

The Speechwriter's Best Practices

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Picture a four-way intersection between public speakers, policy specialists, storytellers, and ghostwriters. Smack in the middle of this multi-lane cross exists the speechwriter. This role requires a complex blend of skills including proficient writing, mastery of spoken language, and accurate research skills. Speechwriting is often folded into the duties of a marketing or PR department. Due to the importance of public communication and the internet's ability to make anything permanent, leaders need a designated speechwriter to craft public addresses. While a good writer might be able to create a decent speech, a trained speechwriter will use specific tools to elevate a 'good speech' into something timeless. Speeches naturally vary between writers and speakers, but the most memorable addresses rest on a set of best practices. These universally-successful characteristics include storytelling, respect for the audience, and well-rehearsed delivery. Most importantly though, speechwriters must take stock of a rapidly changing communications environment.

Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention speech started a new era of speechwriting and delivery. Even more prominent than his vision for the future was his ability to tell a story. Obama threaded national history with his own familial history to create a fabric of progress, of hope, of determination. The stories he told were not haphazard; they served a specific purpose - to persuade voters for the democratic party. He continued to emphasize the importance of stories throughout his presidency. Cody Keenan, Chief Speechwriter during President Obama's second term, confirms this practice: "The first question that President Obama and I always asked each other was 'What's the story we are trying to tell?' You should know that before you really start writing - what's your story?" (2022). Not only does storytelling make speaking more natural, but it hooks the audience and maintains their attention. Stories convey important themes like urgency and hope through images. That imagery has the power to activate audiences. By making a subject feel familiar, the speaker draws listeners in and then, once their attention is held, can use that power to emphasize a call to action.

Audiences must be trusted to understand content. There is a natural tendency to dilute complex theories, legislation, and policies for the general public's understanding. This is especially true in the digital age where subjects are condensed into 280 characters. While conversational vocabulary makes for effective delivery, writers should **not** interchange 'conversational' and 'dumbed-down.' The narrative should be approachable but also instill confidence in the listeners, affirming that they are capable of understanding difficult subjects. Trusting audiences to follow along is not a new idea. Larry Kramer writes fondly of former Attorney General Edward Levi's speeches: "he defends his positions with arguments that ask us to grapple with nuance and that assume we can do so...these do not feel like political speeches. They feel, rather, like the product of hard thinking by a responsible public official who, when faced with difficult choices, takes it upon himself to explain his decisions to a public he assumes

is intelligent enough to understand and thoughtful enough to deserve nothing less.” (p. xi) Levi was addressing the nation in the mid-late 1970s, but Kramer’s commentary still rings true today.

Speechwriters also need to understand the basics of effective delivery. While the writer may not be a speaking coach, they should be able to tailor written words to sound natural when spoken aloud. Speeches crowded with industry-specific jargon and dense statistics are likely to disengage listeners. Numbers and acronyms carry little meaning on their own - they need to be lifted with imagery. “66%” does not tell a story, but “two thirds of the people in this room” does. Adding this type of context allows the speaker to interact with jargon without alienating the audience. That said, elongating numerical statistics can add significant time to a speech. It is imperative that writers do two things during their editing process: 1) read speeches out loud to feel the flow of the language, and 2) time themselves while speaking. For instance, a 3 page double-spaced essay might take 6 minutes to read quietly, but 15 to deliver verbally. Speakers need flexibility to add pauses, change pace, and make meaningful audience connections for emphasis throughout their speech. Watching effective speeches and then reading the same transcripts can be a good way to observe this type of structure. This kind of comparison will allow budding speechwriters to understand what successful speeches look like both on the page and off.

The best speeches cannot always be condensed into snappy soundbytes. As social media reshapes global communication and shortens the average attention-span, there is an understandable urge to write content that shares adjectives with cup-of-soup ramen: easily digestible and instant. This type of writing conflicts with other important skills, like nuance and subtlety. President Obama’s first Chief Speechwriter, Jon Favreau, said in an interview:

“I think social media...incentivizes hot takes, one liners, [and] pithy quotes. But when you look back 5, 10, 15 years from now, you’re not going to be proud of a line that was a really sick burn of Donald Trump. You’re going to be proud of a line, hopefully a whole speech, that can speak to people across the ages, no matter what changes. I worry about speechwriters moving away from telling a cohesive story from beginning to end thinking, *I’ve just got to get out the five or six bytes that will be tweeted*. Because I think once we do that and we lose the sense of story, you lose context. You lose complexity, subtlety and nuance” (2022).

Stories might need more time than what fits on an Instagram reel. Contextual evidence may not collapse nicely down to a tweet. A call to action could be ineffective when separated from the surrounding narrative. Social media is an inevitable part of communication, but it should not be the deciding factor. Speechwriters are entering uncharted territory. As the communication terrain changes, writers need to be deft enough to create comprehensive addresses that can also be parsed into tantalizing bits. If the speech is done well, those social media samplings will draw viewers back to the whole piece.

The speechwriting occupation does not fit cleanly into a box. In order to persuade audiences, a speechwriter must be able to articulate a point through the medium of storytelling. In order to convey complex details, a speechwriter must trust that the listeners are smart enough

to keep up. In order to write authentically in the voice of another, a speechwriter must know how that speaker will deliver the text. To quote Northwestern University professor, Jason DeSanto, “Words govern us. Words move us. Words can constitute. Words can compel.” A sword lies in the speechwriter’s hand, heavy with potential. Through dynamic language, a speech can invigorate generations of audiences for years after the words are first spoken.

References

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