

Paideia Seminar Plan
“The Gettysburg Address” (1863)
Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

Ideas and Values: citizenship, democracy, sacrifice, social contract

Pre-Seminar

Content – Present relevant background information:

Post the speech in the classroom during the week prior to the seminar. Several nights before, assign students the task of reading the text, identifying all of the unfamiliar vocabulary and looking up definitions for unfamiliar words. On the day before the seminar, go over the entire text, discussing vocabulary in detail so that it is not a bar to understanding the speech.

Just prior to the seminar, share the following background information: the Gettysburg Address is the most famous speech by Abraham Lincoln and one of the best known speeches in American history. It was delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg, PA on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863, four and a half months after the Union army defeated the Confederates at the decisive Battle of Gettysburg. It followed a long and rambling oration by a famous speaker of the day (several hours long) and was so short and so direct that Lincoln had finished speaking and returned to his seat while most of the audience was still settling to listen.

Remind the seminar participants that this is a difficult but also an extraordinarily important text that will require their full attention, and then...

state directly that our purpose is to gain understanding of the ideas and values in the text. More specifically, our purpose is to discuss the following ideas, among others:
citizenship, democracy, sacrifice, social contract.



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Process –Prepare participants to participate in seminar discussion with a version of the following script:

“A Paideia Seminar is a collaborative, intellectual dialogue about a text, facilitated with open-ended questions.

“The main purpose of seminar is to arrive at a fuller understanding of the ideas and values in the Gettysburg Address, of ourselves, and of each other.

“As the facilitator, I am primarily responsible for asking challenging, open-ended questions, and I will take a variety of notes to keep up with the talk turns and flow of ideas. I will help move the discussion along in a productive direction by asking follow-up questions based on my notes.

“As participants, I am asking you to think, listen, and speak candidly about your thoughts, reactions, and ideas. You can help each other do this by using each other’s names.

“You do not need to raise your hands in order to speak; rather, the discussion is collaborative in that you try to stay focused on the main speaker and wait your turn to talk.

“You should try to both agree and disagree in a courteous, thoughtful manner. For example, you might say, ‘I disagree with Joanna because...,’ focusing on the ideas involved, not the individuals.

“Now, let’s think about how we normally participate in a discussion as a group. Is there a goal that we can set for ourselves that will help the flow and meaning of the seminar? For this seminar, I would suggest:

To focus on the ideas embedded in the text.

[Set group goal and display it for all to see.]

“Please consider the list of personal participation goals that I have listed on the board.”

To speak at least three times
 To refer to the text in detail
 To keep an open mind
 To speak out of uncertainty

“Is there one that is a particular challenge for you personally? Will you choose one goal from the list and commit to achieving it during the discussion we are about to have?... Please write your personal goal at the top of your copy of the text.”



Seminar

Opening – Identify main ideas from the text:

Of the 266 words contained in this version of the “Gettysburg Address,” which *one* do you think is most significant? (round-robin response) Why? (spontaneous discussion)

Core – Focus/analyze textual details:

Lincoln opens the address by saying that America is a nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” He follows by describing the Civil War as “testing whether ... any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.” What does he mean? What forces would prevent a nation dedicated to equality from surviving?

Why does Lincoln say that they “cannot dedicate, ... cannot consecrate, ... cannot hallow this ground” when that is precisely the purpose of the ceremony?

Lincoln knew that, if popular, his speech would be reprinted in countless newspapers across America, in both the North and South. Beyond those who were physically present at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, to whom do you think he was speaking? Why?

Based on the text, what do you think Lincoln wanted his audience to believe or do as a result of his speech?

Closing – Personalize and apply the textual ideas:

Lincoln closes the Gettysburg Address by challenging his audience: “it is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us.” Were he alive today, what “great task” do you think Lincoln would challenge us with? In what ways could we rise to the challenge?



Post-Seminar

Process – Assess individual and group participation in seminar discussion with an appropriate version of the following script:

“Thank you for your focused and thoughtful participation in our seminar.

“As part of the post-seminar process, I would first like to ask you to take a few minutes to reflect on your relative success in meeting the personal process goal you set prior to beginning the discussion. Please review the goal you set for yourself and reflect in writing to what extent you met the goal. In addition, note why you think you performed as you did. (Pause for reflection.)

“Would several volunteers please share your self-assessment and reflection...?”

*“Now I would like us to talk together about how we did in relation to the group process goal we set for ourselves (**To focus on the ideas embedded in the text**). On a scale of one to ten, ten being perfect, how would you say we did? Why? (Pause for discussion.)*

“As always, our goal is continuous improvement: both as individual seminar participants and as citizens. Thanks again for your participation.”

Content – Extend application of textual and discussion ideas:

After the seminar, divide the participants in groups of three to five students each and assign the various groups different perspectives from which to respond to the speech. They are to pretend that they were present in the audience on November 19, 1863 and heard Lincoln deliver the original “Gettysburg Address”:

- A wounded veteran of the Union army
- An escaped slave living in the North
- A Southern sympathizer who believes in a separate Southern nation
- The mother of a son killed in the battle
- An anti-war activist from the North
- A Congressman who is Lincoln’s political enemy
- A wounded veteran of the Southern army.

Have the groups reread the Gettysburg Address looking for specific statements that would elicit a response from their perspective. Have them compose a letter to a friend who shares their perspective, describing Lincoln’s speech.

