

John F. Kennedy, *Inaugural Address*

John F. Kennedy's inaugural address is a perfect text for practicing close reading and developing an argument about how style—the speech's diction and syntax—can communicate a distinct vision. It is also a chance to look at why the speech remains a model of rhetorical excellence that has withstood the test of time.

It is, we believe, very important for students to watch the speech. You can find it with a quick Google search or on bedfordstmartins.com/languageofcomp. This will help students take in some of the details of the day: the cold weather; who is wearing hats and who isn't; the wives, especially the young and beautiful Jacqueline Kennedy; Robert Frost and Harry Truman, representing the older generation; Richard Nixon's missed handshake; even President Kennedy's strong Boston accent. The photo on page 78 will give you a chance to examine these participants more closely.

Much has been made of the influence of Kennedy's style of speechmaking on Barack Obama. We suggest that students analyze contemporary political speechmaking, considering the rhetorical triangle; appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos; and, of course, diction and syntax.

Although the speech is short, only 1,343 words, students can find reading it daunting. It is probably useful to read it aloud to the class, even after watching it on video. Students can then annotate it or use a graphic organizer or dialectical journal. We recommend having students work in groups on the following questions, each group answering two or three. The groups can then share their answers, with all students taking notes on the responses, after which the groups can work on identifying the speech's tone. At this point, students may have quite a lot of notes about the speech and may be ready to develop an argument for an essay about the purpose of the speech and how its style helped Kennedy achieve it. One method we recommend is beginning with the text's tone, which is created by its diction and syntax, and creating a thesis statement that connects the text's tone to its purpose.

1. Why are so many of the words abstract? How do words like *freedom*, *poverty*, *devotion*, *loyalty*, and *sacrifice* set the tone of the speech?

These words are strong sources of emotional persuasion. They touch chords in us while allowing listeners to interpret the ideas in a personal way. They also set the tone as formal, appropriate to the occasion of a new president of the United States taking office.

2. Find examples of rhetorical devices such as metaphor and personification.

Some examples of metaphor are "bonds of mass misery" (para. 8), "beachhead of cooperation" (para. 19), and "jungle of suspicion" (para. 19); "sister republics" (para. 9) is an example of personification.

3. Does Kennedy use any figures of speech that might be considered clichés? Which metaphors are fresher? Is there a pattern to their use?

This is probably a tough question for anyone and will depend on the background of both teacher and students. Some might consider "bonds of mass misery" and "chains of poverty" to be clichés; they work in these paragraphs (8 and 9), however, because Kennedy is not telling a new story here. The language in the next couple of paragraphs is fresher perhaps because Kennedy is talking about hope for the future both through the United Nations, a fairly new organization, and through technology and science.

4. Do any words in the speech seem archaic, or old-fashioned? If so, what are they? What is their effect?

Words such as *forebears*, *foe*, *asunder*, and *writ* are somewhat archaic, but they help create both the formal tone of the speech and the timelessness of its concerns.

5. The speech is a succession of twenty-seven short paragraphs. Twelve paragraphs have only one sentence, eight have two, and six have three sentences. Why do you think Kennedy used these short paragraphs?

The short paragraphs are an early version of bullet points; each one reveals one of Kennedy's principles or promises. They also offer natural pauses in the delivery of the speech.

6. The speech contains two extremes of sentence length, ranging from ninety-four words (para. 3) to six words (para. 5). A high proportion of the sentences are on the short side. Why?

Brevity is a hallmark of the speech, which may have been a nod to the cold weather. The short sentences are declarative and communicate authority and confidence. The long sentence in paragraph 3 takes its time making the connection between the revolution that created this country and the generation hardened by the recent world war.

7. More than twenty sentences are complex sentences—that is, sentences that contain a subordinate clause. What is their effect? How are they different from the speech's simple or compound sentences?

The subordinate clauses that begin many of the complex sentences help build steam; they energize the sentence's main idea. In some cases, such as the sentences that begin paragraphs 6–11, the subordinate clause is used to create community, each inviting a particular group to be part of Kennedy's vision.

8. The speech has many examples of antithesis in parallel grammatical structures: "To those old allies" (para. 6); "to those new states" (para. 7); "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich" (para. 8); and of course, "[A]sk not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" (para. 25). What does this use of opposites suggest about the purpose of Kennedy's speech?

The young Kennedy, who had won the election by a small margin, focused on unity in this speech. Addressing opposites, as he does here, reassures his audience that he intends to be everyone's president.

9. Why is the dominance of declarative sentences, which make statements, appropriate in an inaugural address?

As mentioned previously, the declarative sentences communicate confidence. They also help create the tone of youthful energy. Try reading some aloud to hear the zip that comes from the classic subject-verb-object structure.

10. Paragraph 23 consists of two rhetorical questions. How do they act as a transition to Kennedy's call for action?

In this speech, the rhetorical questions remind us that the young president was interested in building consensus rather than dictating. They are unifying rather than divisive. The first asks if the world can work together to become better. The second asks us to be part of the mission that he will propose in the last few paragraphs.

11. Find examples of rhetorical schemes such as anaphora (the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or lines) and zeugma (one verb or adjective having multiple and incongruous objects).

On pages 78–80, we offer a glossary of style elements with examples from Kennedy's speech. Although it is fun to know their technical names, recognizing the parallel quality of, say, zeugma or antimetabole is more important. And even more important is recognizing the unifying effect of parallel structure.

12. Consider the speech's many examples of parallelism: "born in this country, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage" (para. 3); "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe" (para. 4). How do they lend themselves to Kennedy's purpose?

As mentioned previously, parallel structure has the effect of unifying and reassuring. Its use shows that Kennedy understands the connections among the people he is pledging to serve as well as the common goals they all share.

13. Kennedy uses hortative sentences (language that urges or calls to action) in paragraphs 3 through 20: "Let the word," "Let both sides," and so on. Later, in paragraphs 25 and 26, he uses the imperative: "ask" and "ask not." What is the difference between the two forms, and why did he start with one and end with the other?

Again, the purpose of Kennedy's speech is to build unity. The hortative sentences' use of "Let" suggests that he is willing to roll up his sleeves and dig in with the rest of us. As the speech nears its end, he is more demanding. Perhaps it is because he has already shown his commitment to service and is almost demanding the rest of us to do the same.

Eleanor Clift, *Inside Kennedy's Inauguration, 50 Years On*

This terrific piece, first published online and then in print in *Newsweek*, captures the excitement of the Kennedy inauguration through a combination of recollections of people who were there and reporting on the event. It might be interesting for students to separate the two perspectives to discover how Clift weaves them together and how they help her achieve her purpose.

U.S. Army Signal Corps, *Inauguration of John F. Kennedy*

In addition to identifying the people in the photo, students might notice the photo's composition: the