

Arguments and Counterarguments: Washington Leaving Office

Students will learn...

- To identify arguments and evidence in primary sources.
- To match counterarguments to arguments to create debates.
- To evaluate the strength of an argument.

You will need...

- An abridged version of [Elizabeth Powel's letter to Washington](#)
- An abridged version of [Washington's Farewell Address](#)
- Creating a Debate Worksheet
- *Optional:* Modern versions of two documents are available to be given to students or used by the teacher to help students understand the language in the documents.

Opener: Providing Context

- Give some background information on the two documents.

Initially, George Washington thought about retiring after he finished his first term as President (1789-1792). He told this to his friend and adviser, Elizabeth Willing Powel. In response, Powel sent Washington a letter on November 4th, 1792 arguing why he should stay for another term. Washington did stay for a second term but finally refused to run for a third time, which he announced to the country on September 19th, 1796 in his Farewell Address.

- Ask the students to think about what would happen if Powel had sent her 1792 letter to Washington again in 1796 before his Farewell Address.

Task 1: Finding arguments

- Group the students into pairs and assign each of them one of the abridged documents.
- Tell the students to highlight the main arguments in each of the paragraphs. Ask them to look for any evidence that supports them.

Task 2: Creating a debate

- Have the students talk in pairs to describe their documents.
- Have them try to match Powel's arguments with Washington's, seeing where their arguments best contradict their partner's.
- When they feel confident about their choices, have them write down the extracts or paraphrase them in the speech bubbles on the worksheet.

Closer: Discussion

- Ask the class: Who has the stronger argument? Why?
- Lead the discussion to highlight that both Powel and Washington do not have hard facts or specific examples to confirm their arguments. Instead, they base their arguments on their beliefs and feelings.
- Extra time: Have one or two pairs volunteer to come up and act out their dialogues.



An abridged version of

Elizabeth Willing Powel's Letter

to George Washington

My dear Sir

1 After I had parted with you on Thursday last, my Mind was thrown into a Train of Reflections in
2 Consequence of the Sentiments that you had confided to me. For tho' they were not new, yet I
3 had flattered myself that a nearer View of the Consequences that would probably ensue upon
4 your quitting a Trust, upon the proper Execution of which the Repose of Millions might be
5 eventually depending, would have pointed out to you the Impropropriety, or to use a stronger Word,
6 the Impracticability of carrying your Intentions into Effect-Regard for you and Anxiety for the
7 Wellfare of our common Country, have determined me to submit to your Consideration the
8 Thoughts which have occurred to me on this Subject, and which, I think, it would be inconsistent
9 with my Friendship for you to withhold.

10 ...I well know your invincible Diffidence, and your Sensibility with respect to public Opinion; on
11 the last therefore I must lay some Stress. Be assured that a great Deal of the well earned
12 Popularity that you are now in Possession of will be torn from you by the Envious and Malignant
13 should you follow the bent of your Inclinations...Your Resignation wou'd elate the Enemies of
14 good Government and cause lasting Regret to the Friends of humanity. The mistaken and
15 prejudiced Part of Mankind...would ascribe your Conduct to unworthy Motives. They would say
16 that you were actuated by Principles of self-Love alone-that you saw the Post was not tenable
17 with any Prospect of adding to your Fame. The Antifederalist would use it as an Argument for
18 dissolving the Union, and would urge that you, from Experience, had found the present System a
19 bad one, and had, artfully, withdrawn from it that you might not be crushed under its
20 Ruins...That Ambition had been the moving spring of all your Actions...and that, as they had
21 nothing more to give, you would run no farther Risque for them...

22 The Federalists consider you as their own and glory in the Possession...Will you withdraw your
23 Aid from a Structure that certainly wants your Assistance to support it? Can you, with Fortitude,
24 see it crumble to decay? I know you cannot you will not. But you will say that there are Abilities
25 and Virtues in other Characters equal to the Task; admitting the Fact... If there is not a
26 Confidence in those Abilities and that Integrity they cannot be beneficially applied. I will venture
27 to assert that, at this Time, you are the only Man in America that dares to do right on all public
28 Occasions...For Gods sake do not yield that Empire to a Love of Ease, Retirement, rural Pursuits,
29 or a false Diffidence of Abilities which those that best know you so justly appreciate.

30 You love philosophic Retirement; convince the World then that you are a practical Philosopher,
31 and that your native Philanthropy has induced you to relinquish an Object so essential to your
32 Happiness. To do this I am certain that you need only give free Exercise to those Sentiments of
33 patriotism and Benevolence which are congenial to your Bosom. Attend to their Verdict-Let your
34 Heart judge of its Truth...

35 But, admitting that you could retire in a Manner exactly conformable to your own Wishes and
36 possessed of the Benediction of Mankind, are you sure that such a Step would promote your
37 Happiness? Have you not often experienced that your Judgement was fallible with Respect to the
38 Means of Happiness? Have you not, on some Occasions, found the Consummation of your
39 Wishes the Source of the keenest of your Sufferings? God grant that your Mind may be so
40 enlightened that you may, on this Occasion, form a true Judgement and...May the Remnant of
41 your Days be happily and actively employed in the Discharge of those Duties which elevate and
42 fortify the Soul. And may you, till the extremest old age, enjoy the pure Felicity of having
43 employed your whole Faculties for the Prosperity of the People for whose Happiness you are
44 responsible, for to you their Happiness is intrusted.

45 Adieu believe me as I ever am Your sincere affectionate Friend

46 E. P.

Elizabeth Willing Powel

November 4th, 1792

An abridged version of

Washington's Farewell Address

1 Friends and fellow citizens:

2 The period for a new election of a citizen, to administer the executive government of the
3 United States, being not far distant, and the time actually arrived, when your thoughts must be
4 employed designating the person, who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears to me
5 proper... that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being
6 considered among the number of those out of whom a choice is to be made.

7 I beg you at the same time to do me the justice to be assured that this resolution has not
8 been taken without a strict regard to all the considerations appertaining to the relation which
9 binds a dutiful citizen to his country; and that in withdrawing the tender of service, which silence
10 in my situation might imply, I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for your future interest, no
11 deficiency of grateful respect for your past kindness but am supported by a full conviction that
12 the step is compatible with both.

13 The acceptance of, and continuance hitherto in, the office to which your suffrages have
14 twice called me, have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty, and to a
15 deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly hoped, that it would have been much
16 earlier in my power...to return to that retirement, from which I had been reluctantly drawn. The
17 strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last election, had even led to the preparation
18 of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed and critical posture
19 of our affairs with foreign nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my
20 confidence impelled me to abandon the idea. I rejoice, that the state of your concerns, external as
21 well as internal, no longer renders the pursuit of inclination incompatible with the sentiment of
22 duty, or propriety; and am persuaded, whatever partiality may be retained for my services, that,
23 in the present circumstances of our country, you will not disapprove my determination to retire.

24 ...I will only say, that I have, with good intentions, contributed towards the organization
25 and administration of the government the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was
26 capable. Not unconscious, in the outset, of the inferiority of my qualifications, experience in my
27 own eyes, perhaps still more in the eyes of others, has strengthened the motives to diffidence of
28 myself; and every day the increasing weight of years admonishes me more and more, that the
29 shade of retirement is as necessary to me as it will be welcome. Satisfied, that, if any
30 circumstances have given peculiar value to my services, they were temporary, I have the
31 consolation to believe, that, while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene,
32 patriotism does not forbid it.

33 In looking forward to the moment...my feelings do not permit me to suspend the deep
34 acknowledgment of that debt of gratitude, which I owe to my beloved country for the many

35 honors it has conferred upon me; still more for the steadfast confidence with which it has
36 supported me; and for the opportunities I have thence enjoyed of manifesting my inviolable
37 attachment, by services faithful and persevering, though in usefulness unequal to my zeal. If
38 benefits have resulted to our country from these services, let it always be remembered...the
39 constancy of your support was the essential prop of the efforts, and a guarantee of the plans by
40 which they were effected. Profoundly penetrated with this idea, I shall carry it with me to my
41 grave, as a strong incitement to unceasing vows ...that your union and brotherly affection may be
42 perpetual; that the free constitution, which is the work of your hands, may be sacredly
43 maintained; that its administration in every department may be stamped with wisdom and virtue;
44 than, in fine, the happiness of the people of these States, under the auspices of liberty, may be
45 made complete...

George Washington

Published September 19th, 1796

Creating a Debate: George Washington and Elizabeth Willing Powel

Instructions: Take excerpts or paraphrase the arguments made in George Washington's Farewell Address and Elizabeth Willing Powel's letter to Washington to create a debate between the two as to whether or not Washington should retire. Remember to add your own transition words to make the conversation flow better.

The image displays a debate template with six large, lined speech bubbles arranged in a 3x2 grid. Each bubble is accompanied by a silhouette of a person: George Washington on the left and Elizabeth Willing Powel on the right. The silhouettes are black and positioned to the left and right of the speech bubbles, respectively. The speech bubbles are white with horizontal lines for writing. The entire template is set against a light gray background.

A modern version of
Elizabeth Willing Powel's Letter
to George Washington

1 My dear Sir,

2 After I left you last Thursday, I kept thinking about what you told me. Although this is not new
3 information, I thought that pointing out the possible consequences of you quitting the Office,
4 which millions of peoples' well-being depend, would show you how improper, or to use a
5 stronger word, impractical your intention is. My respect for you and my worry for the Country's
6 well-being has made me send you my thoughts on the subject for you to think over. It would be
7 inconsistent with my friendship not to tell you.

8 ...I know your modesty, and your feelings about public opinion; on the last point I must stress.
9 Be sure that a lot of your well-earned popularity will be taken from you by envious and spiteful
10 people if you follow your intentions...Your resignation would make the enemies of good
11 government happy and cause lasting regret to the friends of humanity. The mistaken and
12 prejudice part of mankind...would say you did it for the wrong reasons. They would say that you
13 acted selfishly-that you saw that the post was not able to give you any more fame. The Anti-
14 federalist would use it as an argument for dissolving the Union and urge that from your
15 experience, you found out that this system was falling apart, and you were leaving before it
16 crashed and ruined you. That your ambition had moved all your actions...and that as they
17 couldn't give you anything more, you would not risk anything more for them...

18 The Federalists consider you apart of their group and are proud of that...Will you stop helping
19 them, when they need you? I know you cannot and you will not. But you will say that there are
20 other people who have the skills and good character to do that job, I admit that is true but...if the
21 public is not confident in that person's skills and good character then they cannot be used well. I
22 will dare to say that, at this time, you are the only man in America that dares to do the right thing
23 on all occasions...For God's sake do not give up that power for your love of ease, retirement,
24 rural pursuits, and false modesty in your abilities, which people that know you best appreciate.

25 You love philosophic retirement; convince the world then that you are a practical thinker, and
26 that your true generosity made you give up something so essential to your happiness. In order to
27 do this, I am sure that you only need to use your patriotism and goodness, which you have in
28 you. Listen to their judgment-let your heart tell you the truth...

29 But, are you sure that retiring in the way you want, when you are so good to mankind, will make
30 you happy? Is it not true that in the past your judgment has failed in deciding what will make you
31 happy? Is it not true that sometimes you found that having what you wished for is the cause of
32 your greatest suffering? God grant that you will make the right choice and...may your last days
33 be happily and actively used to do those duties which lighten and strength your soul. And may
34 you, until you are extremely old, enjoy the pure pleasure in having used all of your abilities to
35 help the people whose happiness you are responsible for because they entrusted you with it.

36 Adieu, believe me, because I am your sincere affectionate friend forever,

37 E.P.

Elizabeth Willing Powel

November 4th, 1792

Modernized by Mount Vernon's Education Department

A modern version of

Washington's Farewell Address

1 Friends and fellow citizens:

2 The time for a new election for a citizen to become the President of the United States is not far,
3 actually it has arrived, when you must think of the person, who is trusted with its importance, it
4 appears only right to me...that I should now tell you of my decision to not be one of the people
5 whom you are choosing from.

6 I beg you to do me the favor of knowing that this decision was not made without thinking about
7 all the duties that a citizen has for his country; and that quitting this service, which my silence
8 may have implied, I do not care less about your future, and it is not out of disrespect for your
9 past kindness but I believe that this step is best for both these reasons.

10 When accepting your votes for President twice, I have sacrificed what I wanted to do for my
11 duty, and out of respect for what you wanted. I constantly hoped that I could go back to
12 retirement sooner, from which I reluctantly quit. My strong desire to do this, on the previous
13 election, even caused me to prepare an address to tell of my decision, but after thinking a lot
14 about our dangerous position with other nations, and the advice of people I respect, I was
15 convinced to abandon this idea. I am happy that our problems, both inside the country and
16 outside it, are no longer so bad that I quit without feeling like it my duty to stay; and I believe
17 that despite some people wanting my services, in our present circumstances, you will not
18 disapprove of my wish to retire.

19 ...I will only say, that I have tried to contribute to organizing and running this government to the
20 best of my imperfect abilities. Knowing from the start that I was not qualified, my experiences
21 have shown me, and perhaps have shown other people more clearly, all my faults; and every day
22 growing older abuses me more and more, that I need retirement as much as I want it. I am
23 satisfied that if any circumstances have made my services valuable, they were only temporary,
24 and I have the comfort of believing that, while my own desire and foresight want me to retire,
25 my patriotism does not stop me.

26 While I look forward to when I can retire...my feelings don't stop me from saying how grateful I
27 am to my country for the many honors it has given me; and more importantly the confidence it
28 has given me; and for the opportunities I have had to show my love for it through my services,
29 although I could not do as much as I wished to. Let everyone remember...that your constant
30 support was essential to my efforts, and guaranteed everything they produced. I am deeply

31 moved by this idea and I will carry it with me until I die. I pray...that your union and brotherly
32 bond will last forever; that the free constitution that you made will be sacredly followed; that
33 those in every department have wisdom and virtue; then as a result, the happiness of the people
34 of these States, under liberty's protection, will be complete...

George Washington

Published September 19th, 1796

Modernized by Mount Vernon's Education Department