THINKING OUT LOUD
A PSA WHITEPAPER

Speechwriting, FAQ

Honest answers to the 10 toughest questions communicators (and their bosses) ask about creating compelling speeches and presentations.

By David Murray,
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Speechwriting is not a job as much as it is a situation: a problematic one, in which a writer obscure enough to be writing speeches instead of novels, is responsible for articulating the ideas of a leader prominent enough to have a personal speechwriter.

So fraught is the speechwriting job, that the Q&A sessions at the Professional Speechwriters Association's twice-annual Speechwriting School are often dominated by questions that have little to do with crafting speeches.

No, many of the questions come down to the competing priorities of speechwriter and speaker—disagreements made more difficult by the great difference in power and status between the two.

Other questions focus on nettlesome disparities between the reasons that audiences rearrange their lives to attend speeches, and the reasons that speakers rearrange theirs to deliver them.

And still more questions nibble around the edge of the biggest question of them all: With so many more efficient ways of communicating in our modern age, why do we still give speeches in the first place?

Though it's always fun to discuss these dangerous questions in person (preferably over a bottle), we thought we'd collect them in one place, and try to offer our most succinct answers, for edification—and, with any luck, further conversation.

Consider that an invitation.

David Murray, Executive Director
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Q.

"My speaker wants to give the audience a ton of statistics and other data that they'll never remember. How can I avert this disaster?"

A.

By explaining to the speaker what a speech is for.

For tens of thousands of years before the advent of the Gutenberg Press, the speech was an efficiency device: *Gather everyone together, so I only have to say this once.*

Before radio and television, a speech let large crowds hear and see the speaker, and assess what the leader sounded like and looked like, delivering the message.

Then broadcasts allowed millions not just to read, but to hear, "The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself." And then to see their president remind them: "We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Then YouTube and other social media allowed us to see and hear all kinds of leaders, even those below the profile of TV and radio—CEOs, nonprofit leaders, university leaders, military leaders, *our leaders*—say the words out loud.

Now? Now, the onetime efficiency tool of a speech is exactly the most preposterously inefficient communication medium we can imagine. Dozens or hundreds of human beings—plus the VIP speaker—all rearranging their schedules and inconveniencing everyone in their lives to gather in one place to sit quietly and listen to one person talk.

And, Mr. or Ms. Speaker, you're going to waste their precious time giving them *data*?! Data, which they could retrieve with a Google search—and which you could send them, via all manner of infographic glory?

No: To justify the delivering of a speech, there must be an essential emotional component—in fact, *more* than an emotional component, almost a spiritual component, that will take advantage of the physically communal experience and cause members of the audience to bond not just with the speaker, but *with one another*, in galvanized group support of a singular, memorable message and compelling call to action.

Does that sound difficult? Well, it is. But if you're holding an audience hostage for a certain period of time—even for a live virtual speech—shouldn't the bar be pretty high?

Q.

"How will I know when I have written a worthy speech?"

A.

Look at the script, and ask yourself—as the audience will be asking, unconsciously—three questions: Could this message have been delivered by any other person? Could it have been given to any other audience? And could it have been given at any other moment in the history of our [organization, industry, community, nation, world]?

If the answers to all those questions are 'no,' the audience will truly be enthralled, guaranteed. Otherwise? Well, two out of three ain't bad.

Ultimately, a speechwriter must understand that in the corporate planning of any speech, he or she is the only person in the room (including the speaker, usually) who is sticking up for the audience: thinking of why the audience has decided to come to the event, what the audience might like to hear from this speaker, what the audience might *need* to hear—and how much the audience can stand to hear, before the smart phones come out.

Everyone else in that planning meeting wants to get a strategic priority across, a key data point into people's heads, a pet project publicized.

The poor audience deserves one advocate, and that advocate is you. Be strong.

Q.

"My speaker is so personable in small groups, yet so stiff at the lectern. How can I bring out the charm?"

A.

In small groups, does your speaker talk about Environment, Sustainability and Governance? No, your speaker talks about things near and dear to her heart—and things she thinks will genuinely interest the people she's conversing with. To the extent practical, those are the things she should be talking about on the stage: the subjects that truly animate her, that drove her to the top of this organization. The closer you can get to having her talk on and around those subjects, the less wooden she'll be while she's talking about them—and the more her personality will emerge.

Q.

"How do I get my speaker to open up and tell personal stories to put into speeches?"

A.

Some leaders naturally reference their personal life in their professional communications; others don't. Speechwriters needn't spend too much of their time trying to squeezing intimate anecdotes from standoffish stones. Not every corporate CEO's or university president's speech has to be a TED Talk that ties the leader's work directly to some childhood epiphany, or searing early-career experience.

A leader can show passion and concern and demonstrate sensitivity and humor, by talking not about self, but about others: employees, customers, community members and other human beings surrounding the organization. Telling *their* stories in vivid detail, expressing appreciation for their sacrifices and contributions, emoting in a personal way about how *they* make the organization's work—and even the leader's own work—worthwhile.

A speechwriter doesn't need the speaker's help to find those kinds of stories. The speechwriter can find them, inside the organization and out, and render them in such a way that when the leader retells them, they land, and last.

Q.

"Script, or bullet points?"

A.

Speechwriters generally prefer scripts, because they take care with the words they write, and want the message to get across powerfully and clearly.

Many speakers prefer bullet points because they want to appear "more natural," as they will explain. And, as they won't add, they don't want to put in the rehearsal work required to deliver a scripted speech in a conversational way.

The speechwriter must lie in wait, for the right moment: the huge keynote, the crucial crisis statement, the nuanced explanation on the earnings call, the commencement address at the cherished alma mater—when the boss *knows* the words have to be exactly right, and cares enough about the communication opportunity to put in the time to deliver the speechwriter's words as eloquently as they're written.

And the speechwriter must then hope that after delivering one great speech, the speaker will be less content to orally shamble through bullet points in the future.

Q.

"How can I get my speaker to rehearse?"

A.

The legendary speaking coach Virgil Scudder was once told by a CEO before a session, "You have 15 minutes." Scudder shot back, "I bet you don't tell your golf pro that."

Your average speechwriter might not have that kind of mouthy moxie, but every speechwriter must have the conviction that rehearsal is necessary—and confidence in her or his ability to rehearse the speaker well.

Why?

Because that confidence is precisely what that many speakers secretly lack. They resist rehearsal and coaching not only because it is time consuming, but because they worry they'll go through all of it and *still come off badly on the day*—an imagined double humiliation that the speechwriter has to be able to assure them will not occur.

Q.

"I want to grab people's attention at the beginning of a speech, but the speaker wants begin by thanking every VIP in attendance, including the head of catering."

A.

And you are correct, of course. But the speaker also has a point. The way to resolve this is with a quick, dramatic opening—a tease of what is to come—and then the gracious acknowledgments, before turning to the meat of the speech.

In telescoped, genericized form, the structure goes something like this:

> Good evening. I am here tonight to talk about a subject that is important to all of us. How important? Here's how important. [Bracing illustration, story, anecdote.]
>
> I'm grateful for the opportunity—and grateful, too, to all of you for coming. And before I begin, I'd like to thank a few individuals in particular for being here. [Her, him, her, him … and especially her.]
>
> This evening means a great deal to me personally, and here's why …

> But I know the reason you are all here is not because of me—it's because of *we*—and how seriously we all take this issue.
>
> Tonight, I'm going to put forth an idea—and if you agree with the idea, I'm going to ask you to do something about it. What's that idea? Here's that idea …

This structure gets the speech off to a dramatic start quickly, offers the acknowledgments gracefully, establishes the speaker's personal connection … and then reminds the audience that everyone has a stake (or else why everyone be here tonight?). And then you state your theory of the case, and you make it.

Q.

"I write a perfect ending to a speech with a clear call to action, and the speaker delivers it resoundingly. Then the speaker does twenty minutes of Q&A, and I fear the call to action is forgotten. What to do?"

A.

Here's what you do. You write a short second ending to the speech, to be delivered after the last question. Perhaps it contains a last anecdote or perhaps not, but surely it offers all the following elements—again, genericized and telescoped here:

> Thank you for all those good questions, and thanks again for coming tonight. It feels like something happened here this evening. But as I said at the end of my speech, the only way to make sure something happened this evening is for all of us to do what we know needs to be done—for us, for our community, for our country and for our world: [insert whatever the specific original call to action was, in the same or similar resounding language, for repetition's sake]. Thank you, and good night.

Q.

"What speeches should I study?"

A.

There are so many speech anthologies, they should have an anthology of their own. All speechwriters should read *Vital Speeches of the Day* every month to get a sense of how the world's most effective leaders are handling contemporary subjects. And yes, if you want to read Bill Safire's collection *Lend Me Your Ears*, or peruse the wonderful database Speaking While Female, that'll be good for you.

But it's better to listen to speeches than to read them. And if you're going to listen to one speech over and over, one of them is better than the rest: Robert Kennedy's speech in Indianapolis, after the death of Martin Luther King. This speech does *all* the things a speech can do:

It informs, sharing the straight news that King "was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee."

It defines the meaning and significance of this occasion. "Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort."

It articulates and proposes a shared value between the speaker and the audience: "What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be Black."

It describes a hopeful vision for the future: "But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of Black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land. Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world."

And it provides a concrete call to action: "So I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King … but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love—a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke."

You won't achieve that all with every speech—but if you study how Robert Kennedy did it with his, you'll know all the things a speech can do—and you'll know how to do it, too.

Q.

"How do I write compelling speeches for a speaker I rarely or never meet?"

A.

After 30 years of teaching speechwriters, I have what at least sound like practical answers to just about every speechwriting question. Except this one.

I have decided that I'm through trying to answer it, pretending to answer it, apologizing for not being able to help speechwriters who want to know how

to wheedle ideas, coax stories, wrench humor out of clients who won't give them the time of day.

How do you bring out the warmth and humanity of clients who care so little about the audiences they're about to bore, that they won't spend 30 minutes with a person who is paid to invent their ideas out of whole cloth?

You don't.

A speechwriter can hack out conventional ribbon-cutting remarks or bureaucratic state-of-the-institution speeches. But no one can consistently write meaningful, persuasive, galvanizing speeches for someone he or she does not know. Furthermore, a leader who would be satisfied to regularly deliver words written by a faceless underling is not someone a speechwriter wants to spend any but the shortest possible résumé-padding period writing for.

Yes, speechwriting is a problematic situation: It's one person helping another person say something meaningful to some dozens or hundreds of other people.

That requires the robust participation of both the speechwriter, and the speaker.

So people who write speeches must know in their bones what is impossible, what is workable and what is ideal for creating compelling oral communication—and use all their conviction and their cleverness, to assert these realities to the speakers they serve.

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Want to share some of the wisdom here with your speaker, but afraid to share it all? Check out the free downloadable one-sheeter from the Professional Speechwriters Association, titled A Speaker's Guide to Collaborating with a Speechwriter. —ed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Murray is editor and publisher of the monthly magazine Vital Speeches of the Day, which has been publishing the best oral communication in the world for 88 years. He's also founder and executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association, as well as the Executive Communication Council.

David is author of the popular communicator's manifesto *An Effort to Understand: Hearing One Another (and Ourselves) in a Nation Cracked in Half* (Disruption Books, 2021).

He also co-wrote the New York Times-bestselling memoir *Tell My Sons* (Random House, 2013) and wrote a memoir, *Raised by Mad Men*, about his parents, who worked in the ad business in the 1960s.

His award-winning journalism has appeared in such varied publications and media outlets as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Advertising Age*, *Sailing Magazine*, *Golf Magazine*, *Car Collector Magazine*, *Vibe* and Chicago Public Radio.

He lives with his wife and daughter in Chicago.