

Words That Govern

Trace how foundational documents connect purpose, theme, and rhetoric.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.9 “Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights...)”

NAME _____

DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK _____ Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline statements of purpose or principle, circle repeated words or sentence openings, and number each paragraph’s main claim. Use your marks to trace how rhetoric helps each document address a civic problem.

A Nation in Its Words

- ① In 1776, the Declaration of Independence did more than announce a break with Britain. Its authors built a case for separation by beginning with broad claims about equality and rights. The phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident” presents the principles as obvious, not private opinions. The document then lists grievances against King George III, using repeated openings such as “He has” to create a steady record of accusations. This structure moves readers from an ideal, government should protect rights, to a conclusion, people may alter or abolish a destructive government.
- ② The Constitution’s Preamble, written in 1787, states why the new framework of government exists. Its single sentence begins “We the People,” placing popular authority before its goals: justice, domestic tranquility, common defense, general welfare, and liberty. Instead of accusing an enemy, the Preamble uses a balanced series of infinitive phrases, “to form,” “to establish,” and “to secure,” to show connected national aims. The Bill of Rights, added in 1791, takes a different approach. Its amendments set limits on federal power through precise protections for speech, religion, press, assembly, fair trials, and other rights.
- ③ Nearly eighty years later, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address faced a nation divided by civil war. Lincoln did not offer a simple victory speech. He repeatedly used “we” and “us,” linking North and South to a shared history of slavery and to the war’s costs. Biblical allusions, including language about judgment, gave his argument a solemn moral tone. Near the end, parallel phrases, “with malice toward none” and “with charity for all,” shift the purpose toward reconciliation. Like the earlier documents, the address considers national ideals, yet it asks listeners to repair a damaged union rather than create or organize a government.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE _____ Use the passage

1 How does the Declaration's movement from principles to grievances support its purpose?

2 How does the Preamble's rhetorical approach differ from the Bill of Rights' approach?

3 Why does Lincoln repeatedly use "we" and "us" in the passage?

4 How does Lincoln's purpose differ from the purpose of the Declaration and the Preamble?

3 YOUR TURN _____ Your own words

Write a 90 to 110 word comparison of one rhetorical feature used in any two documents from the passage. Quote one word or phrase from each document, explain how the feature serves each purpose, and end with a claim about what the different choices reveal.

PART 1 • READ AND MARK

Underline statements of purpose or principle, circle repeated words or sentence openings, and number each paragraph's main claim. Use your marks to trace how rhetoric helps each document address a civic problem. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 • ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the Declaration's movement from principles to grievances support its purpose?	It uses ideals about rights to judge the king's actions, then builds a case that the people may separate from a destructive government.
2	How does the Preamble's rhetorical approach differ from the Bill of Rights' approach?	The Preamble uses a balanced series of shared national goals, while the Bill of Rights uses precise protections to limit federal power.
3	Why does Lincoln repeatedly use "we" and "us" in the passage?	The inclusive pronouns connect North and South to a shared responsibility for slavery and the war's costs.
4	How does Lincoln's purpose differ from the purpose of the Declaration and the Preamble?	Lincoln seeks reconciliation and repair after war, while the Declaration argues for separation and the Preamble explains the purposes of a new government.

PART 3 • YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The Declaration and Lincoln's address both use repeated language to shape a national argument, but their purposes differ. The Declaration's repeated "He has" turns many grievances into evidence that King George III has abused power. This anaphora supports a break from British rule. Lincoln's repeated "we" and "us," however, join people on both sides of the conflict in a shared responsibility for slavery and war. His inclusive repetition supports reconciliation. Together, the choices show that repetition can either build a case against a ruler or ask a divided people to face a common burden.

Accept answers that accurately connect a quoted or described rhetorical feature to a document's purpose or theme. For the open response, accept any two passage documents, provided the student compares both rather than discussing them separately.