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SPEECHWRITERS SPEAK

Independent Speechwriters: How Do You Charge,
What Do You Get, and How Do You Feel About It?

A Survey by the Professional Speechwriters Association

Introduction

At the 2024 PSA World Conference, all veteran speechwriter Jean Card wanted to do was share the data she and the Professional Speechwriters Association had collaborated to collect, about the economics of independent speechwriting.

But she couldn't get through her slides.

That was because every datapoint she shared with the independent scribes in attendance became a hotly discussed item.

About 20 minutes into the 30-minute session, someone said, "This session could go for three hours!"

We created this executive summary to help speechwriters who were in that conference room and speechwriters who weren't, to see what their peers said on the topic of the survey: "How do you charge, what do you get, and how do you feel about it?"

As in the conference session, the caveats were more meaningful than the numbers. Professional speechwriters are rare creatures, and independent speechwriters much rarer still. Attempting to study their compensation across many varying industries, regions and experience levels is impossible to do with any statistical validity.

But we did identify some useful ranges of quantifiable reality here. And maybe more valuable, the study drew a lot of hard-won wisdom from the independent speechwriting community, on how to get what you deserve—and to help your independent speechwriting comrades get the same.

Thanks to Jean Card for bringing us the idea of this survey, helping us make it as meaningful as possible, and starting the conversation about the economics of independent speechwriting.

Enjoy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David Murray, Executive Director
Professional Speechwriters Association

How Do You Charge?

“By the project” was the most common answer, with about 40% of independent speechwriters naming that as the “type of pricing that works most in your favor.” Retainers came in second, at 26%; and hourly was third at 15%.

Many insights in the survey comments, many of them contained here:

“That depends on the client—and if the project-based pricing was done correctly. Sometimes you win here, and sometimes you lose—but if the scope changes, you need to stop immediately and go back to the client and renegotiate a higher fee. Retaining control of the process, from beginning to end, is how you ensure you are paid what you are worth every time.”

“Charging by the hour is my way of protecting myself from needy clients and clients who can’t make up their minds about what they want. ‘Sure, I’d be happy to rewrite that for the 10th time for you on the basis of this new idea you’ve just had.’ (Puts another X hours on their invoice.)”

Retainers? Aside from offering guaranteed monthly income, one respondent wrote, “Once you’re in the door with a big org, they often don’t use you as much as they thought.”

Some independent speechwriters had strong feelings against hourly, because as one speechwriter saw it, “Hourly pricing leads to being seen as a vendor and too often results in haggling over rates.” Said another, “Hourly tends to devalue speechwriting work—in most cases. It often feels transactional, and that is not what speechwriting is.”

What Do You Get?

When speechwriters charge by the project, roughly a third make \$2,000-\$5,000 for a 20-minute speech. Another third make between \$5,000-\$10,000. And another third make between \$10,000 and \$20,000.

When speechwriters charge by the hour, how much do they ask for? The vast majority are spread evenly across a range between \$100 and \$400 an hour, with a handful of outliers raking in \$400 an hour or more.

Do speechwriters get pushback on their pricing? "Occasionally," two-thirds said. "Never," one third said.

And a large majority of speechwriters said they have a subject-area or industry niche that helps them command higher prices.

Breaking out pricing data among men and women writers revealed notable differences.

For example, 56% of men charge \$5,000 or more (with 8% charging more than \$10,000) for a 10-minute speech, while only 25% of women charge at least \$5,000 (and none more than \$10,000) for a speech of the same length.

Women are also more likely than men to offer bargain prices for smaller projects (i.e. 40% of women are charging \$2,000 or less for a 10-minute speech; only 9% of men go that low). And for all projects or hourly rates, the outliers who charge the highest prices are mostly men.

How Do You Feel About It?

“Are you generally satisfied with your compensation as a speechwriter?”
Eighty-five percent of respondents said yes; 15% said no.

But as in the World Conference session, the life of the survey was in the comments. We asked what speechwriters’ clients should understand about speechwriting and speechwriters. A few of their remarks:

“My best clients, the ones who take the time to share their thoughts with me, invite me inside their lives, do their homework, and position me to their teams as a key to good results, are routinely amazed (at least the first time they work with me) at how much smoother things go and how much better they sound.”

“It is not just parroting or regurgitating what a principal thinks he or she wants to say. It’s an intimate, collaborative process that creates something that neither the principal nor the speechwriter could have created on his or her own. It’s magical hard work.”

“It’s not just about the research and writing; it’s about the counsel—how an audience is likely to be thinking about the speaker and the speech.”

“It would help if they understood how important the delivery is—and then put in the practice to make sure they did a good job of delivering it! It’s really sad/frustrating to write an objectively great speech only to have someone just stand at a podium and recite it with no emphasis or inflection or pauses. It’s like having a beautiful racehorse and then riding it to the 7-11. Just why?”

What's the Secret to Getting Fair Compensation for Independent Speechwriting Work?

Some particularly hard-earned, well-learned wisdom from respondents:

"In the beginning: Explain your process. Tell stories that showcase how your other clients got real results from speeches you wrote for them. Make the principal shine the first time. After you do that? The principal gets it. Understands the value you bring. And is willing to keep paying you to get results just like that every single time."

"Just say no. I spend a lot of unbillable time just thinking about a speech, and reading broadly around the topic. Some jobs are simply not worth the time I know I will invest."

"Ask, 'Have you considered what investment you were willing to pay for the desired result?'"

"Make sure the client sees the entire process. Not just the words on the page, but the process of handling edits, internal debate about a speech's content, advanced research and preparation for delivery."

"Know that big comms agencies charge huge sums for piss-poor work ... so value the difference you can make and don't sell yourself short."

"I sometimes try to offer a few different versions of compensation (monthly, hourly, milestones, etc.) so clients feel like they have some say in things. I work almost exclusively with nonprofits, so I do usually try to say something like 'I'd love to work with you, so let me know what you think of this and we can work something out'—just to keep the conversation open and not sticker-shock someone into ghosting me!"

"Ask for a rate you think is fair, add a little on top, then over-deliver."

"Assess your value to the client (including cost and effort to find/hire equivalent or better expertise elsewhere) and put a price tag on that. Then add 30%."

"Work directly for the leader of an organization. There is no budget when the leader's reputation is on the line."

"OWN YOUR RATE. Share it with confidence. If you don't believe you're worth the money you're charging, no one else is going to."