

Modeling Greatness: Comparing Mandela's 'I Am Prepared to Die' and Castro's 'History Will Absolve Me'

Purpose: This handout shows how two revolutionary leaders used courtroom speeches to redefine guilt, assert moral legitimacy, and inspire movements. It demonstrates how modeling genre conventions can produce original, impactful rhetoric.

1. Context and Occasion

Nelson Mandela delivered his famous speech "I Am Prepared to Die" in 1964 during the Rivonia Trial, where he and other members of the African National Congress (ANC) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) were charged with sabotage. Mandela used the courtroom to justify the ANC's transition from nonviolent protest to armed resistance in the face of apartheid's brutality. He did not deny his role in founding Umkhonto we Sizwe, instead explaining it as a moral and strategic necessity after peaceful means had failed.

Fidel Castro delivered his speech "History Will Absolve Me" in 1953 as a self-defense at his trial following the failed attack on the Moncada Barracks, an attempted coup against the Batista regime. The rebellion was a military disaster, with many rebels killed or captured, and Castro arrested. However, Castro's courtroom rhetoric transformed the failed coup into a moral victory, establishing his political legitimacy and laying the foundation for the Cuban Revolution.

Feature	Nelson Mandela	Fidel Castro
Setting	1964 Rivonia Trial, South Africa	1953 Moncada Barracks Trial, Cuba
Charges	Sabotage and conspiracy	Rebellion against the state
Goal	Justify actions, avoid death sentence	Justify rebellion, appeal to Cuban public
Outcome	Life imprisonment	15 years (served 2), speech later published

Primary Sources:
- Nelson Mandela, I Am Prepared to Die:

<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv03445/04lv03961/05lv03994/06lv04001.htm>

- Fidel Castro, History Will Absolve Me:

<https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1953/10/16.htm>

2. Shared Rhetorical Structure: Turning Defense into Moral Prosecution

- Both speeches acknowledge their actions and argue they were necessary.
- They put the regime on trial, flipping the courtroom power dynamic.
- Each uses personal sacrifice as a symbol of broader political struggle.

3. Key Rhetorical Moves

Strategy	Mandela	Castro
Ethos	Calm, moral, visionary: "I have cherished the ideal..."	Confident, prophetic: "Let me tell you the truth..."
Historical Argument	Apartheid history, failures of peaceful protest	Cuban history, colonialism, and injustice
Logos	Rational shift from nonviolence to sabotage	Structured legal argument: facts, law, justification
Pathos	Closes with emotional crescendo	Ends with triumphant prophecy: "History will absolve me"
Moral Reversal	State is immoral; resistance is duty	Rebels are patriots; state is criminal
Posterity Appeal	Speaks to future justice	Makes history the judge

4. Modeling, Not Mimicking

Both leaders modeled earlier forms:

- Legal speeches (Cicero, Darrow)
- Revolutionary rhetoric (Zola, Robespierre)
- Prophetic tone (Biblical, apocalyptic justice)

Yet each speech is culturally grounded and strategically unique.

5. Classroom Application: Writing Exercise

Prompt: Make a revolutionary argument that something must change. It can be simple (e.g., girls take out the trash and boys wash dishes), or national (e.g., we need term limits for Congress). Your task is to craft a speech that demands change and stirs your audience to act.

In classical rhetoric, there are three levels of style:

- Low style – clear and simple, for explaining or teaching
- Middle style – polished and balanced, for pleasing or entertaining
- High style – elevated, passionate, and intense, for moving to action

This speech should use high style, like Mandela and Castro, to persuade, inspire, and ignite change.

Suggested Structure: Use three paragraphs:

- One based on ethos (credibility and values)
- One on logos (reason and logic)
- One on pathos (emotion and urgency)

Final Line: End with a powerful future-facing sentence: “History will...”, “The time has come...”, or “I am prepared to...”

Closing Insight

Great rhetoric doesn’t just persuade—it redefines the terms of debate. By modeling genre and revoicing tradition, students can learn that originality often comes through adaptation, not invention from scratch.