-ohr-ohn* sounds of *four score ago our fathers brought forth upon continent* to the flutey *ooo-ay* sounds of ***n**ew **n**ation*, which he alliterated for maximum effect.

> *F*our score and seven years ago our *f*athers brought *f*orth upon this continent a *n*ew *n*ation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Lincoln also used alliteration to move other ideas into view:

> 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.

Our *f*athers
brought *f*orth
upo*n* this
co*nti*n*e*n*t*
a *ne*w *na*tio*n*.

In addition to controlling the vowels and consonants, Lincoln arranged the rhythm of his words, using bits of standard poetic meter to move ideas forward. Many of Lincoln's phrases are iambic (just as his 1844 poems were), meaning that every second syllable is stressed:

> Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon 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.

The Strategic Grammar of Lincoln's Sentences

As we look closer at Lincoln's address, we continue to make discoveries: his reliance on one-syllable words, his use of poetic techniques, and his respect for brave men of both sides, rather than just Union soldiers.

But there is another powerful way of examining Lincoln's masterpiece: we can examine the grammar of the ten sentences. We sometimes forget that sentences are ideas and that by exposing the grammar of sentences, we can uncover secrets of the ideas themselves.

For example, we know that every sentence has a verb, and we know that verbs can be used as other parts of speech through the device of *verbals*. There are three kinds of verbals: gerunds, participles, and infinitives. When we use an *-ing* verb as a noun, that is a gerund. When we use a verb as an adjective, that is a participle. And when we use the *to* form of a verb as a noun or a modifier, that is an infinitive.

Gerund: *for us the* ***living***

Participle: *a new nation,* ***conceived*** *in liberty*

Infinitive: *above our poor power* ***to add*** *or [to]* ***detract***

In this way, an action verb might show up in a sentence either as the verb, or as a gerund, or as a participle, or in the form of an infinitive. Each of these options can introduce an action verb's energy into an idea.

The question is, then, did Lincoln rely on linking verbs to make his points, or did he load his speech with action verbs, gerunds made from action verbs, participles made from action verbs, and infinitives made from action verbs? The answer is that the speech is loaded with action verbs in their verb, gerund, participle, and infinitive forms.

Many Action Verbs, Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives

Four score and seven years ago our fathers **brought** forth upon 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.

Few Linking Verbs

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon 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.

There are far fewer linking verbs than action verbs in Lincoln's address. He was not thinking of linking. When we use a linking verb, we are saying that one thing and another thing are the same thing. If we say that Lincoln *is* the president, then the linking verb *is* is like the equals sign in an equation: Lincoln = president. The linking verb means that this thing *is* that thing.

Lincoln used few linking verbs: we *are* met, we *are* engaged, it *is* for us the living.... Even when he did use a linking verb, he tended to use it to attach the subject to a participle made of an action verb: we are *met*, we are *engaged*..., and so the effect is still one of action.

Lincoln wasn't thinking about what things are. He was thinking about people and their actions. He was thinking about what brave men had done and about what we should now do to ensure that a government in which all men are created equal shall not perish from the earth. We can also see his focus on people clearly if we look for the pronouns that Lincoln used.

In a sense, the address is organized around its subject pronouns. It is centered around what *they* did and what *we* are doing and must do. Almost every idea in the address falls either into the *they* category or the *we* category:

> **They** fought here, struggled here, and have consecrated this ground with **their** blood. We can never forget what **they** did here. **They** gave the last full measure of devotion.

> **We** are engaged in a great civil war, **we** are met on a great battlefield, **we** have come to dedicate a portion of it, but **we** cannot dedicate, consecrate, or hallow it because they did. **We** can never forget. It is for **us** to be dedicated to the great task, to take increased devotion. **We** must highly resolve that the dead have not died in vain and that this new nation of, by, and for the people shall not perish.

Personal Pronouns

Four score and seven years ago **our** fathers brought forth upon 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.

Four-Level Analysis

It is useful to look at portions of Lincoln's address through the magic lens of grammar, which offers us four different ways of looking at his ideas.

Parts of speech. The parts of speech are the eight kinds of words: noun, pronoun, and adjective; verb and adverb; and preposition, conjunction, and interjection. The noun and verb are the two main kinds of words, and the others support them.

Parts of sentence. The parts of sentence are the roles that the parts of speech play in making an idea. These roles include subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object, and subject complement. If a subject has an action verb as its predicate, then there might be a direct object. If there is a direct object, then there might be an indirect object. If the subject has a linking verb as its predicate, then there might be a subject complement.

Phrases. A phrase is a group of words that acts as a single part of speech. There are prepositional phrases, which always begin with a preposition. There are appositive phrases, which are interrupting definitions and usually are enclosed in commas. And there are verbal phrases, which are based on gerunds, participles, or infinitives.

Clauses. A clause is a group of words that has a subject and its predicate in it. Independent clauses make sense by themselves, but dependent clauses have to be attached to independent clauses because they do not make sense alone. A one-clause sentence is called a simple sentence. Two independent clauses can join to make a compound sentence, or a dependent clause can join an independent clause to make a complex sentence.

In other words, with the four levels of grammar, we can look at each word, one at a time, to see what the word is doing; we can look at the way the whole idea is structured; we can look at little groups of words; and we can look at whether the sentence has only one idea in it or whether it is a combination of ideas. Let's look closely at a few of Lincoln's ideas.

New Nation: A Super Direct Object

	our	**fathers**	**brought**	**forth**	**upon**	**this**	**continent**	**a**	**new**	**nation,**
Parts of Speech:	pron.	n.	v.	adv.	prep.	pron.	n.	adj.	adj.	n.
Parts of Sentence:		subj.	pred.							D.O.
Phrases:	--prepositional phrase--									
Clauses:	one independent clause; a simple declarative sentence									

What is striking in this sentence is the odd sequence of words. Why didn't Lincoln say, in a more normal order, "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth a new nation upon this continent"?

When we look at the first sentence of the *Gettysburg Address*, we see that Lincoln pulled out all the stops to turn our heads toward the vital concept of the *new nation*. He made it the direct object of an action verb, *brought*. He pushed it to the end of the clause so that it rings in the silence of the comma, rather than being buried by a following prepositional phrase, *upon this continent*. He puffed the words up by alliterating the *n*'s of the adjective and noun: *n*ew *n*ation. He preceded the direct object with low, bass vowels (***our***, *sc**o**re*, *ag**o***, ***our***, *f**a**thers*, *br**ou**ght*, ***or**th*, *up**on***, *c**on**tinent*) that let the ***new*** and *n**a**tion* vowels soar high. And he arranged a double-stress spondee so that the ***new na**tion* stands out. Lincoln wanted us to hear: What did our fathers bring forth? A new nation. Yes, we *are* new, unfinished, a proposition still being tested, and we had forgotten. Now we remember.