

Oratory and American Rhetoric

Background:

Many students are familiar with prominent American speeches through their history courses, however little attention is typically made to how the writing of these speeches creates the profound impact for which they are known. By analyzing aspects of rhetoric in these well-known speeches students have an opportunity to see the implications that good writing and delivery can have on an audience. This activity is not meant as a comprehensive guide to rhetoric, but an introduction to the less familiar (rhetorical devices) by using the familiar.

Directions:

View (or hear) the #1 ranked American speech at <http://americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html> as a class. Most students have heard parts of this speech, but may not be fully familiar with all its nuances.

This speech, "I Have a Dream", is so highly ranked due to its context and oratory skills. Guide students through the process of understanding 1) who King's audience was 2) what was going on at the time 3) how he engaged them with his diction, allusions, and appeals. This introduction will allow them to start with something comfortable and relatively easy as King's speech is overflowing with impactful diction and significant allusions that work to directly appeal to the ethos, pathos, and logos of his audience.

4) As students listen to the speech, teacher models the analysis by filling out the handout using a projector so the class sees exactly how they are to fill out the handout for their own speech.

Engagement:

Once you have completed the activity as a class, have students review the top 25 or 50 (teacher discretion) and discuss what they know about these people and the topics of their speeches. Students choose a speech and complete the following handout. Note that they are only working on one quote to start simply to prove what they know and can see in the speech. Extension of this activity could include an essay response to a larger passage of the piece, presentations of the piece to the class, or Socratic discussion of the piece as a whole.

Oratory and American Audience

Speaker _____

Date _____

Location _____

Political context: _____

Quote 1:

Connection to audience through diction:

Allusions made: _____

These refer to:

Emotional appeals: _____

Logical appeals: _____

Ethical/Cultural appeals: _____

Why is this speech ranked so highly: What is good about it? What is bad about it?