from Speech in the Virginia Convention

by Patrick Henry

COMMON CORE

RI 5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text. **L 3a** Apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts. **L 4b** Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech.

did you know?

Patrick Henry . . .

- had 16 children—6 by his first wife, who died, and then 10 by his second wife.
- owned slaves.
- advocated the right to bear arms later guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.
- strongly supported states' rights.

(background) Virginia House of Burgesses

Meet the Author

Patrick Henry 1736–1799

Known as "the Orator of Liberty," Patrick Henry made a name for himself with his speeches supporting American democracy. He was one of the earliest opponents of British rule in the American colonies. In 1765, after the British Parliament passed a tax bill called the Stamp Act, Henry was among the members of the Virginia legislature that challenged the legality of a British tax on the colonies. But he went farther than his colleagues by making a threat against the king. In his argument, so the story goes, he used a loaded analogy: "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George III . . ."—at this point, shouts of "Treason!" erupted in the hall, but Henry continued—"may profit by their example." He ended his speech with the defiant words, "If this be treason, make the most of it." Henry did indeed make the most of his "treason," becoming a tireless and influential leader both before and after the Revolution.

Profitable Law Career Henry was born in Virginia to a prosperous landowner. His father, who had attended the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, gave him a classical education at home. His mother, Sarah Winston Syme, was from a wealthy family. Henry went out on his own at age 15. Although smart and industrious, he couldn't find success as a storekeeper or later as a tobacco planter. After marrying and starting a family, he decided to teach himself law, and in 1760, at the age of 24, he was admitted to the bar. Henry's eloquence, quick wit, and rhetorical gifts served him well, and his law practice grew increasingly profitable.

Popular Virginia Politician Henry is best known for his fervent "Speech in the Virginia Convention," which narrowly convinced the assembled leadership to prepare for war with Britain. In addition, he organized a Virginia militia that became part of the new Continental Army after independence was declared. He helped write the new state constitution and the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was a major influence on the Bill of Rights added to the U.S. Constitution. He also served several terms as governor of Virginia and as a state legislator. Although President Washington offered him positions as secretary of state and Supreme Court justice, Henry declined and always remained suspicious of the federal government. In 1799, after being elected again to the state legislature, he died at his 700-acre plantation, Red Hill, before he could take office.

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text analysis: rhetorical devices

Rhetorical devices are structures within language that appeal to readers or listeners and communicate ideas.

- A **rhetorical question** is a question to which no answer is expected. (*But when shall we be stronger?*)
- **Antithesis** expresses contrasting ideas in parallel grammatical structures. (*Give me liberty, or give me death!*)
- **Repetition** is the recurrence of words, phrases, or lines. (*Let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come!*)
- **Parallelism** is a kind of repetition in which words or phrases in the same grammatical form connect ideas. (*Is life so dear, or peace so sweet . . .*)
- **Biblical allusions** are references to events, figures, or phrases from the Bible. In this selection, they have the rhetorical appeal of shared beliefs.

As you read Henry's speech, be on the lookout for rhetorical devices and how they might have affected his audience.

reading skill: reading a persuasive speech

In this famous speech, Patrick Henry speaks to members of the Virginia convention, but clearly he is aware of a wider audience—even of future generations reading his words. As you read the speech, think about Henry's **audience** and how he uses language to appeal to his audience. What **tone** or attitude do you detect in his language, and how does his choice of words reveal his **purpose** as a speaker?

vocabulary in context

Use context clues to write a definition of each boldfaced word.

1. **Martial** Speech Sets Stage for War
2. Never **Supinely** Accept Tyranny, Henry Says
3. **Invincible** Patriot Army Will Repel Attacks
4. **Insidious** Spies Reveal Patriots' Plans
5. Nothing Can **Extenuate** Tory Traitors
6. Citizens Told to Be **Vigilant**
7. America Must Remain **Inviolate**

Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

When is it time to TAKE ACTION?

Whether it's the winning shot in the final seconds of the game, the right moment to ask someone out, or the decision to accept a job offer—timing is everything. In the spring of 1775, Patrick Henry had had enough of compromise with the British; it was time for armed resistance. His address to the Virginia Convention turned out to be a decisive moment not only in his own life but in the life of the United States as well.

DISCUSS With a partner, think of examples from sports, politics, or everyday life when the time was right for decisive action. Then, for one example, analyze why it was the right action at the right time.

Example of Decisive Action:

Reasons That the Time Was Right:

Speech in the *Virginia Convention*

Patrick Henry

BACKGROUND In the spring of 1775, delegates from the state of Virginia could not agree whether to press for a peaceful solution with Britain or to prepare for war. Patrick Henry introduced resolutions calling for military preparedness. After politely listening to his colleagues' objections to armed rebellion, he rose to deliver this impassioned appeal.

March 23, 1775

Mr. President:[1] No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope that it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen, if, entertaining as I do opinions of a character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely and without reserve. This is no time for ceremony. The question before the House is one of awful moment[2] to this country. For my own part I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery; and in proportion to the magnitude of the subject ought to be the freedom of the debate. It is only in this way that we can hope to arrive at truth, and fulfill the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country. Should I keep back my opinions at such a (a)

Analyze Visuals ▶
This painting shows Patrick Henry speaking to the Virginia House of Burgesses. What different attitudes are reflected in the faces and postures of his audience members?

(a) **RHETORICAL DEVICES**
Reread lines 1–11. What are some examples of **antithesis,** and what kind of emphasis does it create?

1. **Mr. President:** the president of the Virginia Convention, Peyton Randolph.
2. **of awful moment:** of very grave importance.

Patrick Henry Before the Virginia House of Burgesses (1851), Peter F. Rothermel. Red Hill, The Patrick Henry National Memorial, Brookneal, Virginia.

time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty towards the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings. b

Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren, till she transforms us into beasts.[3] Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not,[4] the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth—to know the worst and to provide for it.

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided; and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past. And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct of the British ministry for the last ten years, to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves and the House? Is it that **insidious** smile with which our petition has been lately received? Trust it not, sir; it will prove a snare to your feet. Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss.[5] c

Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports[6] with these warlike preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled that force must be called in to win back our love? Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. These are the implements of war and subjugation[7]—the last arguments to which kings resort. I ask gentlemen, sir, what means this **martial** array, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? Can gentlemen assign any other possible motives for it? Has Great Britain any enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation of navies and armies? No, sir, she has none. They are meant for us; they can be meant for no other. They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging. d

And what have we to oppose to them? Shall we try argument? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer on the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves longer. e

b PERSUASIVE SPEECH
In lines 1–14, notice how Henry uses the language of shared beliefs to appeal to his audience. What tone does he establish?

insidious (ĭn-sĭd′ē-əs) *adj.* treacherous

c RHETORICAL DEVICES
Reread lines 22–28 and read footnote 5. Why do you think Henry might have chosen this Biblical allusion, and what does the allusion reveal about Henry's awareness of his audience?

martial (mär′shəl) *adj.* warlike

d RHETORICAL DEVICES
Reread lines 29–40, answering each of the **rhetorical questions.** How is a listener likely to respond to Henry's final statements in lines 37–40?

e GRAMMAR AND STYLE
Reread lines 43–46. Notice the use of **declarative, interrogative,** and **imperative** sentences.

3. **the illusions of hope . . . into beasts:** In the *Odyssey* of Homer, the goddess Circe lures men to her island and then magically transforms them into pigs. Henry suggests that the "illusions of hope" may transform people in a similar way.
4. **having eyes . . . hear not:** an allusion to Ezekiel 12:2 in the Bible, which speaks of "who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not."
5. **betrayed with a kiss:** an allusion to Luke 22:47–48 in the Bible, wherein Judas betrayed Jesus to the Roman soldiers by kissing him and thus identifying him.
6. **comports:** agrees or goes along with.
7. **subjugation:** control by conquering.

The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in. . . Boston on March 5th, 1770 (1770), Paul Revere. Colored engraving. Private collection. /Art Resource, New York.

Sir, we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated[8]; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition[9] to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne. In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. There is no longer any room for hope.

COMMON CORE L 4b

Language Coach

Suffixes Read the definition for *remonstrated* (line 48). Now, note the noun *remonstrances* in line 51. What **suffix** (word part at the end of a word that forms a new word) is added to make *remonstrate* a noun? Write a definition for *remonstrances*.

8. **remonstrated:** to object; to protest strongly.
9. **we have prostrated . . . interposition:** We have thrown ourselves at the feet of the king and have begged for intervention.

If we wish to be free—if we mean to preserve **inviolate** those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending—if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained, we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us!

They 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. Three 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;[10] it is to the **vigilant,** the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election.[11] 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! f

It is in vain, sir, to **extenuate** the matter. Gentlemen may cry, "Peace! peace!"—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north[12] will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death! g

inviolate (ĭn-vī′ə-lĭt) *adj.* not violated; intact

supinely (sōō-pīn′lē) *adv.* in a manner with the face upward

invincible (ĭn-vĭn′sə-bəl) *adj.* unbeatable

vigilant (vĭj′ə-lənt) *adj.* alert; watchful

f RHETORICAL DEVICES
Why do you think Henry repeats the word *sir* so often in this paragraph? Explain the likely effect of this **repetition** as well as that of the phrase "let it come!"

extenuate (ĭk-stĕn′yōō-āt′) *v.* to lessen the seriousness of, especially by providing partial excuses

g PERSUASIVE SPEECH
Reread lines 80–86. Notice how the pace or momentum of the speech accelerates as Henry draws to a close. How does the change in pace affect the speaker's tone? What purpose do you detect in the pace and tone of Henry's closing lines? Cite evidence from the speech to support your answer.

10. **battle . . . strong alone:** an allusion to Ecclesiastes 9:11 in the Bible, "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong."
11. **election:** choice.
12. **the next gale . . . north:** Some colonists in Massachusetts had already shown open resistance to the British and were on the brink of war.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What does Patrick Henry urge the colonists to do?
2. **Paraphrase** Reread lines 22–28. What methods had the colonists already used to express their complaints against the British?
3. **Clarify** How did the British respond to those complaints?

Text Analysis

4. **Analyze a Persuasive Speech** How do beliefs shared by speaker and audience advance Henry's purpose and affect his tone in this speech? Support your answer with evidence from the speech.
5. **Interpret Allusions** Review the following allusions to the Bible that Henry uses in his speech. Explain the rhetorical appeal of each allusion.
   - lines 18–19
   - lines 74–75
6. **Evaluate Appeals** How does Henry convince his audience that the **decisive moment** to fight is at hand? In a chart, summarize his reasons. Then, beside each, note whether he appeals mainly to logic or emotion. Which reasons are strongest? Explain.

Reasons to Fight	Logical or Emotional
1. If we want to be free and keep the rights and privileges we have grown accustomed to, we have to fight. (lines 56–61)	logical
2.	

7. **Make Judgments About Rhetorical Devices** Review the rhetorical devices discussed on page 229. Which devices occur most frequently in Henry's speech? Do you think that rhetorical devices are an effective way to communicate, or do you find them manipulative? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.

Text Criticism

8. **Different Perspectives** Imagine that the following people heard Henry's speech from the visitor's gallery. How might each have reacted, and why?
   - the wife of one of the delegates
   - a farmer whose parents live in England
   - a member of the Virginia militia
   - a clergyman
   - an African enslaved in the colony

When is it time to TAKE ACTION?

Patrick Henry's intense frustration compelled him to act. What circumstances in your life have triggered you to make a decision or to take action?

COMMON CORE

RI 5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text. **L 3a** Apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ vocabulary practice

WORD LIST
extenuate
insidious
invincible
inviolate
martial
supinely
vigilant

Decide whether these statements about the vocabulary words are true or false.

1. An **invincible** chess champion is one who has not been beaten.
2. A statue that is lying **supinely** is lying face down.
3. A **vigilant** guard usually takes naps while on duty.
4. Circumstances that **extenuate** a bad decision are those that make it worse.
5. A country that is overrun by armies from another land is experiencing **subjugation.**
6. A vase that has broken into several pieces may be described as **inviolate.**
7. A **martial** gathering is one that is organized by peace demonstrators.

academic vocabulary in speaking

• document • illustrate • interpret • promote • reveal

Patrick Henry uses several persuasive techniques to **illustrate** his points. In a small group, discuss how he presents himself to the delegates and **promotes** his argument. Use at least three Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

vocabulary strategy: analogies

COMMON CORE

L 4d Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase. **L 5** Demonstrate understanding of word relationships. **L 6** Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, and speaking.

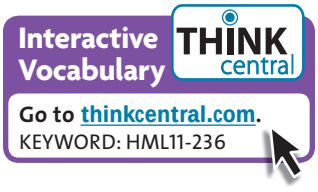
One way to determine word meanings is through the use of **analogies,** or comparisons between pairs of words. Here are two examples of analogies that show different kinds of relationships.

vigilant : unobservant :: invincible : vulnerable
(Vigilant is to unobservant as invincible is to vulnerable.)
subjugation : prisoner :: election : governor
(Subjugation is to prisoner as election is to governor.)

In the first example, both pairs of words are near opposites. In the second example, the relationship is one of process. Just as a prisoner has experienced subjugation, a governor has experienced election.

PRACTICE Complete each analogy by choosing the word that creates the same relationship between both pairs of words. Use a dictionary if you are uncertain about a word's meaning.

1. animal : cat :: vehicle : (a) driving, (b) house, (c) bicycle, (d) theater
2. sad : depressed :: dry : (a) desiccated, (b) wet, (c) arid, (d) damp
3. roof : gable :: poem : (a) haiku, (b) prose, (c) rhyme, (d) stanza
4. vogue : anachronism :: obtuse : (a) dull, (b) cheerful, (c) acute, (d) angle



Language

grammar and style: Vary Sentence Types

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 232. Part of Henry's style is to vary his sentences among the four basic types:

- **Declarative,** which expresses a statement of fact, desire, intent, or feeling and ends with a period. *This is no time for ceremony.* (line 6)
- **Interrogative,** which asks a question and ends with a question mark. *Shall we try argument?* (line 41)
- **Imperative,** which gives a command and sometimes ends with an exclamation point. *Trust it not, sir.* (lines 27–28)
- **Exclamatory,** which expresses strong emotions and always ends with an exclamation point. *I repeat it, sir, we must fight!* (line 60)

Henry's skillful use of sentence variety creates an interesting melody. It also keeps the reader engaged by calling for frequent shifts in response.

PRACTICE For each sentence in this excerpt from Henry's speech, identify the type and compose your own sentence following his pattern.

example

The war is actually begun!

We won the game!

(1) The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! (2) Our brethren are already in the field! (3) Why stand we here idle? (4) What is it that gentlemen wish? (5) What would they have? (6) Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? (7) Forbid it, Almighty God!

reading-writing connection

YOUR TURN

Expand your understanding of Henry's speech by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your speech.

WRITING PROMPT	REVISING TIPS
COMPOSE A PERSUASIVE SPEECH Patrick Henry's famous speech is a classic example of effective **oratory,** the art of public speaking. Using Henry's speech as a model, write a **three-to-five paragraph persuasive speech** on a topic you feel strongly about.	• Present a clear argument. • Cite reasons and evidence. • Use rhetorical devices. • Close with a strong statement.

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COMMON CORE

L 3a Vary syntax for effect, consulting references for guidance as needed; apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading. **W 1** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.