

YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

WE THE PEOPLE

Katie Faber
Calvin College

College students don't often stay up until 2 a.m. watching CNN, but in the weeks leading up to 5 February 2008, two of my friends and I defied the norm. After all, Super Tuesday was important. The three of us could rattle off the definition of a super delegate, the dates of the next major caucuses, and the names of Hillary Clinton's most recent losses in campaign staff. Why did we run between each other's rooms with the latest delegate count? Why were other young voters like us caught up in this political fervor? We were—and still are—listening very closely to one person and his message. Senator Barack Obama moves young voters to join with him in leadership when he links the idea of “we,” the people of America, with active change.

Obama's ability to draw people into action is exemplified in his 10 February 2007, speech in Springfield, Illinois, which he used to announce his candidacy for the presidential nomination. The location reflects Obama's history working in Illinois as a community organizer and lawyer who simply wanted to “play a small part in building a better America,” which he explains in the speech's short autobiography.

He does not take long, though, to move away from the introductions to speak to the heart of the matter. After all, Obama begins a long, widespread campaign with this speech. It must not only introduce his personal story to the public, but also establish his campaign. Obama must speak here to the priorities and passions that will drive him through the next twenty-one months, possibly beyond, if he wants to draw listeners along with him. Therefore, Obama must primarily convince the audience that, in all of our history, and throughout all of our future, Americans can and have been one people, either actively or passively engaged in our time. When examined later, it becomes clear that first-time “inclusion” in an active American population is exactly what young voters are looking for.

Obama pinpoints the positive action of our union by first focusing on the finer moments of American history. He begins with the changes seen in Illinois during his time there, mentioning achievements in health insurance and ethics reforms. He then moves on to speak of broader historic successes—this section of his speech, when read as a whole, gives a sense of building excitement that reaches its climax with the final statement. Pay special attention to the key verbs (*italics added*) that will play an essential role in Obama's appeal to young voters:

It was here we *learned* to disagree without being disagreeable—that it's possible to compromise so long as you know those principles that can never be compromised; and that so long as we're willing to listen to each other, we can assume the best in people instead of the worst.

That's why we were able to *reform* a death penalty system that was broken. That's why we were able to *give* health insurance to children in need. That's why we *made* the tax system more fair and just for working families, and that's why we *passed* ethics

reforms that the cynics said could never, ever be passed.

It was here, in Springfield, where North, South, East and West come together that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people—where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America.

And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States.

I recognize there is a certain presumptuousness—a certain audacity—to this announcement. I know I haven’t spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I’ve been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change.

The genius of our founders is that they designed a system of government that can be changed. And we should take heart, because we’ve changed this country before. In the face of tyranny, a band of patriots *brought* an Empire to its knees. In the face of secession, we *unified* a nation and *set* the captives free. In the face of Depression, we *put* people back to work and *lifted* millions out of poverty. We *welcomed* immigrants to our shores, we *opened* railroads to the west, we *landed* a man on the moon, and we *heard* a King’s call to let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Each and every time, a new generation has risen up and done what’s needed to be done.

The interesting feature in this section is a certain pattern: the consistent linking of the pronoun “we” with those strong, active verbs. The table below splits up several of Obama’s phrases to highlight their significant verb choice:

We	Learned	To disagree without being disagreeable
	Made	The tax system more fair
	Passed	Ethics reforms
	Brought	An Empire to its knees
	Unified	A nation
	Set	The captives free
	Put	People back to work
	Lifted	Millions out of poverty
	Welcomed	Immigrants to our shores
	Opened	Railroads to the west
	Landed	A man on the moon
	Heard	A King’s call to let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream
We were able to		
	Reform	A death penalty system that was broken
	Give	Health insurance to children in need

The strong verbs listed in the second column are all preceded by the pronoun “we,” a rhetorical act that draws listeners into historic events that they cannot claim to have actually influenced. In fact, voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two cannot claim to have witnessed any of them. But by describing history in terms like “we welcomed immigrants” and “we opened railroads,” Obama equates our identity as citizens with the entrepreneurial spirit of those occasions. We need to be nothing more than ourselves to be included in such greatness. Suddenly we are numbered among the generations that Obama says “Each and every time . . . [have] risen up and done what’s needed to be done.” Obama intends for us to leap aboard this train when he declares next that “it is time for our generation to answer that call.”

But the passengers boarding this train pause for a moment because they know that recent history has not been this rosy. Obama goes on to recognize the troubles that have indeed hindered our unified spirit at times. In doing so the action of “we” changes drastically. “We” are still facing these problems together, but now as passive recipients of oppression:

All of us know what those challenges are today—a war with no end, a dependence on oil that threatens our future, schools where too many children aren’t learning, and families struggling paycheck to paycheck despite working as hard as they can. We know the challenges. We’ve heard them. We’ve talked about them for years.

What’s stopped us from meeting these challenges is not the absence of sound policies and sensible plans. What’s stopped us is the failure of leadership, the smallness of our politics—the ease with which we’re distracted by the petty and trivial, our chronic avoidance of tough decisions, our preference for scoring cheap political points instead of rolling up our sleeves and building a working consensus to tackle big problems.

For the last six years we’ve been told that our mounting debts don’t matter, we’ve been told that the anxiety Americans feel about rising health care costs and stagnant wages are an illusion, we’ve been told that climate change is a hoax, and that tough talk and an ill-conceived war can replace diplomacy, and strategy, and foresight. And when all else fails, when Katrina happens, or the death toll in Iraq mounts, we’ve been told that our crises are somebody else’s fault. We’re distracted from our real failures, and told to blame the other party, or gay people, or immigrants.

Obama’s rhetoric dramatically shifts from the we/active-verb pattern to one repeated phrase: *we’ve been told*. This shift implies that, while we as Americans are aware of the problems, the responsibility for the problems lies with an outside party, like the federal government or interest groups. Obama goes on to elaborate on our recent helpless state:

And as people have looked away in disillusionment and frustration, we know what’s filled the void. The cynics, and the lobbyists, and the special interests who’ve turned our government into a game only they can afford to play. They write the checks and you get stuck with the bills, they get the access while you get to write a letter, they think they own this government, but we’re here today to take it back. The time for that politics is over. It’s time to turn the page.

This passage is pivotal in Obama’s speech because it points to the difference between the types of people listening. Some—critical listeners, Republicans, an older generation, or anyone with doubts in the validity of Obama’s message—key in to Obama’s use of the pronoun “they.” “They” work in the government; “they” have power in Washington. More than one listener probably wanted to stop Obama and ask, “Wait—why are you, a senator, not numbering yourself among the ‘they’?” Obama

goes for automatic association with the “we” here, but not all listeners are so easily sold.

And yet one group seems unbothered by this association: young, often first-time voters. In the 2008 South Carolina primary, 67% of young Democrat voters preferred Obama (Hebel), and 57% of young Iowan Democrats did as well (Powell). Some attribute this success to Obama’s grasp of “the tools of the youth culture, a Facebook, YouTube and blogging whirl” (Powell). *Time* magazine declares that Obama’s campaign is “entirely about Obama and his ability to inspire” (Klein 18). But perhaps this success has less to do with what the speaker is saying and more to do with what young listeners are hearing.

Consider this: we, the first-time voters, were only twelve on September 11. We were fourteen when Operation Iraqi Freedom began, and saw that endeavor continue through our teenage years. We were seventeen when *An Inconvenient Truth* was released. In the roughly ten years of our conscious memory, the political system has disappointed again and again. We do not remember the Kennedys. We did not see the Berlin wall come down.

Our generation has grown old enough to see trouble on television but not old enough yet to respond in the voting booths. We are ready to get to work, because we will be the ones dealing with the results of current policies in twenty, thirty, or forty years. We want solutions for these problems, but the politics we have observed have made them worse, not better. Our generation is truly the only one without blame in political history because we have not yet spoken, but the time has finally come for that to change.

Obama speaks directly to the change that young voters want in a specific way with this speech. His grievance section is tailored perfectly to the viewpoint of the youngest generation of voters, a generation that has only dreamed of inclusion in the events mentioned first in the speech. Obama wants young voters to know that he believes that their inclusion in greatness is possible—in the future when he is president. He highlights this inclusion with a switch back to active verbs.

In the next section of his speech, Obama shares with young listeners all the things that could be possible in the next four years. For nearly a third of the speech, Obama now switches to statements of “let us” followed by active verbs similar to those previously used. Obama’s political agenda forms the base for the political topics mentioned, but by mentioning them as things that “we” will be able to accomplish, he maintains cohesion between young listeners and his campaign. Most claims begin with “let us” or “let’s,” which gives a tone of optimistic probability; we will not be stopped this time by age or inability. Obama affirms this positivity by ending each topical section with the phrase “We can do that.”

What exactly does he challenge us to do? Another table of the content of this section summarizes it best:

Let us (be the generation that will)	Begin	This hard work
	Transform	This nation
	Reshape	Our economy to compete in the digital age
	Set	High standards for our schools
	Give	[The schools] the resources they need
	Recruit	A new army of teachers
	Make	College more affordable

	Invest	In scientific research
	Lay down	Broadband lines through the heart of inner cities and rural towns
	Ensure	That our nation's workers are sharing in our prosperity
	Protect	The hard-earned benefits [of our nation's workers]
	Make it possible	To save for retirement
	Allow	Unions to lift up the middle class
	End	Poverty
	Tackle	The health care crisis
	Control	Costs
	Free	America from the tyranny of oil
	Harness	Alternative fuels
	Spur	The production of fuel-efficient cars
	Set up	A system for capping greenhouse gases
	Turn	The crisis of global warming into a moment of opportunity
	Track down	Terrorists
	Tighten	The net around military finances
	Improve	Our intelligence capabilities
	Bring an end	To this war in Iraq
	Honor	The courage of our veterans
	Provide	The care [those veterans] need
	Rebuild	The military they love

Once again, we see that the verbs in the second column are powerful and active, and they all happen to be actions that “we” are doing. In fact, by using either “we” or “us” forty-three times throughout this action section, Obama stresses that this action is undoubtedly, unquestionably *our* doing—young voters included.

By making the idea of “we” synonymous with the action of his leadership, Obama implies that he will usher the country once again into a time when unified action can bring about changes as momentous as the end of slavery or the beginning of exploration. He rejects the current scheme of politics in Washington, saying that although he hasn’t been there very long, he’s “been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change.” He has implied through pronoun and verb choice and now through literal statements that he will move toward people-centered government. He articulates it this way at the end of his action section:

That's why this campaign can't only be about me. It must also be about us—it must be about what we can do together. This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams . . . This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change.

Obama has, to some degree, instilled in us this desire for change. He knows that we are young voters who want action, and he speaks to that with the verbs of his speech. More than that, he includes us in his plans when he uses the pronoun “we.” He wants us to know that his campaign is the “vehicle” we have longed for. And, as a generation, we seem to be jumping aboard: we showed up at the South Carolina and Iowa primaries in early 2008 to vote mostly for Obama; in a September 2008 poll of young voters by *USA Today*, we responded six to one that Obama “understands ‘the problems of people your age’” better than Senator John McCain (Page); on 4 November 2008 around half of our age group turned out to vote, and we voted for Obama 66% of the time (Dahl). Our actions prove that we do hope for a future where politicians avoid manipulation, common people matter, and college students actually wear a picture of their president on homemade T-shirts. This idea has uncertainty and even improbability, but it has power. It has enough power to plant three college friends in front of CNN and keep them there, watching, because they know that soon they might have a chance to speak up for the action that they want.

I would like to thank Dr. Downs and Dr. Vander Lei for their valuable input and encouragement.

Works Cited

- Dahl, Melissa. “Youth Voter Turnout Likely Sets New Record.” *MSNBC* 5 Nov. 2008. 6 Nov. 2008. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27562023/>>.
- Hebel, Sarah. “Youth Vote Triples in South Carolina, Favoring Obama.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 28 Jan. 2008. 10 Feb. 2008 <<http://chronicle.com/blogs/election/1526/youth-vote-triples-in-south-carolina-favoring-obama>>.
- Klein, Joe. “Inspiration vs. Substance.” *Time* 18 Feb. 2008: 18–19.
- Obama, Barack. Speech. Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL. 10 Feb. 2007. 19 Oct. 2008 <http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_11.php>.
- Page, Susan. “Poll: Young Voters Hint at Electorate Shift.” *USA Today* 5 Oct. 2008. 9 Oct. 2008 <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-10-05-poll-youth_N.htm>.
- Powell, Michael. “Young Voters Buoy Obama and McCain.” *International Herald Tribune* 8 Jan. 2008. 10 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/01/08/america/youth.php?page=1>>.