Analyzing Famous Speeches as Arguments: Background Information for Teachers

Classrooms have long been filled with the written word—novels, plays, poems— and teachers have thoughtfully encouraged, coaxed, and prodded students to engage with the literature that's found in the huge anthology located on the bookshelf at the back of the room. Oftentimes, however, the spoken word is left unanalyzed, even though the spoken word sometimes alters our space more than the written. While many are moved by Thoreau's assiduous devotion to passive resistance while reading "Civil Disobedience," it was Elizabeth Cady Stanton's speeches that changed American politics to give women equal rights –forever changing our world perhaps more than Thoreau dreamed. The written word should be revered, of course, but *great* speeches have persuaded people to *great* action and they should not, therefore, be ignored in the Language Arts classroom.

The most difficult part of this scenario is finding a quality speech that is worth analyzing. It would be difficult to identify *the* greatest speech that altered the world the most because there are too many elements to define for that to be possible! But few people would argue that the best speeches are the ones that are remembered because they affected their audiences in ways that no one anticipated when they arrived. Attendees at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 probably knew Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, speech would be impressive, but no one anticipated the change those words would induce. Exceptional speeches such as King's are the ones that have decided wars, announced failures, proclaimed freedoms— and altered our world.

The Assignment:

From a list, students will select a famous speech. This list is a compilation of several collections, including *The American Rhetoric* and *The History Place*. In order to get some international writers, there are some speeches from Britain's *Guardian Unlimited*. There are enough speeches on this list to accommodate everyone—even the most fastidious student. Please note that some famous speeches were deliberately avoided because they are often "overdone" or "overanalyzed," so don't assume that anyone was negligently ignored.

Naturally, there's an essay involved. Students must analyze their chosen speeches as arguments and write a 1000-1200 word essay about their effectiveness considering the context and audience in which they were delivered. Essays should identify and explain the rhetorical strategies that the author deliberately chose while crafting the text. What makes the speech so remarkable? How did the

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author's rhetoric evoke a response from the audience? Why are the words still venerated today?

The thesis must be arguable and may not placidly tout the importance of the speech or the valiance of the creator. Instead, students should carefully consider the author's deliberate manipulation of language.

Here's what there is **not** time for in a 1000-1200 word essay:

Unfortunately, there isn't ample space in this essay to carefully detail every aspect of the historical context in which this speech falls. It's critical to know about the events that led up to the speech. It is probably necessary to include pertinent details; however, it is not useful to delineate the specific events of the entire Revolutionary War that preceded George Washington's Inaugural Speech. Students must stay focused on the speech as an *argumentative text*.

Details:

The essay must include multiple (2-3) secondary sources that effectively and actively support the student's thesis. All students must have a Works Cited page in MLA format and the speech must appear as an additional source listed on that page. The student should cite the version of the speech that he or she referred to during his or her research.

Students need to bring a copy of the speech to class on the days that are set aside for workdays. The final essay must be turned in with a clean, neat copy of the speech at the beginning of class on the assigned date.

Examples of Rhetorical Devices:

Tone, Diction, Figurative Language, Repetition, Hyperbole, Understatement

Elements of Argument:

Claims, Warrants, The Appeals (logos, pathos, ethos), Fallacies