

Six Memorable Speeches

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



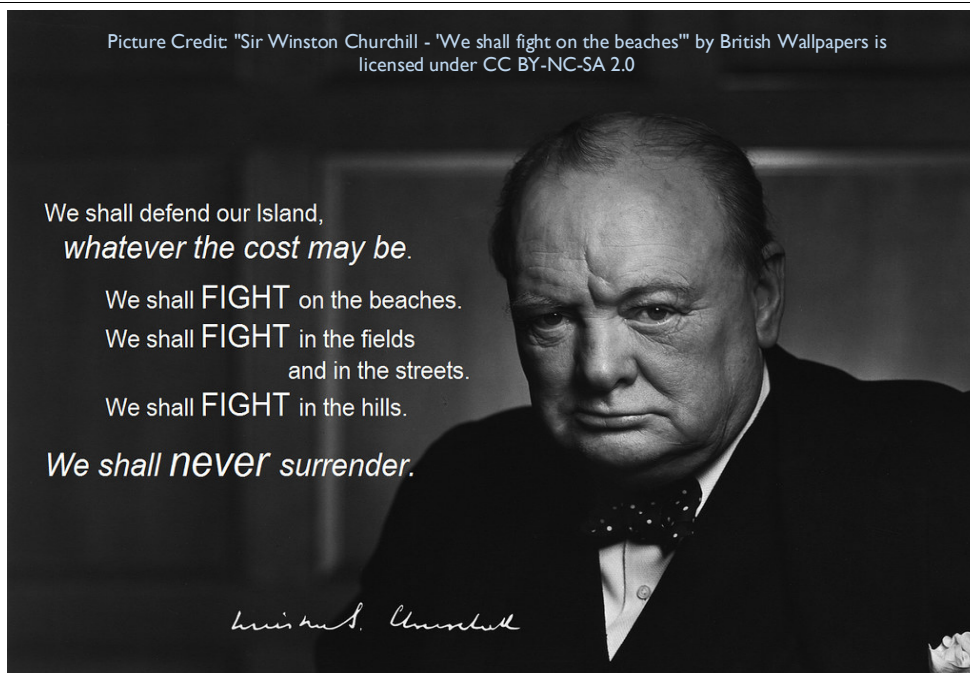
Introduction

Typically, speeches serve four primary purposes: to inform, persuade, instruct, or entertain. Speeches can focus on objects, people, events, concepts, processes, or issues. You will find a comprehensive list of speeches throughout history on Wikipedia, [HERE](#). Take your pick as to which you think is the most memorable and influential - there are plenty to choose from:

- Before the 1st century
- Pre 19th century
- 19th century
- 20th century: Pre- and during World War I
- 20th century: Inter-war years and World War II
- 20th century: 1945–1991 Cold War years
- 20th century: 1992 - 2000 Post Cold War years
- 21st century

Who were the greatest speakers in history? What was the best speech? To answer these questions, it is necessary to recognise that a speech is more than a set of spoken words, however well delivered. It's a combination of the speaker, the context, the language, the time in history - and all these things working together can make it far greater than the sum of its parts. I have chosen six speeches, but you might disagree with my choice. Read on to decide.

Winston Churchill: "*We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches...*" 4th June 1940



His speeches, all of which he wrote himself, were received with rapturous adulation. Making every word matter, he combined an incredible and inspiring delivery with the best of the English language – often using short words, be they Anglo-Saxon words or Shakespearean.

Some might say that Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill had a patchy career¹ until his moment came during the early part of World War II on becoming British Prime Minister.

¹ After a sensational rise to prominence in national politics before [World War I](#), Churchill acquired a reputation for erratic judgment in the war itself and in the decade that followed. Politically suspect in consequence, he was a lonely figure until his response to [Adolf Hitler's](#) challenge brought him to leadership of a national coalition government in 1940. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Winston-Churchill>

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After Paris fell to the seemingly all-powerful and invincible Nazis in June 1940, Britain took a deep breath and prepared for the worst. Only a month into his premiership, Churchill delivered his famous "We shall fight on the beaches" speech to the House of Commons as the country braced itself for a full-scale invasion by the enemy. The last part of his speech, transcribed from Hansard², is:

"Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the new world, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old."

The full speech is [HERE](#).

Queen Elizabeth the First: "I know I have the body but of a weak, feeble woman" July 1588



The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 has long been held as one of England's greatest military achievements. The *British Library* records³ the famous speech delivered by Queen Elizabeth to her troops, who were assembled at Tilbury Camp to defend the country against a Spanish invasion. The successful defence of the Kingdom against invasion on such an unprecedented scale boosted the prestige of England's Queen Elizabeth I and encouraged a sense of English pride and nationalism. Elizabeth defends her strength as a female leader, saying, "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm." Stirring stuff.

Before her rallying speech, the Armada had been driven from the Strait of Dover in the *Battle of Gravelines*⁴, but English troops were still held at ready in case the Spanish army of Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma, might yet attempt to invade from Dunkirk, France.

On the day of her speech, the Queen left her bodyguard before Tilbury Fort and went among her subjects with an escort of six men. Elizabeth's physical appearance was vital to the historical event and as crucial as the actual speech (she had written it herself). Dozens of descriptions of Elizabeth on that day exist, many with slightly differing details. Similarities between descriptions indicate that she wore a plumed helmet and a steel cuirass over a white velvet gown. She held a gold and silver truncheon, or baton, in her hand as she rode atop a white steed. Her demeanour was "full of princely resolution and more than feminine courage" and that "she passed like some Amazonian empress through all her army".

² See [HERE](#). This work is in the public domain worldwide because the work was created by a public body of the United Kingdom with Crown Status and commercially published before 1971. See [Crown copyright artistic works](#), [Crown copyright non-artistic works](#) and [List of Public Bodies with Crown Status](#).

³ Source: British Library, [HERE](#).

⁴ The 1588 Battle of Gravelines saw an indecisive engagement between Spanish and English fleets during the attempted Spanish invasion of England.

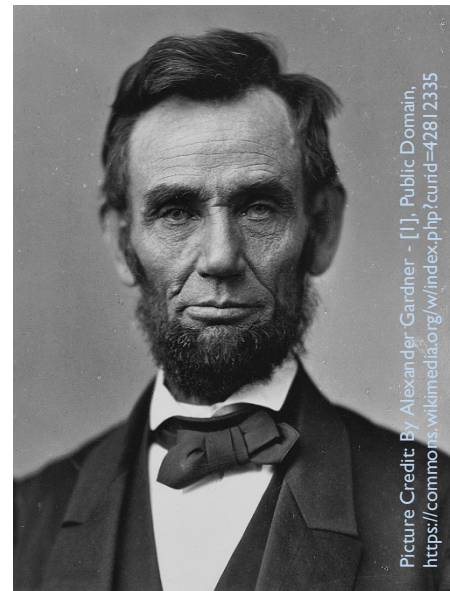
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Abraham Lincoln: "The Gettysburg Address" 19th November 1863

Abraham Lincoln was an American lawyer and statesman who served as the 16th president of the United States from 1861 until his assassination in 1865. Lincoln led the nation through the American Civil War and succeeded in preserving the Union, abolishing slavery, bolstering the federal government, and modernising the US economy. *The Gettysburg Address* is the speech he delivered during the American Civil War at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of 19th November 1863, four and a half months after the Union armies defeated those of the Confederacy at the Battle of Gettysburg. It is one of the best-known speeches in American history. Lincoln's carefully crafted address, not even that day's primary speech, came to be seen as one of the greatest and most influential statements of American national purpose.

In just 271 words, beginning with the now-famous phrase "*Four score and seven years ago*," referring to the signing of the Declaration of Independence 87 years earlier, Lincoln described the US as a nation "*conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal*," and represented the Civil War as a test that would determine whether such a nation, the Union, could endure. He extolled the sacrifices of those who died at Gettysburg in defence of those principles and urged his listeners to resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. Despite the prominent place of the speech in the history and popular culture of the United States, its exact wording is disputed - the five known manuscripts and the contemporary newspaper reprints of the Gettysburg Address in Lincoln's hand, differ in several details.



Picture Credit: By Alexander Gardner - [1]. Public Domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=42812335>

Although Lincoln was not the featured orator that day, his brief address would come to be remembered as one of the most important speeches in American history. In it, he invoked the principles of human equality contained in the Declaration of Independence and connected the sacrifices of the Civil War with the desire for "a new birth of freedom," as well as the all-important preservation of the Union created in 1776 and of its ideal of self-government. Edward Everett, the featured speaker at the dedication ceremony of the National Cemetery of Gettysburg, who had earlier spoken for two hours, wrote to Lincoln, "*I wish that I could flatter myself that I had come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes.*"⁵

The full text of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is as follows⁶:

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

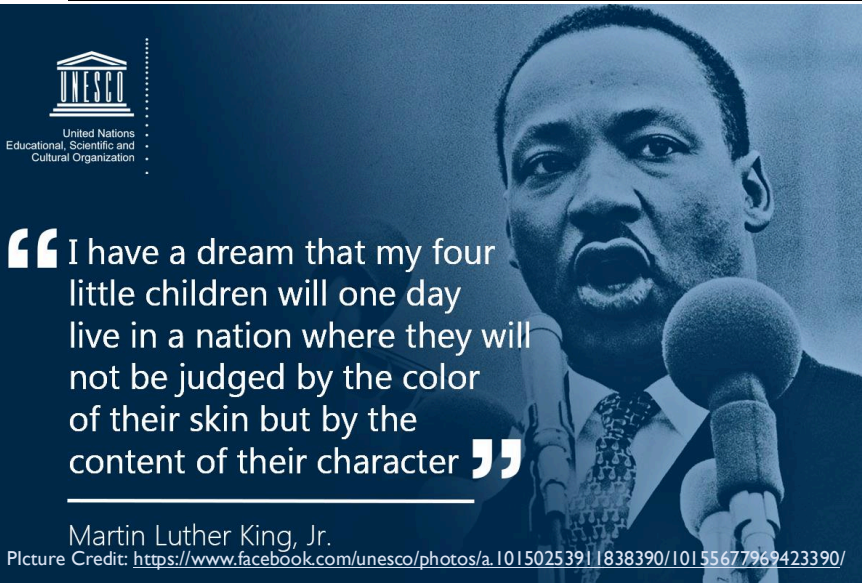
⁵ Source: History.com, [HERE](#).

⁶ Ibid

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Martin Luther King Jr.: "I Have a Dream" 28th August 1963



“ I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Picture Credit: <https://www.facebook.com/unesco/photos/a.10150253911838390/10155677969423390/>

"I Have a Dream" is the key theme in a public speech delivered by American civil rights activist and Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr., during the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom* on 28th August 1963. In the speech, King called for civil and economic rights and an end to racism in the United States. Delivered to over 250,000 civil rights supporters (a fifth were white) from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, the speech was a defining moment of the civil rights movement and among the most iconic speeches in American history. Beginning with a reference to the *Emancipation Proclamation*, which declared millions of slaves free in 1863, King said: "one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free".

Toward the end of the speech, King departed from his prepared text for a partly improvised peroration on the theme "I have a dream", prompted by Mahalia Jackson's cry: "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" In this part of the speech, King described his dreams of freedom and equality arising from a land of slavery and hatred. The speech was ranked the top American speech of the 20th century in a 1999 poll of scholars of public address. The speech has also been described as having "a strong claim to be the greatest in the English language of all time." *The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom* was partly intended to demonstrate mass support for the civil rights legislation proposed by President John F. Kennedy in June 1963.

King originally designed his speech as a homage to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, timed to correspond with the centennial of the *Emancipation Proclamation*. *The March on Washington*, and especially King's speech, helped put civil rights at the top of the agenda of reformers in the United States and facilitated the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

A key paragraph in the speech is:

"I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character."

The speech ends with these paragraphs⁷:

"This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

"And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. And so let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that, let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring."

"And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last."

⁷ Source: <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

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John F Kennedy: Speech at his Inauguration, 20th January 1961

The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy as the 35th president of the United States was held on 20th January 1961 at the East Portico of the United States Capitol in Washington, DC. Kennedy was assassinated two years and 306 days later. Kennedy narrowly defeated Richard Nixon, the incumbent vice president, in the presidential election. He was the first Catholic to become President, the youngest person elected to the office, and the first US president born in the 20th century. Kennedy's inaugural address encompassed the major themes of his campaign and would define his presidency during a time of economic prosperity, emerging social changes, and diplomatic challenges.



Picture Credit: Screen Clip from Video on Wikipedia, [HERE](#).

Immediately after reciting the oath of office, President Kennedy turned to address the crowd gathered at the Capitol. His 1366-word inaugural address, the first delivered to a televised audience in colour, is considered one of the best presidential inaugural speeches in American history. The speech was crafted by Kennedy and his speechwriter Ted Sorensen. Kennedy had Sorensen study President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and other inaugural speeches of former Presidents. Kennedy came into power at the height of the Cold War with the difficult goals of maintaining peaceful international relations and representing the United States as a strong global force. These themes dominated his inaugural address. Kennedy highlighted the newly discovered dangers of nuclear power and the accelerating arms race, essentially making the main point that a focus on pure firepower should be replaced with a focus on international relations and helping impoverished people of the world. The main idea of Kennedy's inaugural address was to instil confidence at home and respect abroad. He believed that democracy thrives only when citizens contribute their talents to the common good and that it is up to leaders to inspire citizens to acts of sacrifice.

The new President's address⁸ was full of richly connotative words – for example, consider the impact of 'unleashed powers of destruction', compared with 'released'. The speech started with:

"Vice President Johnson, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief of Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, reverend clergy, fellow citizens, we observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom. Symbolising an end, as well as a beginning. Signifying renewal, as well as a change. For I have sworn before you and the Almighty God that the same solemn oath of our forebears prescribed nearly a century ago would be warranted. The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought for are still at issue around the globe. The belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God."

The best known and most often quoted epigrams from the speech are:

"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, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

"And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country."⁹

"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."

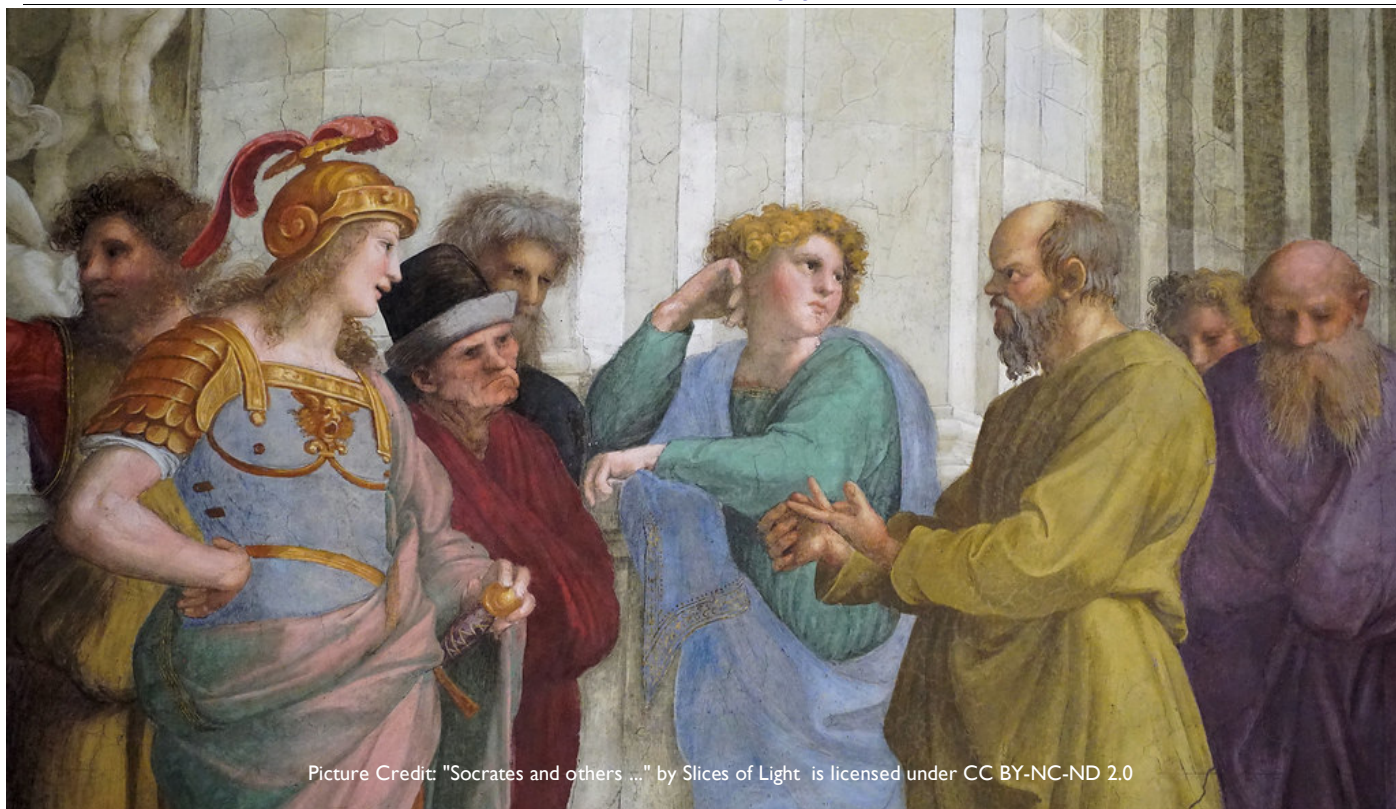
⁸ Read the full speech, [HERE](#) and commentary, [HERE](#).

⁹ This use of **anti-metabole** can be seen as a thesis statement of his speech—a call to action for the public to do what is right for the greater good. It appears to be an elegant rephrasing (could it have been plagiarised) of **Franklin D. Roosevelt's** acceptance speech at the **1936 Democratic National Convention**: "To some generations much is given. Of other generations, much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny."

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The Trial of Socrates and the Apology: 399 BC



Picture Credit: "Socrates and others ..." by Slices of Light is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

In 399 BC, the Athenians sentenced its most famous philosopher to death, showing that threats to the freedom of speech can come from democracies and totalitarian regimes. The so-called trial of Socrates was a fraud from day one because there was no concrete proof that he did anything to make Athens, or its people, less safe.¹⁰ To be fair, Socrates was offered a pardon if he agreed to give up teaching philosophy, an offer he refused, believing he had a moral responsibility to tell the truth.

The trial of Socrates was held to determine the philosopher's guilt of two charges: *asebeia*¹¹ against the *pantheon*¹² of Athens, and corruption of the youth of the city-state. The accusers cited two impious acts by Socrates: "*failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges*" and "*introducing new deities*".

The death sentence of Socrates was the legal consequence of asking politico-philosophic questions of his students¹³, which resulted in the two accusations of moral corruption and impiety. The *Apology of Socrates* (Greek: *Apología Sokrátous*; Latin: *Apologia Socratis*), written by Plato, is a Socratic dialogue of the speech of legal self-defence which Socrates spoke at his trial for impiety and corruption in 399 BC. Specifically, the *Apology of Socrates* is a defence against the charges of "corrupting the youth" and to Athens. Among the primary sources about Socrates' trial and death, the *Apology of Socrates* is the dialogue that depicts the trial and is one of four Socratic dialogues, along with *Euthyphro*, *Phaedo*, and *Crito*, through which Plato details Socrates' final days. Aristotle believed the dialogue, particularly the scene where Socrates questions Meletus, represented a good use of interrogation.

During the trial, in his speech of self-defence, Socrates twice mentions that Plato is present. The *Apology of Socrates* begins with Socrates addressing the jury of some 500 Athenian men to ask if they have been persuaded by the orators (Lycon, Anytus, and Meletus), who have accused Socrates of corrupting the young people of the city and impiety against the pantheon of Athens.

¹⁰ Source: *Socrates' Final Speech: Choosing Death Before Dishonour*, [HERE](#).

¹¹ *Asebeia* was a criminal charge in ancient Greece for the "desecration and mockery of divine objects", for "irreverence towards the state gods" and disrespect towards parents and dead ancestors. It translates into English as impiety or godlessness. Most evidence for it comes from Athens. Source: [Wikipedia](#).

¹² In ancient Greek religion and mythology, the twelve Olympians are the major deities of the Greek pantheon, commonly considered to be Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Hermes, and either Hestia or Dionysus. Source: [Wikipedia](#).

¹³ The fact is that Socrates didn't know when to stop. He asked so many questions, he drove people to despair. In short, he was a pain in the butt.

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The first sentence of his defence speech establishes the theme of the dialogue — that philosophy begins with an admission of ignorance. Socrates later clarifies that philosophical point when he says that whatever wisdom he possesses comes from knowing that he knows nothing.

In the course of the trial, Socrates imitates, parodies, and corrects the orators, his accusers, and asks the jury to judge him by the truth of his statements, not by his oratorical skill. Socrates said he would not use sophisticated language — carefully arranged ornate words and phrases — but would speak using the common idiom of the Greek language. Socrates said that he would speak in the manner he used in the agora¹⁴ and at the money tables, which he was his native tongue and the fashion of his country.

Although offered the opportunity to appease the prejudices of the jury, with a minimal concession to the charges of corruption and impiety, Socrates does not surrender his integrity to avoid the penalty of death. At the trial, the majority of the dikasts¹⁵ voted to convict him of the two charges; then, consistent with common legal practice, voted to determine his punishment and agreed to a sentence of death to be carried out by Socrates's drinking a poisonous beverage of Hemlock. Upon receiving his death sentence, Socrates remains consistently unapologetic as ever. Reflecting on the defence speech he has given thus far and his unwillingness to do anything beneath himself in hopes of altering the course of the trial by appeals to emotion, he says: "*neither did I suppose that I should do anything unsuitable to a free man because of the danger, nor do I now regret that I made the defence.*"

Plato's Apology: Socrates' Death Speech¹⁶

In his final statements to the Athenian jurors and onlookers before his impending self-execution by taking Hemlock, Socrates reveals himself to be playing a game much longer than the span of his trial, lifespan, or even those of his successors.

When faced with the verdict of guilty and the sentence of death, Socrates remains defiant towards his accusers and steadfast in his conviction of the righteousness of his activities. Where previously in *The Apology*, Socrates gives the impression of a man averse or neutral to the prospect of death, at this stage, he turns the tables on his condemnation by insisting on the goodness of the fate that is soon to befall him and the wretched vengeance no doubt awaiting those who have passed sentence on him. Socrates' death speech starts:

"How you, men of Athens, have been affected by my accusers, I do not know. For my part, even I nearly forgot myself because of them, so persuasively did they speak. And yet they have said, so to speak, nothing true. I wondered most at one of the many falsehoods they told, when they said that you should beware that you are not deceived by me, since I am a clever speaker. They are not ashamed that they will immediately be refuted by me in deed, as soon as it becomes apparent that I am not a clever speaker at all; this seemed to me to be most shameless of them—unless of course they call a clever speaker the one who speaks the truth."

And, after a long tirade, Socrates finishes with:

"This much, however, I beg of them: when my sons grow up, punish them, men, and pain them in the very same way I pained you if they seem to you to care for money or anything else before virtue. And if they are reputed to be something when they are nothing, reproach them just as I did you: tell them that they do not care for the things they should, and that they suppose they are something when they are worth nothing. And if you do these things, we will have been treated justly by you, both I myself and my sons. But now it is time to go away, I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unclear to everyone except to the God."

¹⁴ The *agora* was a central public assembly space in ancient Greek city-states.

¹⁵ A *dikast* was one of the 6000 Athenians annually chosen, by lot, to act as judges. It was required that they were male citizens at least 30 years of age. They were assigned by lot to sit on specific *dicasteries*, or court panels. Each group of about 500 *dikasts* (about 200 in matters of private law) constituted a court for the entire year. In more important cases, several *dicasteries* might be combined. The verdict was determined by majority vote; a tie vote acquitted.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/dicastery>

¹⁶ You can read *Socrates' Death Speech* in full at: <https://www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Phil70A/s3/apology.pdf>

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Afterthoughts¹⁷

That Socrates was prosecuted because of his religious ideas and political associations indicates how easily an ideal held dear by his fellow Athenians—the ideal of open and frank speech among citizens—could be set aside when they felt insecure. The question that needs to be asked is: were there other instances, besides the trial of Socrates, in which an Athenian was prosecuted in court because of the dangerous ideas he was alleged to have circulated? Centuries after Socrates' death, several writers alleged that many other intellectual figures of his time—including **Protagoras**, **Anaxagoras**, **Damon**, **Aspasia**, and **Diagoras**—were exiled or prosecuted. Several scholars have concluded that Athens's allegiance to the ideal of freedom of speech was deeply compromised during the last decades of the 5th century. Others have argued that their favourite philosophers, like the universally admired Socrates, were persecuted by the Athenians. But, the trial of Socrates is the only case in which an Athenian was legally prosecuted¹⁸ not for an overt act that directly harmed the public or some individual—such as treason, corruption, or slander—but for alleged harm indirectly caused by the expression and teaching of ideas.

Sources and Further Information

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¹⁷ Excerpted from *The Athenian ideal of free speech of Socrates* on Britannica.com, [HERE](#).

¹⁸ According to Plato's *Apology*, the vote to convict Socrates was very close: he was convicted by a majority of 59.