

Grades 9–10 Playlist: Analyzing Documents of Historical and Literary Significance

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9:

- Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.

Welcome

An understanding of U.S. history requires more than the memorization of important names, places, and dates. By analyzing the nation’s influential documents, readers gain a much deeper understanding of the context of U.S. history. These notable speeches, letters, and legal papers reveal the themes and issues that defined the first few hundred years of the United States. They are also great examples of how rhetorical features and literary elements can strengthen the impact of an informational text.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- analyze seminal U.S. documents for key themes, including related concepts across multiple texts.
- evaluate the impact of rhetorical features and literary elements in seminal U.S. documents.

Review

Key Terms

- A **theme** is a central message or insight revealed through a text.
- A **concept** is a general idea or thought about something.
- A **rhetorical feature** or device is a technique authors and speakers use to convey a point to an audience in the hope of convincing them to see a topic from a different perspective.

Exploring the Standard

Seminal U.S. documents are those that have influenced the nation and provided a basis for its further development. A seminal document can take many forms, including inaugural speeches, constitutional amendments, treaties, public laws, and Supreme Court decisions. The only qualification for a seminal document is that it somehow has influenced the course of U.S. history or otherwise shaped the national character. To analyze the message and meaning of a seminal document, readers have to think critically about the author’s purpose and the text’s structure while also keeping in mind the historical context of the document. It also is helpful to be aware of shared or related themes when dealing with multiple texts.



A Closer Look: Recognizing Related Themes and Concepts

Because historical events often affect each other, many seminal U.S. documents share similar ideas and purposes. They also employ common rhetorical features to help craft effective, convincing arguments. When examining multiple documents, it is helpful not only to think about which themes and concepts are shared among them, but also about how each author chooses to address these ideas. For example, one author writing about racial prejudice might appeal to the reader's emotions, while another author might use a logical argument to make a similar point. Even though the subject matter is the same between the documents, the different treatments ensure that each one is a unique account with its own strengths and weaknesses.

Watch!

Watch this video about some of the techniques authors of seminal U.S. documents used to build effective arguments:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSatpRw3lzc>

Example 1

In this excerpt from an Address to the Second Virginia Convention on March 23, 1774, the politician Patrick Henry delivers a rousing call to action to his fellow countrymen. At the time, the American colonies were undecided on whether to take military action against the invading British forces. Many still hoped to make peace with England by submitting the colonies to the rule of the British crown. Henry speaks against this plan and argues that the battle has already begun and must now be joined in earnest by the colonies. While reading, try to identify lines where the speaker's theme and purpose are most apparent. Which rhetorical or literary elements does Henry use in his speech? What effect do they have on the text's overall meaning and effectiveness?

Listen!

Listen to an audio reenactment of Patrick Henry's speech:

- <http://www.history.org/Almanack/people/bios/biohen.cfm#speech>

¹They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable an adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? Shall we gather strength by irresolution and inaction? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance by lying supinely on our backs and hugging the delusive phantom of hope, until our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot? Sir, we are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. The millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations, and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election. If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable—and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come.



Teaching Notes: Analyzing Documents of Historical and Literary Significance

The goal of RI.9–10.9 is for students to be able to analyze seminal U.S. documents, focusing on their historical and literary significance. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities

1. Ask students to work with a partner or in a small group. Then direct students to discuss Tecumseh’s speech to the Osages, including an explanation of his argument and his reason for making it. Encourage students to take turns answering the following questions and supporting their answers with quotations from the text:
 - How does Tecumseh think the “white man” perceives Native Americans?
 - Why does Tecumseh think the native tribes need to join forces?
 - What does Tecumseh hope to achieve by invoking “the Great Spirit” in his speech?
2. Assign students a seminal U.S. document that relies on ethos, logos, and/or pathos to establish a relationship with the reader and to advance a point of view. Direct them to think about how the writer uses rhetorical features to convince the reader of a particular point of view. Then ask students to label each technique they identify according to the following system:
 - **Pathos:** information that appeals to the reader’s emotions in order to convince them of a claim or to prove a point
 - **Logos:** information that is meant to convince the reader of something through the use of data, facts, and statistics
 - **Ethos:** information that convinces the reader that the author is trustworthy or knowledgeable about a given subject

Writing Prompts

1. Direct students to choose a topic and write a persuasive paper or speech that uses the rhetorical and literary features of the two speeches they read. Ask them to identify where in the text they use these features and the effects they hoped to achieve by doing so.
2. Direct students to conduct research to find a seminal U.S. document that shares a related theme or concept with the two speeches they read. Remind students that both Patrick Henry’s and Tecumseh’s speeches express strong opinions about resisting oppression and unifying to wage a just war. Ask students to use direct quotes and other evidence from the text they chose to write a brief essay answering these questions: How do these multiple historical documents address common themes and concepts? Why should they be considered seminal U.S. documents?

