

Plant a Tree: Using Metaphors in Persuasive Writing

Topic: Persuasive Writing

Grade Level: 7-8

Subject Areas: English Language Arts, History, Current Events

Time Required: 2-3 class periods. Assessment can be assigned for homework or modified for use in class.

Goals/Rationale

“Plant a Tree” is the carefully printed caption on a drawing by young Jack Kennedy. It was saved by his mother, Rose, but her personal papers offer no background information about the picture. Did her son make this simple sketch as part of a classroom activity for Arbor Day? No one can say for sure. However, many years later, as president, JFK would tell a story about planting a tree on a number of occasions, using it as a metaphor to conclude his speeches on an inspiring note and as a call to action in meeting a variety of long-term challenges in the 1960s.

In the following lesson, students analyze excerpts from two of these speeches and compare how the same metaphor was applied in different contexts. Students then compose a short persuasive piece about a significant issue in today’s world, using the image of tree-planting, or a metaphor of their own choosing, to inspire others to do their part in meeting the challenge.

Essential Question

How can a well-chosen metaphor enhance persuasive writing?

Objectives

Students will:

- investigate the use of metaphor in presidential oratory.
- apply analysis to a piece of persuasive writing on a current national or global issue.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

Common Core State Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4/7.4/8.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings.

Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework

USII.T5 - Using primary sources such as campaign literature and debates, news articles/analyses, editorials, and television coverage, analyze the important policies and events that took place during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon.

Historical Background

During 1962 and 1963, President Kennedy told variations of the same story in eight of his speeches, addressing university audiences, labor union conventions, Democratic Party events, the National Academy of Sciences and the White House Conference on Conservation. The anecdote concerned Marshal Lyautey [Hubert Lyautey, 1854-1931], French army general, statesman and colonial administrator in Morocco. As Kennedy told it, Lyautey went to his gardener one day and asked him to plant a certain tree. The gardener objected because the tree grew slowly and wouldn’t reach maturity for a century. “In that case,” the Marshal replied, “there is no time to lose. Plant it this afternoon.”

The Marshal Lyautey story echoed the sense of urgency that Kennedy had expressed in his inaugural address as he called for a determined and united effort in tackling humanity's greatest challenges. "All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days," he proclaimed. "Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should have a basic understanding of figures of speech, and have some experience using similes and metaphors in their writing.

Materials

- [Picture](#) of a tree drawn by John F. Kennedy when he was a boy
- [Last page of the reading copy](#) of President Kennedy's March 23, 1962 Address in Berkeley at the University of California
- Handout with excerpts from Berkeley speech
- [Photo](#) of President Kennedy speaking in Berkeley, March 23, 1962
- [Audio of Berkeley speech](#)
- Handout with excerpts from North Dakota speech
- [Audio of North Dakota speech](#)

Note: If you wish to have students listen to the audio as they read along, it will help to first print out the full text so you can locate the 'in' and 'out' times on the tape for each excerpt.

- [Text of Berkeley speech:](#)
- [Text of North Dakota speech](#)

Procedure

1. Show students the drawing but don't tell who made it. Ask: What do you notice about the picture?
2. Point out that because the drawing is so simple, it conveys the *idea* of a tree rather than any particular kind. Ask: Can you think of a figure of speech that uses the idea of a tree, or part of a tree, to represent something else? [Possible answers include family tree and the three branches of government.] What's another word for such a figure of speech? [metaphor]
3. Explain that the child who drew this tree grew up to become president of the United States. [Can you guess who it was?] Note that President Kennedy was considered by many to be an effective orator and that he frequently used metaphors in his speeches as well as stories, including one that he told about planting a tree.
4. To see how JFK used the tree-planting metaphor, students can view the last page of the reading copy of his March 1962 speech in Berkeley. Explain that the "reading copy" was the one that the president actually used to deliver his remarks and was usually typed in extra-large letters. Also show the photo of him speaking at the event. Ask for a volunteer to read from where it says "I am reminded of the story..." right through to the end of the page. Explain first that the "Marshal Lyautey" (Lee-oh-tay) to whom the president refers was an early 20th-century French military leader and statesman. Also note that Kennedy often made last-minute edits to the prepared text of his speeches, either adding or

eliminating words. On this page students can see where he inserted “the great French” before Marshal Lyautey.

5. After the student has finished reading aloud, point out that without knowing what JFK said earlier in the speech it may be hard to understand exactly why he chose to tell this story. However, the next-to-last sentence on the page does provide some context. Ask students what clues they can find in that sentence about how to interpret his use of the metaphor. Write down their responses on the board.
6. In order for students to get more of the context, give them the handout with additional excerpts from JFK’s address in Berkeley. You might ask them to take turns reading it aloud, or play the audio so they can hear it in the president’s own voice as they read along. Alternatively, have students read the first three paragraphs aloud and cue up the audio to the final section where JFK tells the Marshall Lyautey story. Note that some of the vocabulary may be challenging (e.g., sterile dogmas, ideology, negotiated agreement, firmament), so allow time to discuss unfamiliar terms.
7. Have students respond to the following questions about the Berkeley speech:
 - a. Who is the audience?
 - b. What important goals or challenges does President Kennedy discuss in the speech?
 - c. More specifically, what is the “joint effort” to which the president refers, and with which other nation? What outcomes does JFK suggest might result from such a cooperative venture?
 - d. In your own words, what message do you think President Kennedy wanted the audience to take away from his story about the slow-growing tree—and the need to plant it right away?
 - e. What is another metaphor that appears in the speech?
8. To show how President Kennedy used the tree-planting metaphor in a different context (and how he told the story in a slightly different way), give students the handout on the September 1963 speech in North Dakota. Have them read as before, with or without the recording, and respond to questions a), b) and d) as above. In addition, have students compare and contrast the issues discussed in the two speeches. You might also ask them this question: How well do you think the tree-planting metaphor worked in this speech as compared with the one in Berkeley? (Explain why.)

Assessment

Have students do persuasive writing that includes a metaphor. They can begin as a group by brainstorming issues or challenges in today’s world—ones that they believe call for action by our government and leaders as well as individual citizens. Students choose one of the issues to research. Based on their notes, they prepare an outline for a short piece of persuasive writing (three to five paragraphs) that includes information about the issue, why it’s important, and a call for action. Students should also think of an appropriate metaphor to use in their piece. (If they are having difficulty coming up with an image, you can suggest that they look at editorial cartoons for ideas.) Possible formats include: a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece, a petition, public service announcement, text for a bus or subway poster, etc. After you’ve reviewed their outlines and metaphors, students should proceed to writing their pieces which can then be shared in class.

Lesson Extensions

- Have students research the use of other metaphors in Kennedy's rhetoric. His acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention and Inaugural Address both offer good examples. Transcripts of these and other speeches can be found [here](#).
- Students can examine speeches of more recent presidents, looking for metaphors that have been used to discuss current issues.

Additional Resource

[*Recipe for an Inaugural Address*](#)

In this lesson plan, students consider what "ingredients" might go into the speech that will launch a president's term in office as they examine some of the most memorable inaugural addresses of the past.



Undated childhood drawing by John F. Kennedy, from Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Personal Papers

21.

In its light, we must think and act
not only for the moment but for the
century. ^{The great French} I am reminded of the story
of Marshal Lyautey, who once asked his
gardener to plant a tree. The gardener
objected that the tree was slow-growing
and would not reach maturity for a
hundred years. The Marshal replied,
"In that case, there is no time to lose.
Plant it this afternoon."

Today a world of knowledge -- a
world of cooperation -- a just and
lasting peace -- may well be years away.
But we have no time to lose. Let us
plant our trees this very afternoon.

Last page of the reading copy of President Kennedy's March 23, 1962 Address in Berkeley at the University of California. JFK inserted "the great French" before Marshal Lyautey (fourth line). President's Office Files, Speech Files.

**Excerpts from President Kennedy's Address in Berkeley
at the University of California
March 23, 1962**

This has been a week of momentous events around the worldBut history may well remember this as a week for an act of lesser immediate impact, and that is the decision by the United States and the Soviet Union to seek concrete agreements on the joint exploration of space. Experience has taught us that an agreement to negotiate does not always mean a negotiated agreement. But should such a joint effort be realized, its significance could well be tremendous for us all.

In terms of space science, our combined knowledge and efforts can benefit the people of all the nations: joint weather satellites to provide more ample warnings against destructive storms; joint communications systems to draw the world more closely together; and cooperation in space medicine research and space tracking operations to speed the day when man will go to the moon and beyond.

But the scientific gains from such a joint effort would offer, I believe, less realized return than the gains for world peace. For a cooperative Soviet-American effort in space science and exploration would emphasize the interests that must unite us, rather than those that always divide us. It offers us an area in which the stale and sterile dogmas of the cold war could be literally left a quarter of a million miles behind. And it would remind us on both sides that knowledge, not hate, is the passkey to the future—that knowledge transcends national antagonisms, that it speaks a universal language, that it is the possession, not of a single class, or of a single nation or a single ideology, but of all mankind.

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"Knowledge is the great sun of the firmament," said Senator Daniel Webster. "Life and power are scattered along its beams." In its light, we must think and act not only for the moment but for our time.

I am reminded of the story of the great French Marshal Lyautey, who once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow-growing and would not reach maturity for a hundred years. The Marshal replied, "In that case, there is no time to lose, plant it this afternoon."

Today a world of knowledge, a world of cooperation—a just and lasting peace—may be years away. But we have no time to lose. Let us plant our trees this afternoon.



President Kennedy speaking at the University of California, Berkeley
March 23, 1962

Robert Knudsen, White House Photographs

**Excerpts from President Kennedy's
Address at the University of North Dakota
September 25, 1963**

I have come on a journey of five days across the United States, beginning in Pennsylvania and ending in California, to talk about the conservation of our resources. And I think it is appropriate that we should come here to North Dakota where this whole struggle for the maintenance of the natural resources of this country, for the development of the natural resources of this country, in a sense, began.

I do not argue whether it was Harvard University or North Dakota that made Theodore Roosevelt such a man and such a conservationist, but I am sure that his years here in North Dakota helped make him realize how expensive, how wasteful was indifference to this great resource and how valuable it could become. He put it on much more than a material plane. He said it was the moral obligation of a society, in order to preserve that society, to maintain its natural endowment.

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And unless we make the proper decisions today on how we shall use our water and our air, and our land, and our oceans, unless we make the comparable effort, an effort comparable to what Theodore Roosevelt and others made 50 years ago, we are going to waste it. The fact of the matter is that in the field of conservation, every day that is lost is a valuable opportunity wasted.

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As you know, along the Atlantic Coast, nearly all of the sea, the beach, is owned by comparatively few people. We were able to set aside, a year ago, Cape Cod Park, which is near to all of the people of New England. We are talking about doing the same now on the Delaware River. We are talking about doing the same in northern Indiana, near Gary. We have to seize these opportunities—we are talking about now doing the same in northern Wisconsin—we have to seize these opportunities to set aside these wilderness areas, these primitive areas, these fresh water areas, these lakes. We have to set them aside for the people who are going to come after us.

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So in that great effort, I urge you to participate. Nothing will give you more satisfaction. No need is greater. And I hope that all of us, not only in the field of our immediate interest, but in the field of our resources, will also make the necessary and immediate decisions.

Marshal Lyautey, who was the great French Marshal in North Africa, was once talking to his gardener and he suggested that he plant a tree, and the gardener said, "Well, why plant it? It won't flower for 100 years." And Marshal Lyautey said, "In that case, plant it this afternoon."

I think that is good advice for all of us.