The Gettysburg Address

A Reading A–Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,422

Connections

Writing and Art

Imagine you are Abraham Lincoln. Write your own speech for the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg. Deliver your speech to your class.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about Abraham Lincoln. Write a biography of his life using facts from this book and outside resources. Include a timeline of at least five of the most important events in his life.

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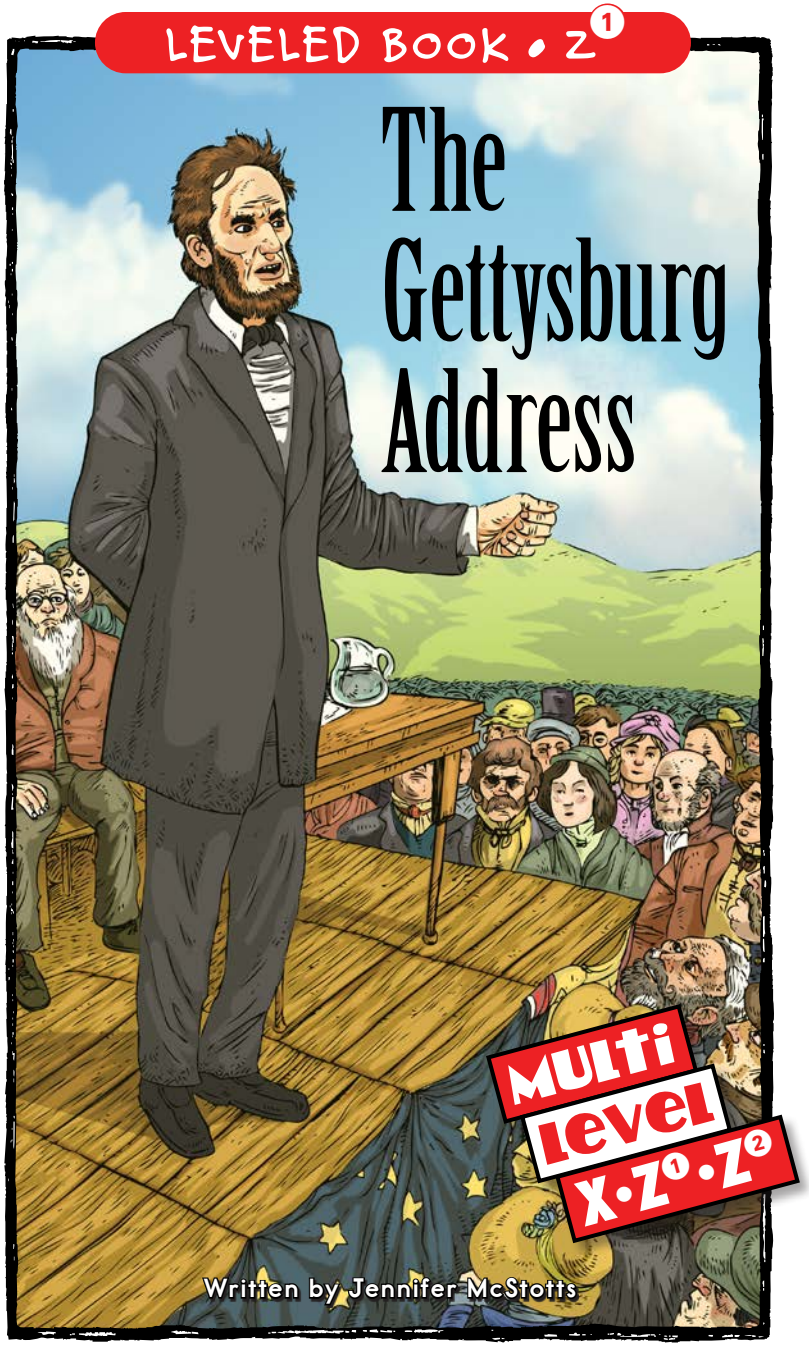

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Glossary

address *(n.)* a formal speech (p. 13)

brevity *(n.)* the quality of expressing something in few words or lasting for only a short time (p. 11)

conceived *(v.)* thought of; imagined (p. 17)

concise *(adj.)* consisting of as few words as possible; brief (p. 11)

constraints *(n.)* limits or restrictions on actions or ideas; the state of being limited or restricted (p. 17)

devastation *(n.)* great damage or destruction (p. 9)

fortitude *(n.)* strength; endurance (p. 18)

oblivion *(n.)* the state of being completely forgotten or unknown (p. 23)

perish *(v.)* to die, especially in a sudden, violent, or unexpected way (p. 20)

proposition *(n.)* an idea to be thought about, explored, or proved (p. 17)

revere *(v.)* to deeply respect or hold someone or something in high esteem (p. 23)

secession *(n.)* the act of formally separating from or leaving an organization or government (p. 7)

The Gettysburg Address

Written by Jennifer McStotts

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Focus Question

Why is the Gettysburg Address one of the most important speeches in American history?

Words to Know

address
brevity
conceived
concise
constraints
devastation
fortitude
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proposition
revere
secession

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Illustrated by Mike LaRiccia

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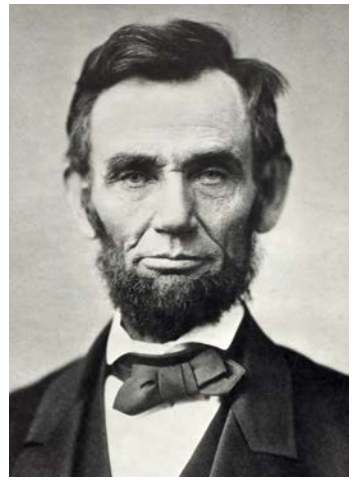
Correlation

LEVEL Z1	
Fountas & Pinnell	W–X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

Their reaction to Lincoln's speech was quiet. Some say there was delayed, scattered applause, barely enough to be polite. One newspaper's editorial negatively commented, "We pass over the silly remarks of the President. For the credit of the nation we are willing that the veil of **oblivion** shall be dropped over them and that they shall be no more repeated or thought of."

Others describe the scene as hushed with "a dignified silence." Some historians say there was no applause because the audience was so impressed by the president's words. After all, in just ten sentences, he had summarized the war and the spirit of a nation.

Just as the battle's significance emerged over time, so has appreciation of Lincoln's speech. People **revere** Lincoln's speech today because he preserved a vision of a nation founded on and dedicated to equality. He rescued not just the war effort, but also the ideal that all those men died for. Americans have been inspired by that vision ever since.



The sixteenth president of the United States is, for many people today, the most beloved president of all.

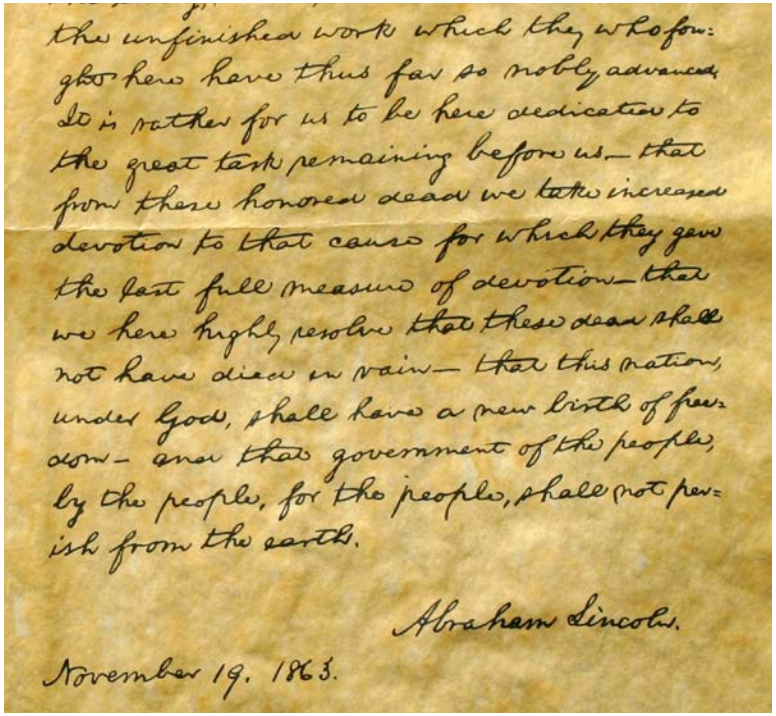
Life After Gettysburg

Today, the handwritten copies of the Gettysburg Address are national treasures. The speech is carved into the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., where visitors are inspired by it every day. Yet we're not certain what the audience thought of his address on that day in 1863.

The Lincoln Memorial

Designed to resemble a Greek Temple, the Lincoln Memorial opened in 1922. Forty-one years later, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech from its steps. Great leaders like Lincoln and King have shown the power that words and speeches have to inspire change in America.

This 19-foot statue of Abraham Lincoln sits in the Memorial's central hall. (If the statue were standing, it would be 28 feet tall.)


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.

Abraham Lincoln.

November 19, 1863.

The fifth version of the Gettysburg Address is the only version President Lincoln signed.

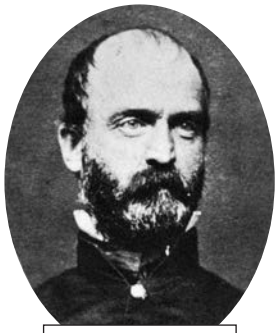
Table of Contents

Brother Against Brother

Fighting between siblings is so common that we don't think twice about it, but imagine being at war and fighting on one side while your brother or sister is fighting on the other side.

The American Civil War was a long fight between two sides of the country. Soldiers sometimes knew their enemy because men from the same town and even the same family would fight on opposite sides. Many of the officers had trained and fought together on the same side in earlier conflicts. Some were close friends before the war.

The Union was composed of the Northern states, and the Confederacy consisted of the Southern states. From 1861 until 1865, the Civil War raged. It cost the lives of 620,000 men. One of the war's most famous battles was the Battle of Gettysburg.



Lewis Armistead

Winfield Scott Hancock

Lewis Armistead and Winfield Scott Hancock were close friends before the Civil War. During the war, they served as generals on opposite sides. Both were wounded at Gettysburg. Hancock lived; Armistead died.

Lincoln fills his audience with respect for the fallen soldiers, describing them as noble and honored. "The last full measure of devotion" means they gave their lives and have nothing more to give. He uses that respect to inspire listeners to recommit to their nation, its freedoms, and the "great task ahead"—winning the war, ending slavery, and saving the United States of America.

The speech ends with the most famous part: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Here, Lincoln again uses repetition but this time with a difference. Rather than using synonyms, Lincoln varies one phrase with simple prepositions to remind his audience that the government of the United States is all about people.

Detail of Elihu Vedder's mural *Government* (1896) in the Library of Congress. The tablet is inscribed with Lincoln's famous phrase.

Lincoln uses synonyms for *dedicate: hallow*, which means "to honor as holy," and *consecrate*, which means "to make sacred." The president hasn't changed his mind and decided that there can be no cemetery. He means that the soldiers' deaths have already made the grounds as sacred and special as they possibly can be.

> *The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.*

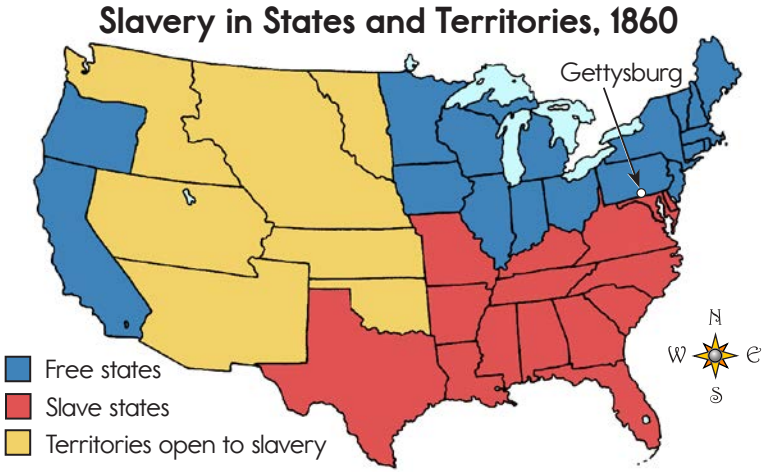
In a way, Lincoln is saying that actions speak louder than words. By changing *will* to *can* in the second clause, he reinforces the idea that it's not even possible that the battle of Gettysburg could ever be forgotten.

> *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 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.*

On the morning of the first day of the battle—July 1, 1863—Union soldier Rudolf Schwarz saw Confederate prisoners being led away. To his surprise, he saw his own brother among them.

The Schwarz brothers hadn't seen each other since departing Germany for the United States. The two men embraced, happy to see each other. They parted when the Confederate brother was taken away, never to meet again. Rudolf was killed in action that afternoon.

How did the United States end up at war, with brothers fighting against brothers? Why is the Battle of Gettysburg famous? And why is a 272-word speech about that one battle more famous still?



President Lincoln and the Civil War

When Abraham Lincoln ran for president in 1860, there were thirty-three states in the country. Slavery was legal in the fifteen Southern "slave states" and illegal in the eighteen Northern "free states." Many slaves tried to escape to the North.

Lincoln was against allowing slavery to spread beyond the Southern states, which upset many people in the South. They believed that if Lincoln became president, he would eventually abolish slavery in all the states. Many Southerners made their money from agriculture, and their huge farms, called *plantations*, required a great deal of labor. Southern plantation owners thought that using slaves was the best way to fill that need and thought that ending slavery would destroy their way of life.

Gettysburg National Cemetery is the final resting place for more than 3,500 Union soldiers killed in the Battle of Gettysburg. In the 1870s, the remains of 3,200 Confederate soldiers were sent to cemeteries in the South. A few Confederates do remain at Gettysburg, along with soldiers from later wars.

Saying the soldiers "gave their lives" rather than "died" puts emphasis on their sacrifice for their country. Lincoln was trying to unite the mourners on both sides of the war for the sake of the country.

> *It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*
>
> *But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.*

First Lincoln says it's right to dedicate part of the battlefield as a national cemetery. Then he uses repetition to make a stronger point.

Yet in 1863, the South treated its people with glaring inequality. Lincoln subtly reminds his audience that they have a responsibility to uphold the ideal of equality that was the cornerstone of the country's founding.

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 moves from the past to the present. He explains that the painful Civil War is "testing" the country's values and its **fortitude**. Whether the nation thinks that "all men are created equal"—or ought to be treated as equals—is being put to the test. As the North has moved toward making this value a political reality, it has put the nation under great strain, a nation "divided unto itself."

We are met on a great battle-field of that war.

The Battle of Gettysburg was one of the bloodiest of the long war. Confederate leaders showed no signs of giving up. Lincoln knew the war was far from over.

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.

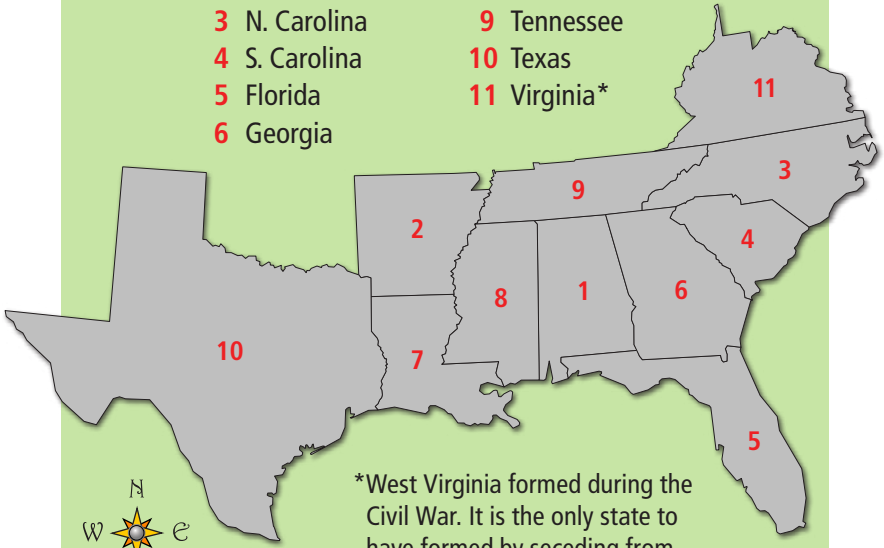
The economy was different in the North. Factories and manufacturing were far more common there than in the South. Those factories did not use slave labor, and many people in those states thought that slavery should end.

In the months that followed Lincoln's election in 1860, eleven slave states declared their **secession** from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America.

The Confederate States of America, 1861

Four slave states did not join the Confederacy: Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware.

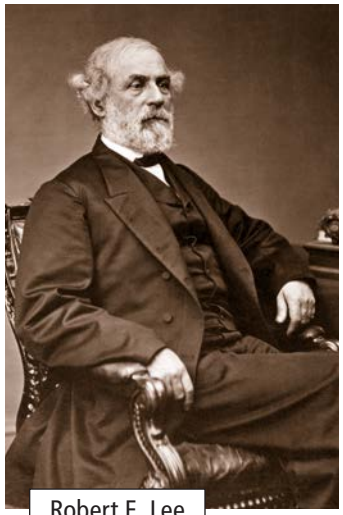
1 Alabama
2 Arkansas
3 N. Carolina
4 S. Carolina
5 Florida
6 Georgia
7 Louisiana
8 Mississippi
9 Tennessee
10 Texas
11 Virginia*



*West Virginia formed during the Civil War. It is the only state to have formed by seceding from a Confederate state (Virginia).

Lincoln took office in March 1861. The two sides went to war a month later. Confederate soldiers were called rebels, or "Johnny Reb." Residents of the Southern states fought hard for independence. The Northern states, which supported Lincoln and the United States, were referred to as the Union because they were dedicated to keeping the country together. Northern soldiers were nicknamed "Yankees" or "Yanks." Many Northerners wanted to end slavery and fought passionately in what they called the "War of Southern Rebellion."

Men (and sometimes boys) put on uniforms—blue for the North and gray for the South—and left their jobs, farms, and families to fight. Many thought the war would be over quickly.



Robert E. Lee

By the time of the Battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln had been president for two years. Confederate General Robert E. Lee had won many victories. He had led troops north into Pennsylvania through Virginia and Maryland. Yet despite Union losses, Lincoln had kept the nation together.

A Closer Look

Let's take Lincoln's address line by line to better understand what he said.

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.*

When Lincoln says "four score and seven years ago," he means four sets of twenty years, plus another seven. The year was 1863; eighty-seven years earlier was 1776, the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Lincoln takes a moment to remind his audience of the date on which the nation was born, and more importantly, why it was born: so people could escape the **constraints** of an old political system to enjoy both the freedom and opportunity of a new democracy.

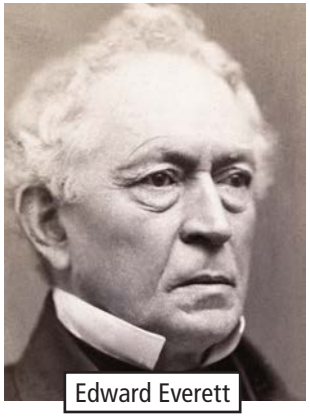
When Lincoln says, "our fathers brought forth . . . a new nation," he means the Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the line in the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln refers to: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they 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.

The Union marched more than 93,000 soldiers into Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the Confederates more than 71,000. When the fighting ceased three days later, nearly 51,000 soldiers were dead, wounded, or missing. Thirty percent died or were injured.

The Battle of Gettysburg ended Lee's northward advance; however, the battle brought **devastation** to both sides as well as the town. Public buildings and private homes were used as hospitals. Every farm became a graveyard. Although the war continued for another year and a half, more men died at the Battle of Gettysburg than at any other Civil War battle.

Four months after that battle, the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg was ready to be dedicated, on November 19, 1863. It was the first national cemetery. President Lincoln was invited to give "a few appropriate remarks," but he wasn't the main speaker. Instead, one of the most popular speakers of the time, Edward Everett, gave the formal speech—one that lasted two hours.



Edward Everett

The Other Speaker

Edward Everett was well known to the crowd at the dedication that day. A former U.S. congressman and senator, he had plenty of practice speaking before an audience. Everett got more practice at Gettysburg. He spoke for two hours—longer than many movies last today! While a speech of that length might sound overwhelming or boring to us, it was common in the 1860s.

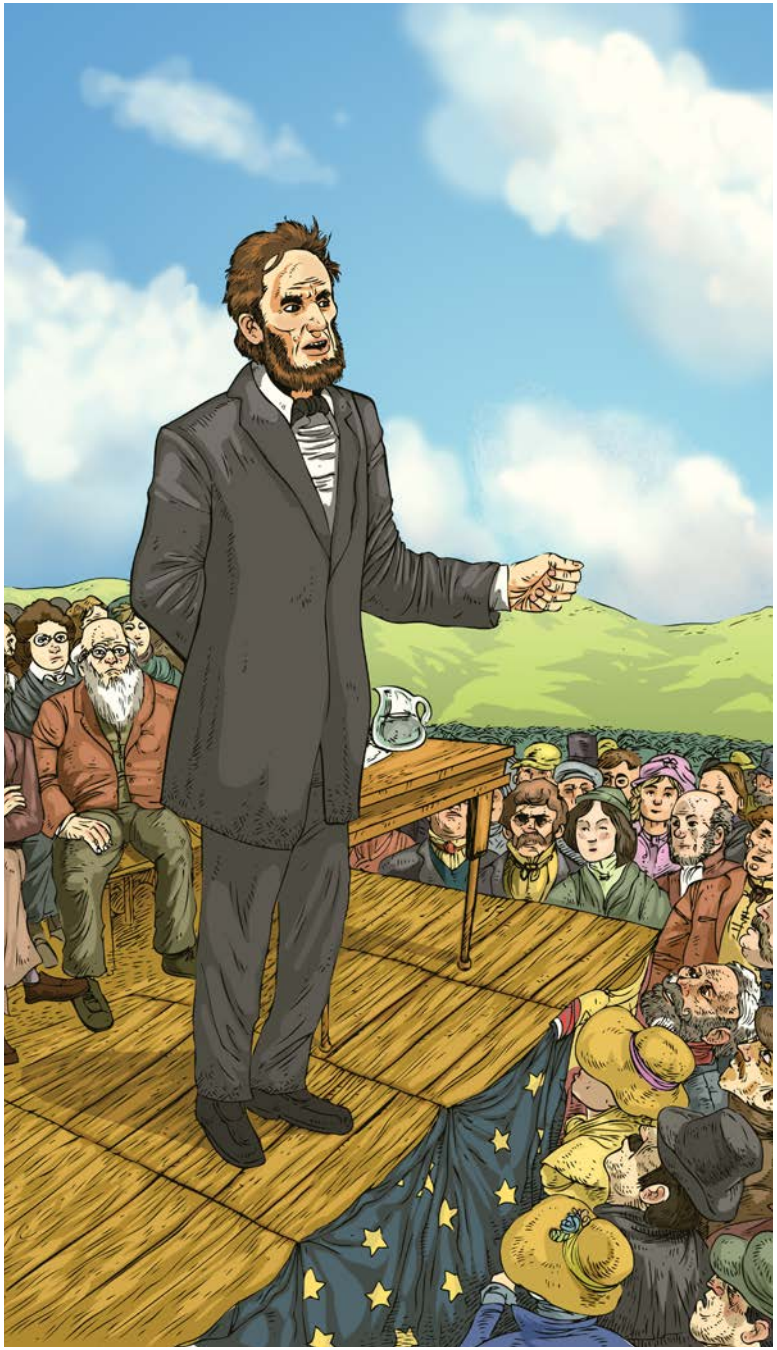
The crowd applauded, but Everett praised the president for his short speech in a letter written the next day: "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes." In other words, Everett was impressed that the president said so much in so short a time. Lincoln wrote back that he was glad to learn that his speech was not a "total failure."

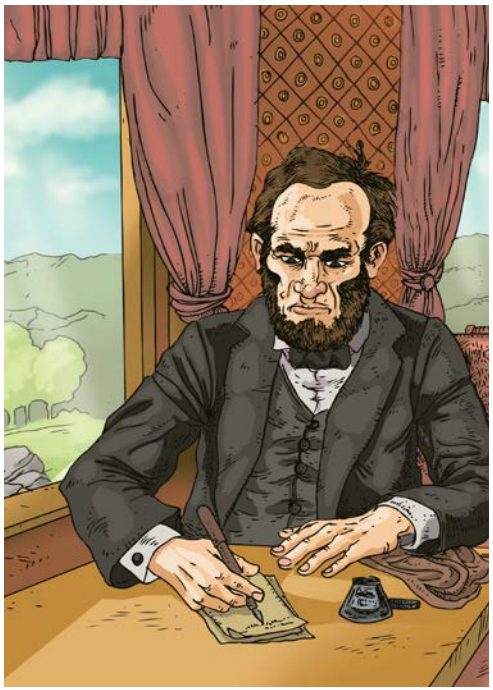
The most popular version of the Gettysburg Address is the final copy. Lincoln even signed and titled this version, which is why it is the most often-reproduced copy and is considered to be worth almost half a million dollars. The original document hangs in the Lincoln Room of the White House.

Here is the text of that version:

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 battle-field 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.





Days before the event, President Lincoln told a journalist that his speech would be "short, short, short." He was true to his word, and wisely so. **Brevity** often affects us more powerfully than something long and drawn out. Why speak for two hours when two minutes will do? The modern phrase "less is more" conveys the same idea.

The impact of the speech's brevity cannot be overstated. Unquestionably, it is part of why we continue to appreciate his speech today.

Though his speech was **concise**, Lincoln gave careful thought to his words. Witnesses describe Lincoln writing on the train to Gettysburg and even on the morning of the ceremony. He continued to write until it was time to go to the cemetery.

President Abraham Lincoln in August 1863, a month after the Battle of Gettysburg

The Battle of Gettysburg marked a turning point in the war, but not many people realized this until much later. Even four months after the battle, few people understood its implications. Confederate leaders saw their loss as a defeat rather than a disaster. Some people in the North were sick of the war—they wanted to let the South go, and Lincoln couldn't tell them that victory was just around the corner. He knew it was not.

That day at Gettysburg, Lincoln needed more than a good speech—he needed a great speech to keep the Union strong and in the fight.

What Did President Lincoln Say?

Today, the Gettysburg **Address** is considered one of the most inspiring speeches in American history. Since Lincoln gave his famous speech before recording technology was invented, there's no proof of his exact words. Reporters who were there wrote down what they heard and sent it by telegraph to newspapers. What's more, five copies of the speech written in Lincoln's own hand still exist. They are all slightly different from one another.

How Did the President Sound?

Because the Gettysburg Address was given in 1863, we don't have recordings of it, but many witnesses and reporters wrote about it. It is said that Lincoln spoke loudly and clearly but also slowly and carefully.

Lincoln's slow speech may have been for effect—to reflect how serious and solemn his words were. It also could have been because he knew his remarks were not very long.

We now know that Lincoln was coming down with a serious illness when he gave the Gettysburg Address. Most who saw Lincoln that day describe him as appropriately "sad" and "mournful." Lincoln's secretary also said his color was "ghastly" and his face "haggard." The president mentioned weakness and dizziness on the day and the morning before the famous speech. By the time Lincoln boarded the train home, he was feverish and had a severe headache. He was later diagnosed with smallpox.