

Text-Dependent Questions

Text: President Abraham Lincoln’s Speech *The Gettysburg Address*, 1863

Text Under Discussion	Question	Instructional Commentary
<p>“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”</p>	<p>What does Lincoln mean by “four score and seven years ago”? Who are “our fathers”?</p>	<p>Lincoln tells us <i>when</i> and by <i>whom</i> the country was founded. Let students know that these details will be addressed later more thoroughly. For now, though keep it simple – that “our fathers” founded the country some time ago. Point out to students that one important thing about reading carefully is that it helps to get a basic gist of a sentence before looking to understand every detail.</p>
	<p>What does conceived mean?</p>	<p>Have students do as much work as they can from the context to determine what is meant by <i>conceived</i> here. The sentence defines one key meaning of <i>conceive</i>: <i>to bring forth something new</i>. This is one way in which the nation is new; it did not exist before. [That’s enough to do with <i>conceive</i> for now. Lincoln uses this word in at least two ways and its meanings will be discussed later in much greater detail.</p>
	<p>What is he saying is significant about America? Is he saying that no one has been free or equal before? So what is new?</p>	<p>Answering this question will force students to pay attention to two things that Lincoln says – that this nation is “conceived <i>in</i> Liberty” and “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Students need to grasp the structure of the sentence: these two phrases modify and describe the “new nation.”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “conceived <i>in</i> liberty”: Lincoln says the country was “conceived <i>in</i> Liberty,” that is, the people who founded it freely chose to dedicate themselves to a claim – it was not forced upon them. They were able to think freely. During the making of the country our fathers were free to structure it however they wanted and they chose to dedicate it to what? 2. “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”: what does it mean to be dedicated to a claim? One way to help students grasp the force of Lincoln’s words is to ask them to consider what would be different if the proposition changed – what if the nation were dedicated to the opposite, i.e., that some people are better than others?