SPEECH TO THE SECOND VIRGINIA CONVENTION  
by Patrick Henry

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Patrick Henry was one of the leaders of the American colonists who stood up to the British parliament when it passed a series of taxes on the colonies. Henry’s Speech to the Second Virginia Convention established him as a forceful proponent of liberty.

LITERARY ELEMENTS
- Rhetorical Question
- Figures of Speech

READING AND RESPONDING
1. p. 108 Based on the first paragraph, what tone do you expect the rest of the speech to have? 
   The last sentences lead the reader to believe that the tone will be blunt and outspoken.

2. p. 108 According to Henry, what is the question “of awful moment” to the country? Why do you think Henry gives several reasons to support his need to speak out? 
   The question “of awful moment” is whether or not to fight for freedom for British rule. His defense of his right to speak out is a rhetorical device used to gain favor with a hostile audience.

3. p. 109 In classical mythology, a siren was a sea goddess who lured sailors to their doom with her beautiful song. What does Henry compare to the siren’s song? Why do you think he uses this metaphor?
   He compares the illusion of hope to the siren’s song to suggest how foolish false hope can be; he admits that it is natural for people to have hope.

4. p. 109 What to things are being compared in the following metaphor: “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided; and that is the lamp of experience”? 
   Henry is comparing experience to a lamp that illuminates one’s path.

5. p. 109 What does Henry say about Britain’s military and naval forces? Why does he introduce this point? 
   He says that Britain is increasing these forces in the colonies. He claims that because Britain has no enemies in the region, the forces’ only purpose is to subjugate the colonies (bring them under control).

6. p. 109 How does Henry build on the following rhetorical question after stating it: “Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation?”
   He later identifies the British fleets and armies as “implements of war and subjugation.” (subjugation: to bring under control and governance; to make submissive)
(7) p. 109 Explain Henry's use of metaphor in the following sentence: “They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging.”

Henry is likening the British use of military force against the colonists to the chaining of enslaved people.

(8) p. 110 Why does Henry refer to past events when he says, “Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne”?

He wants to remind his fellow delegates of Britain’s repeated refusals to negotiate with the colonists.

(9) p. 110 Why does Henry use so many rhetorical questions at the end of the first column?

He is nearing the end of his speech and wants to produce an emotional effect on his audience.

(10) p. 110 According to Henry, what makes Americans “invincible”? Why does Henry say that God is on the side of the colonists?

Americans are “invincible” because they are three million people who are armed in a good cause. He wants to incite the colonists to engage Britain in a “holy” war.

(11) p. 110 How does Henry extend the meaning of a previously used metaphor when he says, “Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston!”

Earlier, he said that the British military was sent to bind the colonists in chains. Here he says that the chains have already been forged.

(12) p. 110 How does Henry’s powerful conclusion (his final sentence) limit the choices available to the American colonists?

In effect, he rules out a peaceful compromise with Britain.

(13) p. 110 Why does Henry suggest that the colonists have only two choices – liberty or death? In your opinion, are these the only options? Explain.

By saying this, he eliminates all options but armed revolt. Although there may be alternatives to war, Henry dismisses the idea of compromise.

(14) p. 110 What is the effect of the rhetorical questions in the last paragraph of Henry’s speech?

The questions build to a powerful, emotional climax.

(15) p. 110 Name an idea or belief that Henry wants his audience to accept, based on that final paragraph.

He wants his audience to accept his belief that peace without freedom is worse than death.

(16) p. 110 What was Henry’s immediate purpose in giving this speech?

His purpose was to convince his fellow delegates to prepare to resist British military power.