

# "Speech to the Virginia Convention"

# English III: Persuasion

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## KEY VOCABULARY:

-persuasion:

-logos:

-ethos:

-pathos:

-paraphrase:

-summarize:

-metaphor:

-rhetorical question:

Today, you will analyze and interpret Patrick Henry's "Speech to the Virginia Convention"

## TASK:

1. Read and **SUMMARIZE** the background information about Patrick Henry.
2. Read and **ANNOTATE** the "Speech to the Virginia Convention"
3. Use highlighters to color code examples of **LOGOS**, **ETHOS**, and **PATHOS**.
4. Record the author's **MAIN IDEA**: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Record the **AUTHOR'S PURPOSE**: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. On notebook paper, answer #'s 2-4 on page 105 *using complete sentences*. Use multiple sentences to explain.

**Standards:** QCA.6.b. Summarize and paraphrase information in increasingly challenging texts, identifying key ideas, supporting details, inconsistencies, and ambiguities

**Assessment:** \_\_\_\_\_ EXCEEDS \_\_\_\_\_ MEETS \_\_\_\_\_ NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

QCA.5.h. Identify the author's stated or implied purpose in increasingly challenging texts

**Assessment:** \_\_\_\_\_ EXCEEDS \_\_\_\_\_ MEETS \_\_\_\_\_ NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

QCA.5g. Evaluate ways authors develop style to achieve specific rhetorical and aesthetic purposes, noting the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme; cite specific examples from increasingly challenging texts.

**Assessment:** \_\_\_\_\_ EXCEEDS \_\_\_\_\_ MEETS \_\_\_\_\_ NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

## Patrick Henry

(1736–1799)

One fiery act can catapult someone from obscurity to fame. That is what happened to Patrick Henry, a young representative who stood up in the Virginia House of Burgesses one day in 1765. He delivered a dynamic, thundering speech against the hated Stamp Act, with which the British Parliament instituted taxes on all newspapers and public documents. For the ten years following his declaration of resistance, Henry—a tall, lank, somber-looking man who favored the kind of clothing a preacher might wear—was recognized as one of the most persuasive figures in Virginia politics.

Henry had not always been so successful. Born in a frontier region of Virginia, he was raised in a cultured but modest environment. During his youth the country was undergoing the religious revival known as the Great Awakening, and young Patrick often accompanied his mother to hear the sermons of the traveling preachers. Later, as a young man, he made several unsuccessful stabs at farming and merchant life before discovering his love of oratory and his true calling: the law.

In 1765, the twenty-nine-year-old lawyer was chosen to represent his region in the Virginia House of Burgesses. Henry's speech against the Stamp Act was the first of the two most famous speeches in American Colonial history. The second, his famous "liberty or death" speech, came ten years later in 1775 as the Colonies were nearing the breaking point with England. Following the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, the British had closed the port of Boston and inaugurated other harsh measures referred to by the colonists as the "Intolerable Acts." When the First Continental Congress protested these acts, the British Crown relieved the Colonies of taxation on a number of conditions. One condition was that the colonists fully support British rule and contribute toward the maintenance of British



Patrick Henry (1820–1830). Anonymous. Oil on canvas. Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont. Photograph by Ken Burris.

troops in America, whose numbers were increasing greatly. On March 20, 1775, the Virginia House of Burgesses held a convention in St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond to decide how to respond to the growing British military threat. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (page 114) were both present.

On March 23, after several speeches in favor of compromise with the British, Patrick Henry rose to defend his resolution to take up arms. Later, a clergyman who was present recalled that during Henry's speech he felt "sick with excitement." As the speech reached its climax, Henry is said to have grabbed an ivory letter opener and plunged it toward his chest at the final word *death*.

Henry persuaded the delegation. The Virginia Convention voted to arm its people against England. On April 19, 1775, the Battle of Lexington, Massachusetts, ignited the Revolutionary War.

## Before You Read

### SPEECH TO THE VIRGINIA CONVENTION

#### Make the Connection

#### Words into Actions

Words—acts of both thought and feeling—shape us; they are tools of self-making. We know how much blood and suffering resulted from Henry's words "Give me liberty or give me death!" and what pride his impassioned cry continues to generate years after it was spoken. The "American dream," as we loosely call our aspirations toward freedom, self-

reliance, and self-creation, is defined in large part by the words of the men and women who helped to shape America in its early years.

#### Elements of Literature

##### Persuasion

**Persuasion** is a form of speaking or writing that aims to move an audience to take a specific action. A good persuasive speaker or writer uses both head and heart—reasons and feelings, or logic and emotion—to win over an audience. To be successful, a writer or speaker must provide reasons to support a particular opinion or course of action. In the final analysis, though, audiences are often won over not only by the force of the speaker's arguments but also by the power of his or her personality.

**P**ersuasion is a form of discourse that uses reason and emotional appeals to convince another person to think or act in a certain way.

For more on Persuasion, see the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.

#### Reading Skills and Strategies

##### Recognizing Modes of Persuasion

Patrick Henry uses two modes of persuasion: appeals to **logic** and appeals to

**emotions** or values. As you read, track these two methods in a double-column chart. In the left column, list Henry's logical reasons for wanting war. In the right column, write down his emotional appeals. As you take notes, star (\*) those appeals that you find most effective. Place an "X" next to appeals that strike you as deceptive or faulty.

#### Background

The historian Garry Wills described Patrick Henry in this way: "... he had the actor's trick, in his oratory, of lifting his whole body up toward climaxes, along with his voice, as if he *could* add cubits by wanting to. . . . No one who beheld him incandescent with a Cause ever forgot the experience. . . ."

Although Henry's 1775 speech is one of the most famous in all American oratory, no manuscript of it exists. Henry's biographer, William Wirt, pieced together the traditionally accepted text forty years after it was delivered, using notes of people who were present at the speech. As you read Henry's speech, try to envision the physical surroundings of its delivery: a church in eighteenth-century Richmond, Virginia, on an early spring day. Try, also, to imagine the manner in which Henry delivered his speech.

# Speech to the Virginia Convention

Patrick Henry

Mr. President: 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<sup>1</sup> 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 time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason toward my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the majesty of heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.

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.<sup>2</sup> Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be

1. awful moment: great importance.

2. listen . . . beasts: In Greek mythology, the sirens are sea-maidens whose seductive singing lures men to wreck their boats on coastal rocks. In the *Odyssey*, an epic by the Greek poet Homer (c. eighth century B.C.), Circe, an enchantress, transforms Odysseus' men into swine after they arrive at her island home. Henry's allusion combines these two stories.

of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not, 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<sup>3</sup> 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. Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports<sup>4</sup> 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; the last arguments to which kings resort.

3. our petition: The First Continental Congress had recently protested against new tax laws. King George III had withdrawn the laws conditionally, but the colonists were unwilling to accept his conditions.

4. comports: agrees.

## WORDS TO OWN

solace (säl'is) v.: to comfort.

insidious (in·sid'ē·əs) adj.: sly; sneaky.

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. 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. Sir, we have done everything that could be done, to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup> hope of peace and reconciliation. There is no longer any room for hope. 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

5. **interposition:** intervention; stepping in to try to solve the problem.

6. **fond:** foolishly optimistic.

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 the 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; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election.<sup>7</sup> 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!

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 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!

7. **election:** choice.

#### WORDS TO OWN

**martial** (mār'shəl) *adj.*: warlike.

**supplication** (sup'lə-kā'shən) *n.*: earnest plea.

**avert** (ə-vurt') *v.*: to prevent; turn away.

**spurned** (spurnd) *v.*: rejected.

**inviolable** (in-vi'ə-lit) *adj.*: uncorrupted.

**adversary** (ad'vær-ser'ē) *n.*: opponent.

**vigilant** (vij'ə-lənt) *adj.* used as *n.*: watchful.

**inevitable** (in-ev'i-tə-bəl) *adj.*: not avoidable.

## MAKING MEANINGS

### First Thoughts

- How did Henry's speech affect you?

#### Reading Check

What is the main idea of Henry's speech?

### Shaping

#### Interpretations

- Review your double-column chart, noting especially the arguments you starred (★) and those you marked with an "x." What made these arguments powerful or weak? Were you more convinced by Henry's appeals to **logic** or by his appeals to **emotion**? What conclusions can you draw about the art of persuasion?
- In paragraph four, what **metaphors** does Henry use to describe the coming war?
- Henry makes use of the **rhetorical question**—a question that is asked for effect. Rhetorical questions, which are often used in **persuasion**, presume the audience agrees with the speaker on the answers, and so no answer is expected or required. Find a series of rhetorical questions in the fifth paragraph of this speech. Why do you think Henry uses this device, rather than straightforward statements of fact, to make his points? How does this technique make his speech more persuasive?

### Extending the Text

- Because Henry's audience knew the Bible, as well as classical mythology, the orator knew he could count on certain **allusions** producing emotional effects. Look up the classical or Biblical passages Henry alludes to in each of the following statements from his speech. How would each allusion relate to the conflict in Virginia in 1775? Could any of them relate to life today? Explain.
  - "We are apt to . . . listen to the song of that siren, till she transforms us into beasts." (*Odyssey*, Books 10 and 12)
  - "Are we disposed to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation?" (Ezekiel 12:2)
  - "Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss." (Luke 22:47–48)

## CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio

### Writer's Notebook

#### 1. Collecting Ideas for an Autobiographical Incident

Write about an action you took or a particular time in your life that seems like a turning point—a decisive period that helped define the person you are today. Save your notes for possible use in the Writer's Workshop on page 130.



### Comparing Orations

#### 2. Politician and Preacher

In a brief essay, compare and contrast Henry's speech with Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (page 79). Consider the specific ways in which the speeches are alike and how they are different. Use the following chart to help organize your material.

Elements of the Oration	Edwards	Henry
Speaker's purpose and audience		
Main idea		
Appeals to reason and emotion		
Use of rhetorical questions and other literary devices		
Overall effectiveness		

### Speaking and Listening

#### 3. A Call to Action

Recast part or all of Henry's speech to pertain to some issue today that calls for action—poverty, drugs, crime, or military intervention to help end violent oppression in another country. Deliver the recast speech to the class.