

# Unlocking The Power Within JFK's Stylish Address

Published November 2, 2013 | By [Richard Lederer](#)

On Nov. 22, the country will pause to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. This dark event in our history reminds us of a happier day that shone at the very start of Kennedy's presidency.

On Jan. 20, 1961, thousands of visitors converged on Washington, D.C., for the inauguration of our 35th president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. A blizzard had struck the eastern seaboard that day. The streets of the capital were clogged with snow and stranded automobiles, but the inaugural ceremony went on, and a new president delivered one of the most memorable addresses in American history.

What makes President Kennedy's speech so unforgettable is its striking use of parallel structure — the repetition of grammatical forms to emphasize similar ideas. Let's look at a few brief excerpts from that famous inaugural address that exemplify the president's powerful use of parallelism. Examine each section with an ear and eye toward incorporating parallel structure and other uses of balanced prose into your own speaking and writing styles.

Early in his oration, the president issues this clarion call: "We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom," immediately followed by the tandem participial phrases "symbolizing an end as well as a beginning, signifying renewal as well as change." The echoic sounds of symbolizing and signifying enhance the parallel "as well as" prepositional phrases.

Similar parallelism infuses sentence after sentence that follows, as in "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

After a brief parallelism of two balanced adjectives, "whether it wishes us well or ill," Kennedy employs five parallel verb-direct object constructions — "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe." Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Listen to the music of this device in the pairings of pay/price, bear/burden, friend/foe and, finally, survival/success.

Kennedy goes on to declare: "So let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." Following the balanced noun clauses — "that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof," Kennedy utters the memorable "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." Here the powerful "Let us ..." clauses are marked by chiasmus, a rhetorical term that describes the effective transposition of key words, in this case negotiate and fear. Near the conclusion of his inaugural address, President Kennedy again employs chiasmus to craft what is probably his most enduring statement: "And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

In this ringing passage, each sentence begins with a direct address — "my fellow Americans" and "my fellow citizens of the world." The two chiasmi — "country ... you" and "you .... country" — work their magic with four parallel noun clauses — "what your country can do..., what you can do ..., what America will do ....., what we can do ...."

I do not contend that President Kennedy's oration is so unforgettable solely because of its parallel structure. But would we remember his message as vividly if he had said, "You shouldn't worry about the things you can get from your country. Instead, consider how you can contribute to America"?

*Please send your questions and comments about language to [richard.lederer@utsandiego.com](mailto:richard.lederer@utsandiego.com)*

Posted in [2013](#), [U-T Columns](#) | Tagged [grammar & usage](#), [history](#), [president](#), [writing](#)