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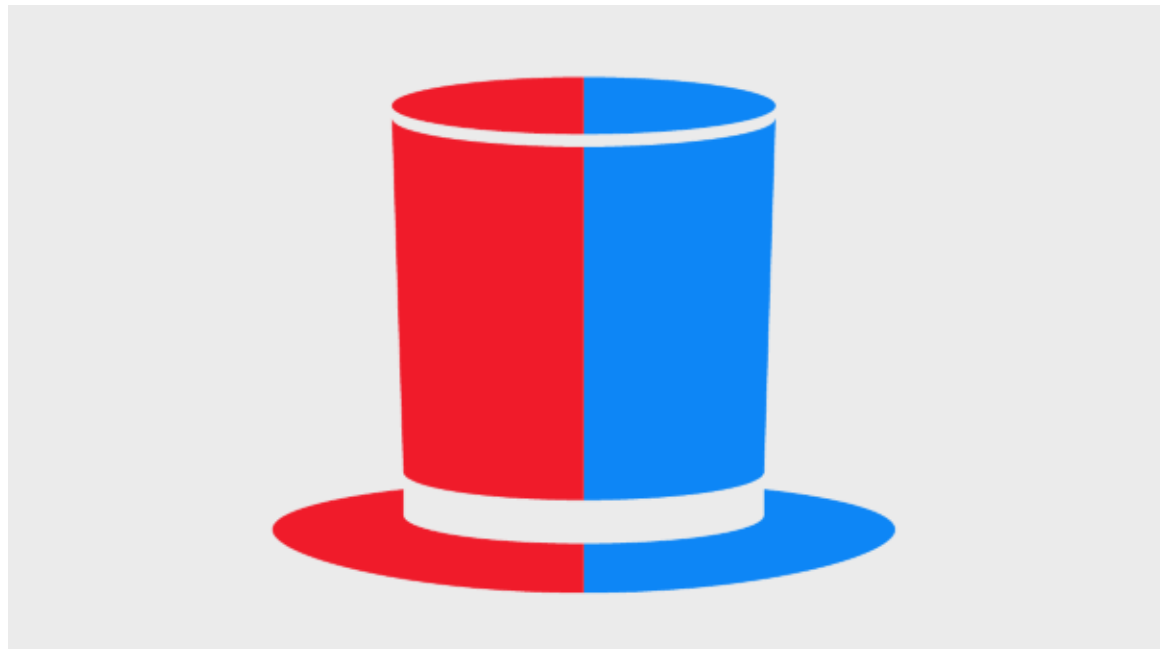
# Why the Gettysburg Address Is Still a Great Case Study in Persuasion

*by Tim David*

COMMUNICATION

# Why the Gettysburg Address Is Still a Great Case Study in Persuasion

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Today marks the 150th anniversary of the end of the American Civil War, a war that began on April 12, 1861. It was just a month after the inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln. He had not won a majority vote – far from it. He’d only won about 40% of the popular vote, and some states didn’t even put him on the ballot. He only scraped a victory thanks to a very close four-way race. But despite this unlikely beginning during turbulent times, Lincoln went on to become one of the country’s most revered presidents, and one of its best orators. His best-known speech is, of course,

the Gettysburg Address. It's often studied for its rhetoric, and deservedly so – there are gems of psychological persuasion hidden throughout.

But there's good advice for all communicators in just the first sentence. In that opening line alone, Lincoln delivers four distinct psychological strategies designed to persuade and influence his audience:

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.

**Tell a story.** Research has shown that stories can be powerfully persuasive. In this case, Lincoln's now iconic opening is a little more specific than the standard "once upon a time," but regardless of his exact wording, these first words signal to the audience that there's a narrative coming.

There are many studies that attest to the power of story. For example, Deborah Small at the University of Pennsylvania created two different versions of a marketing pamphlet designed to raise money for a charity. One version was laden with statistical data about the problems facing children in Africa, and the other featured a story about Rokia, an impoverished girl in the area. Participants were given just one of the two pamphlets to evaluate and they were also given five one-dollar bills to donate as much or as little as they would like to a charity that promised to help those children in Africa. Those who had received the statistics-laden pamphlet donated an average of \$1.43, but those who had received the story pamphlet donated nearly double, an average of \$2.38.

The bottom line: if you need to be more persuasive in the boardroom, in the classroom, or from the podium, a simple story will greatly increase your chances of moving your listeners to action.

**Begin from a place of agreement.** Although he had to go back eighty-seven years, Lincoln eventually found something that his entire audience could agree on. Words like "liberty" and phrases like "all men are created equal" are pulled directly from a document that Americans – then and now – revere like no other, the Declaration of Independence. To nod your head in agreement at those words is a near compulsion.

It is crucial to get people to say "yes" to little things if you want them to say "yes" to bigger things later. So start by acknowledging your agreements.

**"Our."** Lincoln used first person, plural personal pronouns like "we" and "our" throughout his two-minute speech. They help develop rapport and create a sense of "togetherness". But there's also some surprising research that suggests these types of pronouns also increased Lincoln's status in the minds of his audience.

James Pennebaker studies how people use words. More specifically, how they use function words (such as pronouns and articles). His findings are startling and nearly universal. In his book, *The Secret*

*Life of Pronouns* he writes, “In any interaction between two people, the person with the higher status uses fewer I-words. [They also] use first person plural pronouns (we, us, our) at much higher rates than those lower in status.”

Is it possible that by using “our” early on and peppering the rest of his speech with even more “we” words, Lincoln effectively gained positioning, status, and perceived confidence within his audience’s minds? Did this technique, combined with the authority that comes with the U.S. Presidency make the rest of his words much more credible and compelling? Or were these words simply the evidence of his title and position? Whether intuitive or intentional, it’s clear that Lincoln stayed away from I-words and leaned heavily towards we-words, captivating his audience on a subconscious level.

If you want to improve your status and positioning, try removing as many I-words as you can from your emails and face to face interactions and replace them with we-words.

**Articulate a compelling reason.** In the 1970s Harvard psychologist, Ellen Langer discovered that saying the word “because” when asking for something increases your persuasive power from 60% to 93% – even if you don’t have an actual reason. Unfortunately, that only really works for tiny decisions of relative little importance, such as whether or not you want to allow someone to cut in line ahead of you. Lincoln was dealing with a line being cut across a country. It couldn’t possibly work with something of any real significance, could it?

Lincoln used something I discuss in [my book](#) called “Advanced Because Techniques,” or “ABT”. Although he doesn’t state the word “because” directly, the entire sentence (the entire speech, even) could be summed up in the word “because”. After all, it answers the question “Why?”

Why? “The proposition that all men are created equal.”

Why? “To see whether that nation, or any nation so conceived can long endure.”

Why? “For those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.”

Why? “For us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.”

Why? “[So] 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.”

People need reasons to do things, and Lincoln gave them more than one. His compelling list of hidden “because” etched the moment not just in the memories of those gathered, but right into the very fabric of America.

Figure out what motivates your employees, and when they need a pick-me-up, remind them of those reasons. Stop pointing to the company mission statement. The only reasons that consistently work are people's own internal reasons. If your goal is to have motivated employees (or children, or students, etc.), then it's your responsibility to find out what those reasons are.

Lincoln became a great public speaker not only because he knew the right words to say, but because he had a deep knowledge of precisely how it was going to affect his audience and compel them to action. He understood his audience's perspective. In order to become great communicators in business and in life, we too must be able to step beyond our own thoughts, feelings, and desires and master [the art of words from other people's perspective](#).

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**Tim David** spent eight years as a magician, and in 2010 was named North America's Top Mentalist. He's now a corporate communications consultant and speaker. His book is [Magic Words: The Science and Secrets Behind Seven Words That Motivate, Engage, and Influence](#).

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