

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

How might faculty teaching WR courses use the essay, “First Responders: The Evolution of Presidential Roles and Rhetoric in the Era of School Shootings”? This essay can be used in a number of ways as a student model of writing. The essay is by no means perfect, but those imperfections coupled with its strengths make it a useful tool for discussion about writing. Here are some features of the essay that you might consider highlighting for your students:

1. Structuring a long essay that involves multiple sources – note that the writer

*Uses headings and additional spacing to denote distinct sections

*Organizes topically – in this example, after the introduction, the writer arranges sections on the

- historical and political context(s);
- theoretical text, which serves as a lens; and then the
- application of the theory source to three presidents and their responses (exhibits) to school shootings

2. Using multiple genres of exhibit sources in one essay: in this essay, the writer uses

Speeches

Tweets

Polls

3. Using a theory source:

Encourage your students to explore the places in the essay where the writer refers to the theory source (Campbell and Jamieson). Note that the writer explains/summarizes the theory source early in the essay; later, the writer notes at various points how the exhibits illustrate the theory source’s ideas; but also help students to see that the writer finds the theory source fails in certain ways to predict what happens in the exhibits. In a way, the writer is making an argument about the theory source and its continued relevance for our own era.

Novice writers have a tendency, when using a theory source as a lens for analyzing one or more exhibits, to apply the lens in an uncritical manner. These writers, typically, introduce and summarize a theory source. Their use of the theory source is essentially saying, “See, the exhibit demonstrates what the lens or theory source predicted. Finished.”

In this essay, however, the writer argues (and demonstrates) that the exhibit sources depart in interesting ways from the expectations of the theory source; nonetheless, the writer argues that the theory source still applies, despite this new kind of activity that the theorists had not anticipated. Note, for example, how the student writer argues that Clinton’s speech “stands apart from the national eulogies that preceded it” (5) and that Clinton “strengthens and alters this [Campbell and Jamieson] rubric” (6).

4. Developing a comparison between exhibits (in this case, texts by Clinton, Obama, and Trump)

An exercise you might use with students would involve having them identify as many places in the essay where the writer makes explicit comparisons. Ask students about (1) the way in which the essay overall structures the comparison and (2) at the sentence level how comparisons are made (using verbs, subordinate clauses, particular words that highlight contrasts, etc.) Finally, you could ask students (3) if there are missed opportunities to build in comparisons and, if so, where in the essay might they occur, why, and what sentences the students would construct to reinforce the comparison.

Below are some particular ways that the writer establishes and sustains a comparison of the three presidents and their responses to school shootings:

*All presidents to be compared are initially introduced (page 1; pages 3-4)

*Clinton is “the first” (terminology that suggests “second,” “third,” etc.) (p. 4; p. 5)

*Clinton establishes “a new role for the president” (p. 5)

*Transition to Obama section, “Columbine did not go down in history as the *last* school shooting” (my emphasis) p. 6 – “last” is a clear contrast to “first”

*Use of verbs, subordinate clauses, and comparative phrases establish explicit comparison:

Obama’s “attention to policy diverges from ... Clinton’s response to Columbine” (p. 6);

“While Clinton aimed ... to garner support ..., Obama struggles ...” (p8);

“Like Clinton, Obama addresses ...” p7;

*In the final sentences ending the Obama section (2nd part of the comparison), the writer helps the reader see the comparison by making references to Clinton (the 1st figure in the comparison) (p. 8)

*While the Trump section (3rd part of comparison) begins without any comparison to other presidents, this section’s second paragraph introduces both Clinton and Obama, and the remainder of the section reinforces comparisons between the three different presidents.

5. Writing a conclusion that signifies a “so what?” or why this issue matters

The essay concludes by first pointing out a rather obvious point that is made toward the end of the body of the essay: that “presidential responses to these [school shooting] tragedies have grown increasingly cynical” (p. 11). But, the writer is not content to merely end here. Instead, the writer expands on this point about political cynicism, pointing out that the real problem concerns American democracy, political polarization and a failure to adequately represent the will of the people. These examples highlight the failure of democracy. The essay, therefore, does not simply restate the writer’s main points about the various exhibits, but instead tells us that these events require a re-examination of this cherished ideal of American democracy.

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WR 151: Writing, Research, & Inquiry with Oral and/or Signed Expression

FROM THE WRITER

In high school, my favorite subject was history, and so I was excited that my WR151 course had a historical focus and involved reading and analyzing famous speeches and documents in American history. Much of our class discussion around these documents highlighted patterns in rhetoric throughout history, and the shared methods orators use to provide comfort, inspiration, or new ideas to the nation. For much of our analysis, we used scholars of rhetoric Campbell and Jamieson's works to find common themes and structures in the documents we studied. I decided to focus on school shootings because gun control and school safety have sparked the most discussion and political engagement among my generation over the past seven years, since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, and there are few presidents who have addressed the issue due to its contemporaneity. The contrast between the approaches and rhetorical styles of Donald Trump and Barack Obama, specifically, led me to question the role of the president during these national tragedies, and whether or not any patterns or evolutions arise when looking at presidential responses of this genre across eras. I hoped to determine through my research and my application of Campbell and Jamieson's rubric for national eulogies whether there was an established presidential role following school shootings, or if each president who has addressed the issue has done so in a different way that more closely mirrors his policy agenda or values.

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ELINOR YEO

Martin Fido Award for Prose Style

FIRST RESPONDERS: THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL ROLES AND RHETORIC IN THE ERA OF SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

At 11:19 a.m. on April 20, 1999, two senior students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado opened fire on their classmates, ultimately killing twelve students and one teacher. From that point, the U.S. has faced fifty mass murders or mass murder attempts in schools (Pearle). As with at-home terrorism or foreign interference in elections, the threat of a school shooting is a relatively new phenomenon for U.S. leaders to address. It could be expected, then, that presidents would need to develop a new rhetorical structure and tradition for their oratorical responses to school shootings. Political analysts have even lauded President Clinton's response to Columbine as "establishing several precedents for presidential responses to mass shootings going forward" (Troy). According to scholars of rhetoric, Carolyn Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, however, presidents adhere to a certain model when addressing the nation following a national tragedy. Campbell and Jamieson call these addresses "national eulogies" and argue that each president uses the same four rhetorical tactics to deliver a sufficient response (80). Presidential responses to school shootings do not diverge from this core pattern. Despite the unique and unprecedented nature of the tragedies, they require a response from the president structurally similar to those of any other national tragedy or death. This being said, there are several ways in which Presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump vary their adaptations and implementations of this core structure. These slight rhetorical variations expose the nuances in the roles each president assumes following a school shooting, and how the political climate of their presidency informs these roles.

U.S. Political Climate Surrounding Gun Violence 1999–2018

Before examining specific presidential addresses following school shootings, it is necessary to have an understanding of the political climates that shaped these responses. According to political analysts and scholars of presidential rhetoric, Clinton's oration following the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School marked the first public presidential response to a school shooting in American history. Before 1999, presidents did not respond to tragedies such as school shootings that they viewed as impacting local communities only (Troy). Columbine, with thirteen deaths and over twenty injuries, marked the deadliest mass shooting in a high school in American history, warranting a strong and unprecedented response from the president (Shultz 65). Recent innovations in communication technology and broadcasting also allowed for Clinton to nationalize the tragedy at Columbine and begin a new expectation for presidential responses to school shootings.

The Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting that occurred in 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut was and remains the second deadliest school shooting in American history behind the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007 (Shultz 65). Though Sandy Hook presented a new and

unparalleled challenge in many ways, President Obama had faced fourteen mass shootings already in his three-year-old presidency, giving him more preparation and examples to follow than Clinton had following Columbine. Due to the rapid influx of gun violence since Columbine, the issue of gun reform had developed significantly more prevalence in national politics by 2012. Even before Sandy Hook, Obama's early attempts at gun reform fell short as they faced the congressional gridlock surrounding the issue. With more and more of his reform propositions failing to pass, Obama's frustration with the NRA and the congressional system mounted, reaching a new level when six teachers and twenty children between the ages of six and seven were shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

The 2016 election brought an increase in division and hostility to the American political climate. Trump's campaign unearthed deep feelings of resentment between different socioeconomic, ethnic, and political groups. This tension persisted into Trump's "victory" and presidency, and quickly infiltrated the dialogue surrounding gun violence, making the issue of gun control more politicized than ever before. Almost exactly one year before the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Trump repealed an Obama-era gun regulation improving background checks on potential gun purchasers. He also received \$11.4 million from the National Rifle Association towards his 2016 campaign advertisements (Timmons). Trump's early affiliation with the NRA and allegiance to pro-gun laws during his presidency sparked public response, especially among students, following the Parkland shooting. This reaction culminated in the March for Our Lives, which I will analyze later as the first ever national youth-led anti-gun protest and a reflection of the people's demand for government action.

Presidential Responses to School Shootings

Throughout their careers, scholars of rhetoric Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson have developed several rubrics for various genres of presidential oration. In their 2008 work, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words*, they identify a rubric for presidential responses to national tragedies. According to this rubric, presidents employ the same four rhetorical tactics in their addresses to the nation following a tragedy. They begin by using deeply emotional or religious rhetoric to adopt a pastoral role in comforting the public. They then provide an explanation for the tragedy, placing the event in the larger context of the nation's past and present, in order to provide some sort of greater reasoning for why the tragedy would occur. They offer this reasoning again by transforming the deaths that occurred into symbols of national resilience and unity. Lastly, each president offers some form of assurance that the tragedy will not be repeated (Campbell and Jamieson 80). This rubric continues to apply to presidential responses to school shootings, though Clinton, Obama, and Trump vary in their implementation of its core guidelines.

The political climates in which Clinton, Obama, and Trump gave their responses have triggered the rhetorical variations between them. As aforementioned, political and rhetorical analysts widely view the Columbine High School shooting as the first of its kind, making Clinton's response to the event the first of its kind as well. On May 20, 1999, President Clinton delivered an address in Littleton, Colorado to a gymnasium filled with members of the Columbine High School Community. Analyst Tevi Troy refers to this address as "...a vintage Clinton performance—feeling the pain of the audience, highlighting the importance of values, and trying to bring the nation together in a shared enterprise." Clinton's address upholds Campbell and Jamieson's standard for pastoral and unifying rhetoric in national eulogies. He quotes Scripture verses of St. Paul and enforces national unity and collective healing by telling the students, "All America has looked and

listened with shared grief and enormous affection and admiration for you...Take care of yourselves and your families first. Take care of the school next. But remember, you can help America heal, and in so doing you will speed the process of healing for yourselves” (Clinton).

In addition to rhetoric around healing and unity, Clinton continues to uphold Campbell and Jamieson’s rubric in his use of those who died in the Columbine tragedy as symbols of national resilience and overcoming what Professor of English Craig Rood refers to as the “warrant of the dead” (48). He tells the students that, in addition to helping each other and the nation heal, “...there is something else you can do, and something I believe that you should do for yourselves and your friends, to make sure they will be remembered. Every special one of them” (Clinton). Although this call for remembrance and honoring the dead follows the traditional guidelines for national eulogies, the “something else” Clinton notes goes beyond Campbell and Jamieson’s rubric, and is more indicative of Clinton’s position in history at the time of the address.

As the first president to respond to a school shooting, Clinton sought to adopt a proactive role following Columbine, in the hope of thwarting the risk of another tragedy of its kind. When he tells the students there is something else they can do, he specifically calls for them to use their experience to promote change, in order to ensure that Columbine will go down in history as both the first and last school shooting of its caliber. He acknowledges this opportunity again when he tells the students, “We know somehow that what happened to you pierced the soul of America. And it gives you a chance to be heard in a way no one else can be heard, by the President and by ordinary people in every community in this country.” He goes on to tell them, “...you have a unique chance — a chance — to make sure that the children of Columbine are never forgotten” (Clinton). Clinton’s address stands apart from the national eulogies that preceded it because it creates a new role for the president following school shootings specifically—one that sets a precedent of both addressing these tragedies and using this specific tragedy to make significant headway in ending gun violence in America. Clinton’s call to the students contains a level of optimism, motivation, and hope in the American people that they will respond to Columbine with enough heartbreak and anger to unite in creating “a culture of values instead of a culture of violence...to keep the guns out of the wrong hands...to make sure kids who are in trouble — and there will always be some — are identified early and reached and helped” (Clinton). In preaching unity, utilizing the “warrant of the dead,” and inspiring hope and optimism that an event as tragic as Columbine will not be repeated, Clinton employs traditional rhetorical tactics as summarized by Campbell and Jamieson’s rubric. He strengthens and alters this rubric, however, to match the unprecedented nature of his response to Columbine, and the unique opportunity in history he has to stop gun violence before it escalates.

As we now know, Columbine did not go down in history as the last school shooting of its caliber. When Barack Obama spoke at a prayer vigil in Newtown, Connecticut, he had already grown frustrated with the onslaught of mass shootings that followed Columbine. In his responses to these earlier shootings of his presidency, Obama heavily adopted the pastoral role. According to author Andre E. Johnson, Obama’s earlier national eulogies relied on “an action-oriented faith emphasizing love and the ethical treatment of one’s neighbor” (52). Obama continued to adhere to the traditional rubric for national eulogies in his response to Sandy Hook by quoting Corinthians, sharing his emotional response as a father to the horrible deaths of elementary-schoolers, and choosing a prayer vigil as the platform for his address. However, Sandy Hook marked a turning point in Obama’s rhetoric following school shootings.

Due to the onslaught of gun violence during his term, it is no surprise that, of the three presidents analyzed in this paper, Obama focuses on gun control and policy most immediately and

forcefully in his responses to the major school shootings that occurred in his term. This urgent and explicit attention to policy diverges from Campbell and Jamieson's rubric as well as Clinton's response to Columbine, which only briefly alluded to policy reform and placed more emphasis on the emotional response. Obama adapts the traditional rubric to progress his policy goals and to fulfill his new role following Sandy Hook. He especially uses messages of unity and a collective response to the tragedy to bolster his policy objectives and generate national support. Like Clinton, Obama addresses his audience as part of the solution, in order to give "the impression that [he] is committed to rebuilding in the face of this tragedy and that he sees this process as a collective effort, one which requires the commitments and impartiality of all Americans in order to effect meaningful change" (McWilliams 96). Author David Frank explains that, by holding the nation and immediate audience partially accountable for enacting change, he places gun violence "within the reach of policy," providing hope that the tragedy will not be repeated if the nation takes the proper policy measures (670).

Though Obama does follow traditional guidelines in his use of the "warrant of the dead" to promote national unity towards change, he also contradicts the rubric by approaching this specific tragedy with a new level of cynicism. In his response at the prayer vigil, Obama states:

No single law — no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society. But that can't be an excuse for inaction. Surely, we can do better than this. If there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town, from the grief that has visited Tucson, Aurora, and Oak Creek, and Newtown, and communities from Columbine to Blacksburg before that—then surely we have an obligation to try.

This outlook illustrates that Obama does not, in fact, try to put the tragedy "within the reach of policy," nor does he attempt to offer much hope or assurance to the nation that the tragedy will not be repeated. Even in his address to the victims' families, Obama cannot hide his discouragement and disgust for the state of American gun reform. The sheer accumulation of mass shootings up until Sandy Hook caused his response to what he considers the "toughest day of [his] presidency" to mirror his desperation for policy and visible change (Troy). He channels Campbell and Jamieson's guidelines to convey this message for change, but his notable cynicism causes his rhetoric to shift from *hopeful* messages of unity, as the rubric decrees and as Clinton strongly emphasized, to *pleading* messages of unity. While Clinton aimed to use the public's reaction to Columbine to garner support for change, Obama struggles in his public addresses to break through the national desensitization to gun violence that developed since Columbine as the tragedies continued to occur, and inspire lasting and unpolarized concern regarding the epidemic.

Following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Donald Trump delivered a standard six-minute response to the nation in the White House Press Room. In the final line of his address, he states, "...let us hold our loved ones close, let us pray for healing and for peace, and let us come together as one nation to wipe away the tears and strive for a much better tomorrow" (Trump "Presidents"). In this single sentence, Trump essentially hits all of the key components of a national eulogy as summarized by Campbell and Jamieson. He preaches love and unity, and inspires hope that there is an attainable end to this type of tragedy and suffering. Only in one sentence, "We are committed to working with state and local leaders to help secure our schools, and tackle the difficult issue of mental health," does he mention any semblance of a strategy for reaching this "better tomorrow." Greg Jaffe and Jenna Johnson of *The Washington Post* describe these remarks as "so generic that they could have applied to any catastrophe."

Apart from his brief sound bite, Trump's response to the Parkland shooting seemed to follow anything but the traditional guidelines. For one thing, Trump offered few other remarks on the tragedy besides his initial press release, while Clinton and Obama delivered longer speeches following their immediate White House responses. Both Clinton and Obama delivered these additional addresses in the city where the tragedy occurred, whereas Trump's most notable response to the victims, other than his press release, also occurred at the White House, where he held an audience with students and families from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas community. Jaffe and Johnson compare this decision to listen rather than speak to Obama's battle with gun reform rhetoric, writing, "While Obama simply ran out of things to say about the nation's unending string of gun tragedies, Trump, who often strains to express empathy, has struggled to find much to say about them at all." Trump supporters or Americans who grew tired with Obama-era talk without action could see this shift in response tactic as Trump redefining what it means to comfort the nation following a school shooting. They could argue that Trump adopts the "pastoral role" by providing emotional confirmation for the suffering families, as opposed to the traditional version of the role, where the president preaches to an audience. However, sitting down with families is not the manifestation of the pastoral role that Campbell and Jamieson expect, and it led to just as little change as Clinton and Obama's responses to previous school shootings.

Trump further deviates from Campbell and Jamieson's rubric by applying the divisive rhetoric that characterized his campaign to his Parkland response, as opposed to the unifying rhetoric employed by Clinton and Obama. The day after the tragedy, Trump took to Twitter, saying: "So many signs that the Florida shooter was mentally disturbed, even expelled from school for bad and erratic behavior. Neighbors and classmates knew he was a big problem. Must always report such instances to authorities, again and again!" The rhetoric Trump uses in this tweet reflects the accusatory theme of the majority of his presence on Twitter, his favorite platform for communicating with the public. The tweet uses mental illness as a justification for ignoring the danger of the widespread availability of guns, in the same way his past rhetoric uses ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation as scapegoats for other pressing national problems. Jaffe and Johnson argue that this passive response is Trump's wager that "Americans will move on to other issues. Eventually, they will forget." Trump's tweets following Parkland unraveled his feeble initial attempt to follow the traditional guidelines of national eulogies and foreshadowed his lack of policy work and attention following the tragedy.

Trump's meager response to the Parkland shooting bred a historical, youth-led national movement against gun violence orchestrated and championed by students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The March for Our Lives in Washington D.C., following weeks of national school walk-outs and local protests, became the third largest protest in U.S. history, and the organizing students became the faces and voices of the gun control movement. They engaged with local and national news to spread awareness and garner support for stricter legislation, and they confronted pro-gun members of Congress at town hall events, on social media, and in Washington. In a matter of months, high school juniors and seniors from Parkland, Florida became household names in the fight against gun violence, filling the void of Trump's inadequate rhetorical and political response to the tragedy, and inspiring Americans, especially students, to exercise their rights and demand more from their government. In the words of Marjory Stoneman Douglas activist, Emma González:

We are tired of being ignored. So we are speaking up for those who don't have anyone listening to them, for those who can't talk about it just yet, and for those who will never

speaking again. We are grieving, we are furious, and we are using our words fiercely and desperately because that's the only thing standing between us and this happening again.

In replacing presidential and congressional silence with the people's voice, the movement that sprouted out of Parkland reflected the public's need for acknowledgement and action following the shooting. The March for Our Lives provided hope that desensitization to gun violence has not completely settled over the American people, and, hopefully, reminded the public that they hold the power to define a national issue, despite a neglectful president.

The American political climate changes constantly. Since Columbine, Americans have seen four different presidents, four different means of discourse, four different sets of goals, policies, and strategies. Amidst all this change, gun violence has remained a constant threat to the American people, and school shootings are a regular concern for all children and parents. Schools across the country now practice active shooter drills on a monthly basis, and Congress continues to present a divided front on the issue, regardless of the countless demands from the public for action and change. The presidential responses to these tragedies have grown increasingly cynical, replacing Clinton's early optimism with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness that gun violence can ever be resolved in the United States, culminating in Trump ignoring the issue altogether in his public addresses. What is most worrying about this trend is that public opinion overwhelmingly supports meaningful gun control, but everyday Americans are growing more and more desensitized to mass shootings and pessimistic that even their best efforts to express their demands will fall short. The evolution of presidential rhetoric surrounding school shootings reflects the much larger issue of an American political system that no longer has the capacity to enact the types of laws that the public wants, based on polling data (Khalid). If this dysfunction persists, public policy will fail entirely to represent the country's people and their demands, overturning the very foundation of American democracy, and allowing for the continued slaughter of American schoolchildren. Until we repair our deeply polarized government, both political and public hope for an end to gun violence will continue on a downward trajectory, as will any meaningful effort to get there.

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