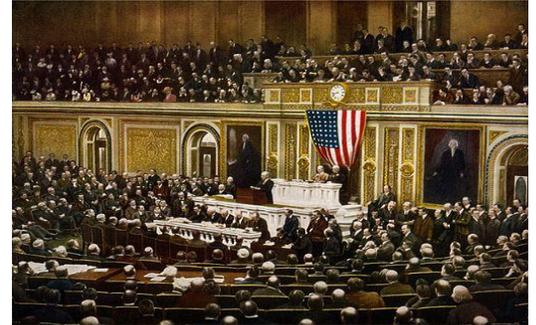


# Lesson Plan: How Presidents Talk about Military Action and War

By Rachel Roberson

## Featured resources

- [Words of Warcraft: How U.S. Presidents -- from FDR to Trump – Have Made the Case for Military Action](#)
- [Presidential Words of Warcraft chart \(graphic organizer\)](#)



Woodrow Wilson asking Congress to declare war on Germany, 1917/Wikimedia Commons

## Opening quick write prompt:

When you first hear or read about American military action overseas like the recent airstrikes in Syria, what do you most want to know? For example, are you interested in the reason for this action? The safety of civilians? Projected casualties? The goals of the action? The cost? What's most important for you to know?

*A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.*

## Objective

- Students will analyze current and historic presidential speeches related to war and military action.
- Students will evaluate the effectiveness of presidential rhetoric around calls for military action.

## Essential Question and Lesson Context

**How do presidents make the case for war and military action and what rhetorical strategies do these appeals have in common?**

President Trump announced on April 6 that the United States conducted a missile strike on targets in Syria in response to a deadly chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government. This strike is the latest in a long line of U.S. military actions, including five wars since World War II. The solemn presidential speeches that have accompanied these actions share similar stylistic and rhetorical strategies that have remained consistent throughout the years. This lesson asks students to look more closely at five common elements in these presidential speeches and evaluate their effectiveness when making the case for military action.

## Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Imperialism (n.)	A policy by which a country increases its power by gaining control over other areas of the world
Proactive (adj.)	Acting in anticipation of future problems, needs or changes
Repudiate (v.)	To refuse to have anything to do with
Scrupulous (adj.)	Very careful about doing something correctly
Sobering (adj.)	Making serious or thoughtful

## Direct instruction and guided practice

- Discuss the quick write prompt. Encourage students to share personal accounts of the first thing that comes to mind when they hear about military action. This is also the time to discuss the recent airstrikes in Syria, if you choose. [The Vox video \(6:45\) in The Lowdown post](#) gives context and background on the Syrian conflict.
- Explain that presidents have been giving speeches to the American public for decades making the case for U.S. military action overseas, in the same way President Trump did recently. These speeches share similar techniques because they have similar audiences and goals
- **Ask:** When a president goes on TV and gives a speech about a military action or war, why is he giving that speech? What are his goals? Encourage students to make their best guess. Many will guess correctly that presidents want to inform *and* persuade.
- Analyze how this looks in action. As a class, compare/contrast Trump's speech on the Syrian airstrikes and President George H.W. Bush's speech on the First Gulf War (both embedded in [The Lowdown post](#)). Play a minute of each speech, then stop and discuss the similarities and differences (the speeches are very similar). Make a list of the common elements in each speech.

- **Transition to independent practice:** As a class, read the introduction to [The Lowdown post](#) (before the videos) and compare your class list of what Trump and George H.W. Bush's speech have in common with the list of five common elements of presidential speeches about military actions.

### Independent practice

- Individually or in small groups, students choose 2-3 presidential speeches from [The Lowdown post](#) to view and analyze.
- Using the [Presidential Words of Warcraft chart](#) or similar handout, students should find 3-4 specific examples of any of the five elements of this kind of presidential speech named in [The Lowdown post](#), or other elements your class has identified. Students should also identify a particularly effective use of one of the elements (or another rhetorical technique you have discussed) and one ineffective use.
  - The five elements are: justification/urgency, dichotomy of good vs. evil, American benevolence and exceptionalism, violence as a last resort, assurances of lasting peace.

### Assessment/Reflection

- Ask students or groups to share examples of effective and ineffective uses of the rhetorical elements in historic and more recent speeches. Students should explain why they think their example is effective or ineffective.
- As a class, students respond to the following questions in a discussion or in writing:
  - What did you learn from analyzing presidential speeches about U.S. military action?
  - Do you think learning some of the common elements these speeches share will change the way you listen to them in the future? Why or why not?
  - Do you think these kinds of speeches give enough information? What, if anything, do you think presidents should include or leave out of these types of speeches?

*[Circle chats](#), small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.*

### Extension/Homework

**First 100 Days: Art in the Age of Trump: Final call!** KQED Arts is accepting submission from artists of all ages for this series. Art of all types (visual, music, dance, poetry) are welcome, and ideally submissions should focus on a specific issue, rather than the appearance or personality of a politician. Find the online submission form [here](#).

## Common Core standards

<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1</a>	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7</a>	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4</a>	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9</a>	Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1</a>	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.