

Speechwriting: An Acquired Art

Craig R. Smith

Ronald Reagan's political success has been rooted not just in what he had to say but in how well he said it. The same could be said for Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy in their eras. As any longtime observer of politics can confirm, there are relatively few political communicators of the caliber of Reagan, Roosevelt, and Kennedy; in fact, many (if not most) politicians are barely adequate as public speakers. Sooner rather than later, major public officials come to depend heavily on their speechwriters to craft appeals that are at once substantively convincing and stylistically attractive. Few aides possess the skills to do this well, but one who does, former Ford presidential speechwriter Craig Smith, explains how political speeches can be constructed for maximum impact and effect. His frank appraisal of speechwriting techniques nicely blends belief in the power of ideas with recognition that timing, symbols, and appearances are elements as powerful as substance in politics.

Jean Paul Sartre once said, "We make ourselves what we are." Nothing is more influential in this creative process than communication, and particularly persuasion. The problem is that because we talk so much, and because we learn so much so early, we often take the art of public speaking for granted. Politicians are no different. Most of them fail to understand that they are known primarily through their speeches, through what they say and how they say it. Many I have worked for use speechwriters to frame issues or to phrase stylistic lines, but few use all of the writer's talents. They assume they can handle most situations themselves.

It is not until the politician is embarrassed by a bad newspaper column or silent crowd that he turns to a speechwriter for help. At

Craig R. Smith served as a full-time speechwriter for President Gerald Ford.

this juncture, a second mistake is usually made. Instead of hiring a professional speechwriter, the candidate turns to a journalist or a novelist. Journalists usually write for the eye; fiction writers not only write for the eye but tend to have styles that are immutable.

An effective speechwriter writes for the ear; he is a rhetorician. He understands that a speech is a moment of confrontation between an audience and a speaker. That the audience is not universal, but specific; that the message is not for the ages, but for a certain moment; that the speech itself is neither prose nor poetry, but a persuasive attempt to change attitudes; that speeches are invisible for an audience—they can't go back up a page and recheck what they saw before. Thus, speeches are necessarily more organized and more repetitious than printed prose. In fact, a speech that *reads* well probably is not an effective

speech, just as a passage that *sounds* impressive is not likely to be good prose.

All this means that speeches, while they provide useful media copy when properly rewritten, are as different from written documents as elephants are from donkeys. An effective speechwriter will have been steeped in rhetorical theory and understands that the audience must be analyzed, the speaker's credibility enhanced, the emotional tone of the moment reshaped, the issues well researched and properly framed, the style made fascinating for the ear, and the delivery attuned to the moment.

Analyzing the audience

While a general theme or a specific message may be in the mind of the speechwriter when he begins his draft, not a single word should be typed until the audience for the speech has been analyzed. All of the strategies of speechwriting arise out of the audience because the speaker's primary objective is to persuade the audience. But how does one analyze an audience?

As a practicing speechwriter, I know how frustrating this task can be. On the campaign trail, or even in the White House, I have received speechwriting assignments that contain no description whatsoever of the audience. Even in the best campaigns, the speechwriter may be given only the advance man's assessment of the group to be addressed. This is a terrible error unless the speech is not really intended for the specific audience to be addressed, in which case the writer still needs an analysis of the possible *intended* audiences.

Audience analysis can be accomplished in several ways. First, the advance people should make it part of their duties to ask as many questions about the composition of the audience as possible. Can the audience be divided into age groups, sexual groups, or occupational groups? What religious affiliation

predominates? How many people will be present? What issues are they concerned with? What values do they hold? What will the physical conditions for the speech be?

These latter two questions are difficult to answer on a short-term basis. Often a local audience will be a microcosm of the national audience and in such cases Gallup, Harris, and other polls can be used for guidance. Try to use the most relevant poll data to determine "hot" issues in the area or within the age group or interest group addressed.

Perhaps the most effective use of poll data was accomplished by the Nixon speechwriters in 1968. The composition of parts of his 1968 nomination acceptance speech to the Republican Convention reveals how poll data can be used to carve out a majority of supporters from a diverse audience.

Nixon knew that he faced a double audience: the voters at home watching him on television and the delegates on the floor of the convention hall watching him in person. Furthermore, poll data revealed a deep division in the national audience over the course the United States should follow in the Vietnam war. Forty-three percent of the home audience characterized themselves as "hawks," while forty-two percent saw themselves as "doves." There was more unity among delegates on this issue.

But what complicated Nixon's task was the fact that Vietnam was the most important question for both audiences. Thus, he could not ignore the issue. Nor could he ignore crime and the economy, which his polling data had revealed were the second and third most important issues for the voters and delegates.

Nixon solved this dilemma in several ways. First, he structured the speech so that the delegate audience was placated early on. The speech addressed intraparty issues such as unity and victory, thereby forming some consensus among delegates by using issues they were concerned about. But when Nixon turned to his national audience he did not forget the delegates.

He began by talking about the *problem* of Vietnam, thereby satisfying the need to hear something about it. But because his national audience was divided on the issue, Nixon skirted proposing a specific solution. Instead, he argued that he had a plan to solve the problem but could not mention it lest he disturb the delicate negotiations underway in Paris. *LESSON*: To be effective when facing an issue that divides an audience, talk about the problem and avoid being specific about solutions.

Next, Nixon turned to crime and the economy. He knew that both audiences were united with regard to the solutions they preferred. At least seventy percent of each audience wanted stronger law enforcement, a change in the Supreme Court, less spending, and less big government. Thus, Nixon not only discussed the problems, but gave very specific solutions to them. *LESSON*: Where there is consensus, seize on it specifically.

Nixon was able to achieve considerable consensus because his pollsters not only provided him with a list of problems the nation and the delegates wanted to hear about, but they *rank ordered the problems and then polled the audience on what they thought the solutions to those problems should be*. Nixon arranged his speech so as to placate interest groups and yet appeared to be speaking specifically at the same time. And this he did as he wandered around Montauk Point writing on yellow legal pads, with the help of modern polling.

Finally, a thorough analysis will not only include demographics and issue-positions, but will *formulate values*. Values are deeply held beliefs that serve as guides to people in the decision-making process. To get at them is a very difficult task, but several methods have proven effective.

First, "focus groups" composed of a cross section of the audience can be brought together and observed. If properly questioned, they will normally reveal the values held by the group as a whole. Second, some groups, particularly those concerned with single issues, will have

values that are readily apparent. For example, many anti-abortionists are deeply religious. Third, past voting patterns can be analyzed to reveal trends over time. Blue collar workers, for example, hold a cluster of values concerning the work ethic. Their voting record on such issues as busing and affirmative action exposes this cluster of values.

Since values are deeply held, they often present the speechwriter with concepts of constant and universal appeal. Opinions can change rapidly, but values such as courage, commitment to children, and patriotism are steady. Often, speakers must address these values instead of the more volatile issues.

Formulating the issues

Most speeches seek to make a point, to convey a message, to change attitudes. At the outset, the speechwriter needs to know what the speaker is trying to accomplish. If the speaker wishes to change the minds of his colleagues on certain issues on the floor of the Senate, his speech will have a different cast than the speaker seeking to use the issues to get his audience to vote for him for public office. In the former case, the formulation of the issues with supporting arguments and evidence becomes an end in itself. But in the latter case, the issues are used to open the listener to persuasion which then seeks to identify the speaker with the listener.

How does one frame an issue for presentation in the speech? Assuming the speaker's purpose is to move his audience closer to his own position, and assuming that audience has been analyzed, the speechwriter must begin with extensive research. He must know what arguments can be launched against the position to be taken so that he can preempt them. He must know what the best evidence available is for his argument. And he must know what pieces of that evidence the particular audience will need to make their decision as well as which parts of it they will accept as persuasive.

The following questions can help the speechwriter check to see that his *evidence* is sufficient:

- How many *examples* are needed to establish the point with this audience? Should these examples be objective or picturesque?
- What *sources* of evidence are particularly attractive and credible with this audience? What authorities should be avoided?
- Can this audience understand *statistical* evidence? How much explanation of the data is needed?

Evidence needs to be built to a conclusion. Such a construction is an argument. The following questions should be asked about the form of the *argument* to be used to present an issue:

- **Should the argument be inductive or deductive?** That is to say, should you begin with your conclusion and support it, or should you lead your audience to your conclusion through evidence and argument? The answer to this question depends on the attitude of the audience toward the particular issue.

If they are hostile to the speaker's position, it is wise to withhold the conclusion until a solid set of facts and premises have been laid down. If you begin with the conclusion in this case, the audience will immediately reject it and question the evidence you use to present it.

If the audience is in agreement with the issue in question, begin with the conclusion and reinforce it. This will lead to greater identification between speaker and audience and will strengthen positions already held.

- **How much of the argument should be stated?** A good speechwriter knows what is called the "enthymematic process." This phenomenon occurs every time the audience supplies a premise that the speaker leaves out. It happens all the time. For example, if a speaker says, "Jones is a liberal and I don't think we should vote for liberals," the audience will fill in the missing premise; that is, "We should not vote for Jones." This saves time

and prevents the speech from becoming boring when the speaker keeps stating the obvious.

But the enthymematic process can be used more subtly. In his 1968 acceptance speech, Richard Nixon promised "peace with honor." The vagueness of the phrase allowed moderates and conservatives who supported Nixon to fill in their own meaning for his phrase. Thus, Nixon was able to remain the choice of diverse groups through deft phrasing that played to the enthymematic process.

Enhancing credibility

Aristotle once argued that a speaker's credibility was perhaps his most potent persuasive tool. Certainly, in an era of image often given to the cult of personality, credibility becomes an overwhelmingly persuasive factor. There are two components of credibility that will not be discussed here. One is that magical quality called *charisma*: either a speaker has it or he does not. And in all cases it must be dealt with on an individual basis. Second is *prior reputation*. In every case, before a speaker opens his mouth, some sense of the man has preceded him, whether it is because of the cut of his clothes or because he has been in the news.

What is more important here are those factors over which the speechwriter has control. The first is *expertise*.

A speaker must know, or at least appear to know, what he is talking about. Therefore, how a speaker handles the issues can have a significant impact on the audience's perception of the speaker's expertise. The use of statistics, specific solutions, and privileged knowledge all add to the sense of expertise and thus contribute to credibility. It is no accident that Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America; he expertly handled the news for many years.

The second factor is *goodwill*. A speechwriter needs to make sure that the speech conveys to an audience the fact that the speaker has *their* best interests at heart. This is a difficult

task in the political world, where most speakers are perceived to be merely advancing their own careers. The use of issues of interest to the audience, and references to local problems and members of the audience, all help to convey goodwill.

The third factor is *character*. When and how has the speaker demonstrated character? While George Bush's experiences in World War II may not qualify him for the presidency, they do reveal that the man has courage and can make tough decisions, all of which enhance his character and thereby the audience's sense of his credibility.

The fourth factor is *congruency*. The speechwriter needs to be sure that the speech is internally consistent. That requires a close examination of the evidence and argument used in the speech. A presidential candidate once said, "Twenty percent of the poor go to bed hungry every night. That means that one-fifth of the people in this country need welfare aid." If it wasn't obvious, his speechwriter should have informed him that twenty percent of the poor is not the same as one-fifth of the entire population.

The speechwriter also needs to be sure the speech is externally consistent; that is, does it jibe with the facts the audience already knows? A speaker telling a group that unemployment is low across the country in an area where unemployment is high will not have much credibility!

The final factor of importance is *spontaneity* of delivery. In 1969 Senator Edward Kennedy addressed the nation regarding the tragedy at Chappaquiddick. He read from a prepared manuscript, losing his place several times. This lack of spontaneity reinforced in the minds of his audience a sense that something was being covered up. Richard Nixon faced the same problem in dealing with Watergate. When he read his speeches he was automatically unspontaneous and lost credibility. But when he held press conferences, where no script was possible, his answers seemed more believable to the public. The format of the

speech thus becomes a crucial factor in enhancing the speaker's credibility.

Emotional tone

Another elusive matter is that of appealing to the emotions of the audience. Often, an emotional appeal is essential if persuasion is to be sealed. But if the speaker goes too far, the results can be catastrophic since persuasion not backed by argument and evidence evaporates very quickly. There is a sure-fire three-step approach for speechwriters wishing to appeal to the emotions.

- First, determine what the current emotional tone of the audience is. Are they *angry* over inflation? Are they *frustrated* by the federal government? Are they *apathetic* about politics?

- Second, determine what mood is most compatible with your message. Do you want the voters *mad* at Washington? Are you writing to *calm* the voters down? Do you want the audience to be *sympathetic* toward refugees?

- Third, and here's the rub, what words, images, and arguments will move the audience from its present state of mind to the one compatible with your message? Often you need only enhance an already existing mood. On other occasions you need to move the audience to another state of mind. In such cases, one image can be worth dozens of examples or facts. A well-crafted picture of starving refugees is far more likely to cause sympathy for their plight than a list of statistics about how many there are.

Always remember that emotions are volatile and interact with each other. Almost any speech will touch on a myriad of emotions ranging from fear to guilt. The effective speechwriter will keep a tight rein on all of these strategies.

Organization

Once the above strategies have been digested, the speechwriter is ready to organize these appeals into a coherent speech. Organization

enhances a speaker's credibility and usually determines how much of the speech is retained by the audience. Organization is a crucial part of speechwriting and one of the few elements over which the speechwriter can have some control.

The introduction of the speech should be written last, after the other sections are complete. A good introduction has at least four parts. First, the *opening* should focus attention. Analogies, stories, and historical parallels can all be effective in getting attention. The opening remarks set a tone and often help the audience determine what frame of mind they are expected to be in. Frivolous remarks may result in the audience losing interest in the entire speech. Occasionally a truly shocking or controversial remark is in order if it serves to get a rambunctious crowd to listen to what follows.

The opening should flow naturally into the next part of the introduction: the *statement of the topic*. Often this is done in general terms. In the case of a hostile audience, one should not disclose the conclusion the speaker is going to reach.

Third, the topic should be *related to the particular audience present*. Normally, this is done by telling the audience why the topic is important to them, to the area in which they live, or to the business in which they work.

Finally, a good introduction ends with a *preview of the organization* to follow. This gives the audience something to hang their expectations on, while at the same time imparting a sense of control to the speaker.

The body of the speech can be organized around a number of patterns. The important thing is organization. Tests have shown that organization leads to greater retention of message, higher esteem for the speaker, and better reviews from the media.

Speechwriters with bright and cooperative clients can devise intricate and persuasive structures for their speeches. Less bright and less cooperative clients require simpler

structures as do less formal speaking situations. Here are some useful models:

- **Causes and effects.** A discussion of a major problem can often be divided into its causes and effects. If the speaker wishes to take a stand on an issue, he can conclude with a solution based on his "balanced" analysis of the topic. I recommend discussion of no more than three causes and three effects, treating each as a separate unit so that they stick in the mind of the listener.

- **Advantages and disadvantages.** Often known as "pro and con," this method of division allows for balance and the appearance of an unbiased approach to the topic. The speaker has the option of reaching a conclusion or leaving it to the audience based on the information he has supplied them.

- **Problems and solutions.** Speakers wishing to take a stand and wishing to cover several different topics can use this method of structuring the speech. Again, transitional language should be used to keep the structure clear in the mind of the audience. For example, "Now that we have examined these problems, I would like to examine some proposed solutions."

Conclusions are very important. Often called perorations because they are speeches unto themselves, conclusions require great care. I suggest the following steps:

- First, summarize the speech. The longer the speech and the more intricate its structure, the longer the summary must be.

- Second, if you wish to deliver a conclusion, this is the place for it. All of the arguments and evidence have been delivered; the emotions have been stirred; and the audience sits ready to hear your judgment as a credible speaker.

- Third, the emotional tone of the speech should be reinforced. Roman orators sometimes referred to this moment as the anticlimax when once again the orator lifts the spirits of his audience to an emotional pitch. I suggest at this point that the speaker refer back to

the opening of the speech. This tactic gives the speech a sense of unity and also signals the audience that the conclusion is near. It is a handy way to exit, not always the easiest thing to accomplish in a major speech!

Style in language

Most writers understand that style is nothing more than word choice. Good writers understand that choice is everything. Buffon, the French academician, once said that style is the man himself. Buffon may have hit on a democratic principle of style. Each of us has our own style that we are most effective using. The question is how do you find your true style, and then how do you enhance it?

Harry Truman found his style in the rough and tumble of the 1948 presidential campaign. Contrary to the advice of most of his writers, he began to speak extemporaneously, and to use language that many thought was unbecoming and, thus, unpresidential. The discovery of his own style provided Truman in part with one of the biggest upsets in political history. John Kennedy seemed born with his sense of style and brought it to fruition in his inaugural address.

But what can the speechwriter do to locate and enhance his client's style?

- First, try to isolate those moments when your client is at his best. Record them; listen to the phrasing, the word choice, and the pace. Using that material as a kind of stylistic essence, try to improve it by adding more sophisticated structures, more colorful language, and a few stylistic devices.

- Second, try to remember that style should reinforce message, not smother it. Some speakers use so many devices that the message is lost and the speaker sounds pretentious. Candidate Ronald Reagan was particularly effective at using clusters of images to reinforce the ideas of his speech. The images never get in the way of ideas; they provide instead an almost subliminal backdrop for them.

Often a touch of repetition can add elegance even when the phrase repeated is one the speaker came to naturally.

"If you want to buy a house, it will cost a great deal more than it did just a few short years ago.

"If you want to start a business, the overhead will be prohibitive.

"If you want to save, the inflation rate will wipe out your gain."

Here a very simple phrase, "If you want . . .," is repeated to give the message emphasis. As an aside, I would add that these devices become monotonous only after the third use.

- Third, a section laden with issues or arguments is likely to sustain itself, so stylistic devices should be kept to a minimum here. But emotional or transitional sections, particularly introductions and conclusions, normally have less substance and require more style.

President Ford's nomination acceptance speech at the 1976 Republican Convention is a case in point. The speech is full of evidence and specific positions, but the transitions are highly stylized to relieve the factual onslaught.

- Fourth, speechwriters should try to develop an understanding of as many different stylistic strategies as possible. Since style is highly individualized, it is well-served by very diverse strategies. The Romans developed over 450 different tropes and figures of language. Shakespeare used these tropes and figures often in his plays, and they, few would argue, contain some of the best speeches ever written.

The most common stylistic devices include *metaphor*, *analogy*, *allegory*, *irony*, *hyperbole*, *alliteration*, and *balance*. A good speechwriter will have mastered these and other devices. He knows that an oxymoron such as, "We must never negotiate in fear, but we must never fear to negotiate," will be retained by the listener because it holds attention with a poetic touch.

Often the best stylistic devices are composed of the simplest words: "The only thing we have

to tear is fear itself. . . . The business of America is business. . . . of the people, by the people, for the people. . . . Speak softly and carry a big stick." Franklin Roosevelt took care to see that each word in his speeches was apt as well as on the list of the most common words in current societal usage.

- Fifth, the expert speechwriter realizes that style, like the other components of the art, cannot be isolated from the entire speechwriting effort. The words a man chooses say something about his personality. They must be geared to the comprehension level of the audience. They must be compatible with the mood conveyed.

Too often writers try to remake their clients into literary giants. While "the grand style" may be effective with a few, for example a Kennedy or a MacArthur, it usually opens the ordinary speaker to ridicule while making him very uncomfortable. Effective style is so rare in a society constantly degraded by the crassness of commercial television that a little style will go a long way.

- Finally, the effective speechwriter knows that the art of writing lies in rewriting. Most good speeches go through at least five drafts,

with the client participating in much of the redrafting. F.D.R.'s major speeches usually were drafted eight to twelve times. He was intimately involved in the process. Perhaps that is why he knew his material so well, and his speeches bore his own indelible stamp despite the fact that he had a large staff of writers.

Communicating is the most important thing a politician does. If he has advisors for other major functions, he should certainly have one for his speeches. And the person he selects should be fully versed and up-to-date in the field. An effective speechwriter needs to know his craft, including adjusting the politician's rhetoric to factors of personality, audience, emotion, style, organization, logic, delivery, and motive.

A major speechwriting staff will include an audience analysis unit and a research unit. A ready library of quotations, witticisms, and reference material will be on hand. But most important of all is the hiring of a writer who is thoroughly steeped in rhetorical theory, the art of finding in any given case the available means of persuasion.