SPEECHWRITERS SPEAK:
A PSA WHITEPAPER

Back to the Future, in Professional Speechwriting: Stubborn Problems and Time-Tested Solutions

Forty years ago, a corporate speechwriter gave a speech about speechwriting, and it was published in Vital Speeches of the Day. *It's full of insights for speechwriters today.*

By David Murray,
executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association and publisher of *Vital Speeches of the Day*

Dear Speechwriter—

John Bonee died at 63 in 1987, only six years after delivering a speech called, "The Care and Feeding of the Executive Speaker: A Few Age Old Principles of Effective Oratory," to the National Conference of the Public Relations Students Society of America, in Chicago, November 9, 1981.

Like many speechwriters at the time, Bonee had dropped into his speechwriting career from another professional planet. He'd been a priest, before joining the Illinois Bell Telephone Company to edit a corporate magazine and write speeches for company execs.

My recent rereading of Bonee's speech led to an immediate reprinting. I've annotated it—lightly, because honestly, there wasn't really all that much to add to what Bonee told the aspiring young communicators that day in Chicago, four decades ago.

If anything, Bonee's insights came across fresher, bolder, clearer and more articulate than much of the self-promotional thought-leadership stuff speechwriters post on LinkedIn now.

And more erudite! These days, do speechwriters at regional utilities refer to Aristotle and the Sophists, to Marshall McLuhan, and to Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch? No, because neither the students, nor they themselves, would have the foggiest idea of what they were talking about.

So it's a different time—but not as different as we might think

Anyway, it's a fun read, even though as Bonee himself admits, "I didn't invent these thoughts—just dressed up in new words the principles every good speech writer has found useful, effective and even necessary since the moment the human race began to use vocalization to express our ideas of reality."

And as a speech, it's a pretty good example of the form.

Enjoy.

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The Care and Feeding of the Executive Speaker

A FEW AGE OLD PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ORATORY

By JOHN R. BONEE, *Corporate Communication Manager, Illinois Bell*

Delivered at the National Conference of the Public Relations Students Society of America, Chicago, Illinois, November 9, 1981

SINCE I agreed to speak here today, I've had two letters and three phone calls from Nancy Theiss asking what type of audiovisual equipment I might need, another call reminding me that I hadn't made any requests, describing this meeting room and repeating the invitation to ask for I don't know what: slide projection, 16mm film, multi-media, whatever.

Well, I didn't want any audiovisual equipment and I am going to tell you why.

I'm here to talk about *speech* writing. And a speech is the *spoken* word.

Six years before the invention of PowerPoint, this speechwriter has us at hello.

You've heard the proverb, "One picture is worth a thousand words"? Well, if you believe that — then draw me the Gettysburg Address.

That says something about my attitude towards the spoken word, my work with the spoken word, and my love of the spoken. If the spoken word is eloquent, if it obeys the classical rules of acceptable rhetoric, it will be effective without visual aids.

Since my topic is the care and feeding of the executive speaker, I'm not going to treat you to a systematic treatise on speech writing. Instead I'm going to tell you how to care for the speaker for whom you write, or may be writing for someday in your career.

In the first part, I'm going to talk about the *theoretical* barriers to successful speech writing and to the successful management, if you will, of the speaker. Barriers that are rather intellectual than practical. In the second part I'll talk about some *practical* problems you meet in dealing with your client.

What are the *theoretical* problems you will run into when you become a speech writer? There are at least four.

The first is a *prejudice in favor of logic over rhetoric,* of sweet reason over emotional appeal — a prejudice in favor of the facts, the data, the information over any other kind of argumentation. It's a *big* problem because so many speakers think all you have to do is give people the facts; tell them the statistics. Put up bar graphs and line graphs and pie charts, quote some research, cite Yankelovich, Skelly & White, call upon Roper & Gallup and Harris and ORC . . . then you've got them. Your logic is impeccable, they will bow to it, you will convince them.

Okay, so you've convinced them, but have you *persuaded* them? Because conviction and persuasion are *not the same.* Conviction is intellectual, persuasion is in the order of action. If you have an emotionally loaded problem, you can convince people without persuading.

Think of a controversial social problem. Suppose you want to persuade people to accept —let us say — busing, as a solution to the problem of integrating our public schools. Sweet reason is not going to move parents to put their kids

on that bus to ride ten miles to a school outside their neighborhood.

Sweet reason will not do it! Intellectually, you can make people accept integration as a reasonable goal, as a necessary goal, as the only right kind of goal to have in our society. But that doesn't put the kids on the bus, it doesn't stop the protests, it doesn't stop the angry speeches at the school board meeting. It just doesn't work.

Why? Because those people's *emotions* are involved. Strong emotions like fear and anger, resentment, even sometimes hatred. You've got to work with those emotions if you're going to write a persuasive speech and that's the only kind of speech worth writing. It's the only kind of speech worth giving.

You know, it's said that the human person is a rational animal. Okay, that's basically true. But don't count on people being *rational* animals all the time. Sometimes their animality takes over from their rationality. Not just sometimes — frequently. Not just frequently — more frequently than not.

There was a man who had everything going for him. He was rich, he was smart — high I.Q. — he was well educated. There was only one thing wrong with him. He thought he was dead.

So his family and friends prevailed upon him to visit a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist recognized that this man was intelligent, educated, successful in business. He thought, "Well, I'll *reason* him out of his illusion!"

So he asked him, "Listen, tell me, do dead men *eat*?" The patient said, "Well, as a matter of fact, maybe they *do*. In many cultures — in the Orient for example — they put food in the tombs so that the dead can come back and consume it. Apparently dead men do eat."

And then the psychiatrist asked him, "Well, do dead men *talk?*" And he said, "Well, maybe they do. You know, Houdini, for example, had a telephone put in his coffin so he could call back from the other world. And people apparently talk through mediums. Yeah, dead men do talk sometimes."

Next, the doctor asked, "Do dead men *walk*?" The man said, "Sometimes they do. There are documented cases, in England, for example, of haunted castles — the former occupant comes back and walks during the night, rattles chains. Yeah, dead men do walk."

In desperation, he finally asked, "Do dead men *bleed?*" And the patient said, "No, absolutely not. Dead men do not bleed."

The doctor said, "Roll up your sleeve." So he rolled up his sleeve and the doctor took a scalpel and made a small incision in the man's forearm. The blood began to roll down his arm and he put his finger on it and tasted it and he said, "What do you know . . . dead men *do* bleed!"

The point? You cannot *reason* people out of any proposition to which they have a strong emotional commitment.

Now, for the speech writer and for the speaker, this means that the *argument* — sweet reason as I've called it — is not the one and only way you persuade people. It's not the only factor or even the most important factor in the persuasive situation. There are others. At least two. One is the audience, the other is the speaker.

Audience analysis is important. You have to know your audience. No good speech is written in a vacuum. The standard speech, so called, is no good. Use it only as a last

resort. If you write standard speeches to be parroted by people who commit them to memory, they're going to be less than effective. A good speech is written for a particular audience to be delivered by an individual speaker.

You have to know some basic psychology. You have to know what the human emotions are, you have to know how to arouse them, you have to know how to quiet them.

You have to know what different groups of people are like. It makes a great deal of difference whether you're speaking to a group of teen-agers or a group of senior citizens . . . a group of Black people or a group of Latinos . . . whether you're talking to Democrats or Republicans. You *must* take the audience into consideration. Lots of research and lots of homework go into audience analysis. You omit it only at the risk of writing an ineffective speech.

The speaker? It's important to know the speaker. Are you writing for a man or a woman? Where does the speaker come from? A small town, a farm, a big city? From a large family or a small one? What is the speaker's ethnic background . . . educational background . . . experience in business and in social situations? Do you know any personal anecdotes about your speaker?

Again, nothing earth-shattering here to the modern speechwriter's ear, but particularly well put.

You must get to know your speaker so well that you can get inside your speaker's skin — until you think the way this person thinks and you feel the way this person feels and write the way this person *talks*.

Write so the speaker can put that well-known best foot forward. If you have somebody who can't speak long sentences with dependent clauses and two or three parenthetical expressions, then write short sentences. If you have somebody who can handle a lengthy periodical sentence, okay. You *write* the speech for the *speaker* and for the *audience*.

Everybody knows that to be authoritative and believable, the speaker must identify with the interests of the audience and must come across as knowledgeable and sincere in wanting to serve the needs, the demands, and the expectations of the people listening to the speech.

So, one theoretical problem is a prejudice in favor of logic as against rhetoric. The second is an *insistence on saying everything instead of limiting the message*.

You'll have this problem when the speaker is an expert in the subject of the speech. But remember — the speaker is not necessarily an expert orator or an expert writer or an expert rhetorician. Often the person wants to say so much, and the topic means so much to the individual, the speaker tries to get you to put everything that can possibly be said about the subject into a single speech.

Well, if you do that, you've failed. I kid you not. You've failed the audience and you've failed the speaker. Because nobody is going to remember anything. Those people out there are not going to act the way you're trying to persuade them. A speech has to have *focus*.

There isn't a great deal you can say in one single speech. Every speaker and every writer should obey the admonition of Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch. He was an English writer who died in 1944 and he left us some excellent advice. "*Kill your darlings.*" Strangle them in their cradle. He meant that we all have favorite ideas, certain favorite expressions, pet terms and figures of speech. And we'd like to get them *all* into *everything* we write and *everything* we say.

Don't do it! Not unless it helps you establish the proposition you're trying to establish and move the people in the

audience to do what you want them to do. If it contributes to your goal, go ahead, put it in. If it doesn't contribute to that goal, be ruthless — kill your darlings, strangle them in their cradles. Throw them out. Save them for another more appropriate time.

The third problem in handling a speaker (after you've resisted the temptation to depend on reason alone and to say everything you know) is a *prejudice in favor of visual aids*.

Marshall McLuhan told us a few years ago that the medium is the message. Don't believe it! If the medium is the message then Aristotle was wrong when he wrote his book of rhetoric to correct the abuses of the Sophists.

The medium is *not* the message. Don't start with the idea, "I am going to give a slide talk; I am going to make a videotape; or I am going to put on a multimedia presentation."

You don't start there! You start with your aim, your goal, your objective. What do you want to do with the talk? If it calls for slides, okay. If television is the best medium to make the point, okay. But don't go for the medium first and the message later. What you wind up with, if you do, is an audio *non-visual* presentation — where you throw up word slides that mean nothing at all, or funny pictures that distract the audience from what you're saying.

And the speechwriters leapt to their feet and roared!

A speech is an oral presentation, not a visual presentation. If you're going to write a visual presentation, the text is relatively unimportant. Start with the *visuals*. Think *visually*. Make a storyboard, then write your text to fit that. But for heaven's sake don't write a speech and then search through the text for language to illustrate with slides. That doesn't work. It's amateurish.

Our fourth prejudice is a *prejudice in favor of a written style*. The people we write for are not stupid. They're not uneducated. They're not illiterate. Some of them are good writers. But they've been trained to write for the eye, not for the ear. That's the difference between the writer and the *speech* writer. The speech writer writes to be listened to, not to be read. People are going to *hear* your words, not *see* them.

This is important, because when you write for a print medium, you write tight. You don't waste words. And as a speech writer, you will find yourself fighting a client or a boss or an editor who will want to cut out throw-away words like "now" and "so" and "by-the-way" . . . who will want to cut out what appear to be redundancies and tautologies. They'll tell you you're repeating yourself.

That's great if you're writing a feature story or a news story or a bulletin; because if you write something tight in a paragraph and your readers don't get it the first time, they can go back and read it again — and reread it . . . and reread it as many times as they want until they understand and accept it.

But the spoken word is ephemeral. The words I'm speaking now pass through the air. You can't bring them back unless *I* bring them back. When I do, that's *not* repetition. That's amplification. Everything I say, I should say two or three ways. I shouldn't say it only once. You need to hear it again.

Did you notice I just said the same thing three times? That's a useful oratorical device.

You've heard of "walking the talk." This would be "talking the walk."

You can use contractions in writing a speech. Which maybe you wouldn't use in a formal business letter. You can even occasionally use slang. You can use sentence fragments.

Don't be deceived by those sentence fragments. Sometimes they're not really fragments at all. They are a way of punctuating the manuscript so the speaker will pace the delivery . . . make the proper pauses for emphasis. A sentence which, if written for print, might have several dependent clauses and a parenthesis or two, may be broken up into three or four sentences and a couple of fragments in a speech. It may *sound* like a long sentence. But it will be broken up into short ones so the speaker can handle the text.

So much for the theoretical problems. Now, a few practical ones. There are three practical problems every speech writer encounters.

First, *the interfaces between you and your speaker.* If you're in a big organization, any kind of hierarchy, where management is levelized (I don't care if it's business or the church or the academic community) you're going to have people who get between you and the person you're writing for.

They are a disruptive force.

You must absolutely insist on seeing your client face-to-face, on interviewing your speaker for every speech. And (if you're writing for the same person regularly) you must have continuous face-to-face contact to get to know that person. Otherwise, you'll be writing just another standard speech. Or you'll be writing for the people between you and the boss instead of for the boss. And that's *no good*. You'll spill a lot of blood on this one, believe me. I have. (That's why I'm so pale).

This is precisely the right line to draw in the speechwriting sand. And his remark about "you'll be writing for the people between you and the boss instead of for the boss": no good, indeed.

Another practical barrier is *clearances*. Everybody is an editor. Now, there are subject matter experts — people in engineering, in economics, in technology. And you need them. There are experts in anything you care to mention. Trouble is, they all think they're writers too.

I work for the telephone company. But I wouldn't think of telling somebody how to splice telephone cable. I can't do it. If I want to write about it, I go to a cable splicer and get my information and go back to that cable splicer and find out if what I've said is right.

But when I give my manuscript to the cable splicer, I don't want that cable splicer to rewrite my stuff. What I want is the word that my manuscript is technically okay . . . or word that it needs fixing. Did I say what is actually the case or not? Tell me my mistakes. What *should* I have said, now *how* should I say it.

So, it's a good idea if you're a speech writer or get even a single assignment to write a speech, to make it clear from the beginning that *you* are the writer and that you take full responsibility for your speech. You guarantee your client that what's there is accurate. That it's not a violation of fact, not a violation of policy.

When I got a new boss recently, I said to him, "Look, I don't know how you're used to operating, but I'll tell you how I like to operate. When I give you a manuscript, you don't have to send it to the law department, you don't have to send it to our rates and revenue people, you don't have to send it to the marketing types. If I'm doing my job, I've been there. I've talked to them. I've let them review the first draft long before I gave it to you. If anything is wrong, I take the responsibility. *I'm* accountable to you . . . no one else is."

He agreed. That's the only way I can do my job. Otherwise, I'm shirking responsibility or abdicating it to some pushy character who wants to do my job for me.

So, the first practical problem was *interfaces*, the second *clearances* . . . and there's a final one — how to *merchandise* the speech.

I work in a large public relations department and have a lot of people helping me. When I write a speech, at the same time I give the boss my final draft (about a week before the engagement), I also give it to our media relations group and to our employee information people. They send advance copies to the press and the media and — inside the company — plan stories in our employee information publications.

I can help them, too. I can help my boss' public speeches get coverage, and exposure . . . and I'll tell you a couple of ways I can do it.

A good title is also a sign that the speechwriter and the speaker truly want to use the speech to communicate something, which causes everyone from the audience to the media and social mediasphere to the editor of *Vital Speeches* to sit up and take notice.

First, I can give the speech a title to catch somebody's interest. Like the title I gave this speech. I didn't give it a long-winded academic sounding title about "The principles of executive speech writing in a major corporation in America in the last half of the 20th century." That would sound like a doctoral dissertation. I said, "The Care and Feeding of the Executive Speaker." I thought that might catch your attention and maybe lure you into coming to listen to me. If I had said it the other way you probably would've stayed away in droves.

So, give it a good title.

Another suggestion. Work a couple of good catchy phrases into the speech — quotable phrases an editor can grab and put into a headline or build into a story. A past chairman of the board made a speech that got tremendous coverage simply because of this phrase: "We have finally decided to decide." If something like this can be lifted out and quoted and make an impression, you're home free.

Use rhetorical words. I recently saw a facsimile of Franklin D. Roosevelt's address to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Japan. The speech begins with these words and they're often quoted: "December 7, 1941: A day that will live in infamy." Well, in the original manuscript, his writer had typed, "December 7, 1941: A day that will live in world history." Roosevelt, in his own hand, scratched out "world history" and substituted the single word . . . infamy. That one word made it a great speech, a memorable speech, a speech — you'll excuse the expression — that will live in world history. Infamy is an oratorical word. "World History" is a dusty, dull, dead word. "*Infamy*" is an emotional word! That's why it worked.

Another tip: Start off by putting yourself in the position of the person who writes the news release on your speech. Write the lead the way you would like to see it in the papers the next day. Write that lead. It will make you focus the speech. It will tell you exactly what you're trying to say. It will limit your perspective. Then go ahead and write the speech around the lead. You'll increase the odds in your favor.

I've talked about the theoretical barriers and the practical problems you face in managing your relationship with your speaker. They are: Prejudice in favor of cold logic, the prejudice in favor of overwhelming people with everything you know about the subject, the assumption that you always need to write for the eye instead of the ear. On the practical side, I talked about the problems you run into because of people between you and the speaker, the problem of clearances by subject matter experts, and the problem of merchandising what the boss has said.

This has not been a "how to" presentation. I haven't given you a bunch of rules of thumb, 1-2-3-4-5, and if you

follow them you'll be a great speech writer. I've given you just a few age-old principles of effective oratory.

I didn't invent these thoughts — just dressed up in new words the principles every good speech writer has found useful, effective and even necessary since the moment the human race began to use vocalization to express our ideas of reality.

Thank you.

And, Bonee might have added, until the moment we cease to bother.