



Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
PresidentLincoln.org

Seward, the Red Pen, and the “Mystic Chords of Memory”

Grade Level: 7–12

Illinois Learning Standards:

3A, Stage F; 3B, Stage F; 3A, Stage G; 3B, Stage G; 3A, Stage H; 3B, Stage H; 3A, Stage I; 3B, Stage I; 3A, Stage J; 3B, Stage J

Objectives:

- Edit for tone, clarity, and word choice
- Gain understanding of the fragile political and social climate that surrounded Lincoln’s inauguration

Materials Needed:

- Red pens (if available)
- Computer with Internet access

Background:

Every United States president, upon being sworn into office, has delivered an inaugural address. Typically, the speech outlines the incoming president’s plans for his four-year term. Often, it is taken as an opportunity to address and assess national or international events pertinent to the United States at the time. Lincoln’s first inaugural address was no exception. In it he addressed the escalating crisis between the North and the South. By Lincoln’s inauguration day, seven states had seceded from the Union and formed a new national government—the Confederate States of America. Several more states teetered on the brink of joining the Confederacy.

Lincoln’s challenge in writing his first address was to strike a balance between force and conciliation—defending federal authority and the Union without pushing Southerners into further rebellion. At points in his first draft, his language was harsh. Before the first shots of the war, Lincoln shared his original manuscript with William Seward who made several revisions, most notable being his addition of a final paragraph. Lincoln took Seward’s eloquent final passage and added his own prose to create one of the most poetic presidential passages in history.

Lincoln’s Original Final Passage:

In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*, unless you *first* assail *it*. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. *You* have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while *I* shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect, and defend” it. *You* can forbear the *assault* upon it; *I* can *not* shrink from the *defense* of it. With *you*, and not with *me*, is the solemn question of “Shall it be peace, or a sword?”

Seward, the Red Pen, and the “Mystic Chords of Memory”

The transcription of the last paragraph of Abraham Lincoln’s first draft of his First Inaugural Address can be accessed at:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d0770200\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d0770200)))

William Seward’s transcribed suggestions of changes to Lincoln’s First Inaugural can be accessed at:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d0771000\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d0771000)))

Lincoln’s Actual Closing:

In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. *You* have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while *I* shall have the most solemn one to “preserve, protect, and defend it.”

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

The transcription of Abraham Lincoln’s final version of his First Inaugural Address can be accessed at:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d0773800\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d0773800)))

Activity Procedure:

- Remind students that slavery and Southern secession were delicate issues at the time and Lincoln’s wording was critical to events that might possibly follow.
- Have students discuss the meaning of the original final paragraph.
- Ask students (before reading final draft) to make revisions to Lincoln’s original manuscript of his First Inaugural Address.
- After sharing their changes with classmates, ask students to compare their changes to those made by Seward and eventually by Lincoln himself.
- Were the student’s changes similar to Seward’s? How did they differ?

Discussion Points:

- Considering the political atmosphere of the time (1861), why did Seward make the changes he did? Do you agree or disagree with his changes?
- How did Lincoln’s final “tweaks” to Seward’s poetic final passage affect the overall speech?

Extension:

Part I

Students compare and contrast the content and very different styles of Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address to his Second Inaugural Address.

The transcription of Abraham Lincoln’s final version of his First Inaugural Address can be accessed at:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d0773800\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d0773800)))

The transcription of Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address can be found at:

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d4361300\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d4361300)))

Part II

Students research presidential inaugural addresses, choose one, read it, and write a synopsis, including:

- A general comparison to Lincoln’s addresses
- Any prevalent theme or idea
- Phrases or passages that stand out
- Issues of concern to the president at the time the address was written, how this president addressed or took action on the issue(s), and the results of his actions
- What we can learn from inaugural addresses

