Speechwriting in Perspective: A Brief Guide to Effective and Persuasive Communication

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Summary

The frequent delivery of public remarks by Senators and Representatives is an important element of their roles as community leaders, spokespersons, and freely elected legislators. Congressional staff are often called on to help prepare draft remarks for such purposes.

Writing for the spoken word is a special discipline; it requires that congressional speechwriters' products be written to be heard, not read. Speeches are better cast in simple, direct, and often short sentences that can be easily understood by listeners. Rhetorical devices such repetition, variation, cadence, and balance are available to, and should be used by, the speechwriter.

It is important for speechwriters to analyze audiences according to factors such as age; gender; culture; profession and income level; size of audience; political affiliation, if any; and the occasion for, and purpose of, the speech. Most effective speeches do not exceed 20 minutes in length.

A wide range of speechwriting resources are available for congressional staff from the Congressional Research Service and other sources.

After researching their topic, speechwriters should prepare an outline from which the speech will be developed. They should strive to maintain a clear theme throughout the speech. Most speeches will have a three-part structure consisting of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

The accepted style of contemporary American public address is natural, direct, low key, casual, and conversational. This puts listeners at ease and promotes a sense of community between audience and speaker.

Punctuation should reflect the sound structure of the speech, reinforcing the rhythm and pace of actual speech. Clarity of expression is as important a consideration in speech grammar as rigid adherence to rules for written language.

Effective delivery can greatly improve a speech. Congressional speechwriters should make every effort to become familiar with the speaking style of the Member for whom they are writing, and adjust their drafts accordingly.

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Introduction

"Rhetoric," wrote Aristotle, "is the power of determining in a particular case what are the available means of persuasion." This report reviews some effective means for the rhetoric of persuasive communication in speeches written by congressional staff for Senators and Representatives. By speeches, this report means draft statements prepared for oral delivery by Members. Such speeches are often prepared under the pressure of deadlines that leave minimal time for extensive revision. Moreover, they must often be drafted in whole or part for Members who may have little opportunity to edit and amend them. The burdens of public office (as well as of campaigning) and the insistent demand for speeches of every kind for a variety of occasions require some degree of reliance on speechwriters, a reliance that is heightened by the limitations of time and the urgencies of the media.

A speech thus "ghostwritten" should nevertheless reflect the intention and even the style of the speaker. The best ghostwriters are properly invisible; they subordinate themselves to the speaker in such a way that the final product is effectively personalized in the process of actual communication. The only ways to achieve or even approach this ideal are practice and experience. This report seeks to provide some guidance for congressional staff on the principles and practice of speechwriting. The suggestions offered herein, when combined with practice, attention to audience and occasion, and, most importantly, the Member's attitudes, convictions, and style, can help create a speech that can be a "seamless garment" when delivered by the Member.

This report revises an earlier report by the same title prepared by Charles H. Whittier, Specialist in Religion and Public Policy, Government Division.

Writing For The Spoken Word: The Distinctive Task of The Speechwriter

Writing effective speeches requires a constant awareness of the distinction between the written and the spoken word: the speechwriter must learn to "write aloud." While the best speeches read as well as they sound, the novice speechwriter should give priority to the ear and not the eye. His or her speech must be written to be heard, not read.

This means that easy intelligibility should be a paramount concern, so that the listening span is not strained. One of the first rules of the speechwriting profession

is that a sentence written to be heard should be simple, direct, and short. When the speechwriter "writes aloud," George Orwell's advice to cut out any word that can possibly be cut is helpful, so long as the resulting effect is clarity, and not verbal shorthand.[1] Ciceronian oratory on the one hand and Dick-and-Jane simplicity on the other are extremes to be avoided. The speechwriter thus faces the challenge of crafting words that convey the speaker's meaning clearly, but that also draw on the rich nuance and texture of spoken English.

The average spoken sentence runs from eight to 16 words; anything longer is considered more difficult for listeners to follow by ear, and according to one expert, may be too long for the average listener to absorb and analyze quickly.[2] By comparison, written sentences of up to 30 words are easily understood by average readers.[3] Given these generally accepted limitations, what devices are available to the writer to make more complex sentences and speech wording accessible to the listener? Complex sentences can be clarified by repeating key words and using simple connections. By numerous rhetorical techniques, the speaker states, restates, and states again in different ways, the central themes of the speech.

Repetition and Variation

Repetition with variation is a basic speechwriting tool used by many of the greatest speakers to emphasize key elements while avoiding monotony. Some examples follow.

- Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech was a striking example of this technique, using that phrase to introduce a series of his visions for a better future.

- Lincoln at Gettysburg emphasized the significance of the day's events by restating the solemnity of the occasion in not fewer than three variations: "We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground, ..."

- Similarly, Winston Churchill's World War II speeches used repetition with variation to build a powerful climax: "We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on the beaches and landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills, ... we shall never surrender."

- Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1937 "One third of a Nation" speech imparted a sense of urgency by his deliberate repetition of a "here are" construction to describe conditions in the country, followed again and again with "now":

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[1] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950).

[2] Edward Bernays, quoted in Mary G. Gotschall, "The Lost Art of Speechmaking," *Campaigns and Elections*, vol. 14, June-July, 1993, p. 48.

[3] William E. Wiethoff, *Writing the Speech* (Greenwood, IN: Alistair Press, 1994), p. 15.

> Here is one-third of a nation ill-nourished, ill-clad, ill-housed—NOW.
> Here are thousands upon thousands of farmers wondering whether next year's prices will meet their mortgage interest—NOW.
> Here are thousands upon thousands of men and women laboring for long hours in factories for inadequate pay—NOW.

Cadence and Balance

Another venerable rhetorical device is the use of cadence and balance in the spoken word. This is a part of speechwriting where the speaker and the writer need cooperation to ensure success. The tradition of public speaking in the English language owes much to the poetic tradition, which was originally an oral tradition. As one observer noted, "the language of the speech should also be *poetic*—replete with alliteration, metaphor, and other figures of speech. Such adornments, far from being superfluous, enhance meaning and emphasize relationships among ideas."[4] As difficult to define as to achieve, cadence and balance impart a flowing movement and harmonious effect to any speech. Essentially a matter of ordering groups of words (and ideas) into rhythmic patterns, cadence and balance can be attained by such classical rhetorical devices as the ones described below. Do not be put off by the classic Greek names of some of these rhetorical devices; in practice we use them naturally in conversation and writing every day.

Rhythmic Triads. The grouping of words into patterns of three can lead to a memorable effect, provided the device is not overused. Some notable examples from classic oratory include "*Veni, vidi, vici*"; "Never ... was so much owed by so many to so few"; "The kingdom, the power, and the glory ..."; "I have not sought, I do not seek, I repudiate the support of ..."; "one third of a nation ill-clad, ill-nourished, ill-housed ...."

Parallelism. The linkage of similar words or ideas in a balanced construction that repeatedly uses the same grammatical form to convey parallel or coordinated ideas: "Bigotry has no head and cannot think; no heart and cannot feel;" "Charity beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

Alliteration. The repetition of initial sounds in a series of words to give emphasis. For instance, "We need to return to that old-fashioned notion of competition—where substance, not subsidies, determines the winner," or, "the nattering nabobs of negativism ...."

Anaphora. This is the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences. Churchill's famous defiance of Hitler, "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds ...," which has been previously cited, is one of the most famous examples.

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[4] Judith Humphrey, "Writing Professional Speeches," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, vol. 54, Mar. 15, 1988, p. 343.

Antithesis. A common form of parallel structure comparing and contrasting dissimilar elements. For instance, "Give me liberty, or give me death"; "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country"; "To some generations much is given; from others, much is demanded"; "A great empire and little minds go ill together"; "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of folly"; "If Puritanism was not the godfather to Capitalism, then it was godson."

Sentence Variation

This technique involves more than alternating longer sentences with short ones. The writer may employ either periodic sentences, that is, those in which the main clause comes at the end, or loose sentences, in which the main clause is presented at or near the beginning, to be followed by other main or subordinate clauses. Sentence variation also includes the use of such devices as those described below.

Rhetorical Questions. "Is peace a rash system?" "Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" The speaker leads the audience to the conclusion he hopes they will draw by asking a question that makes his point, and that he intends to answer himself, either immediately, with a flourish, or at greater length during his remarks, through patient exposition.

Sentence Fragments. "Dear money. Lower credit. Less enterprise in business and manufacture. A reduced home demand. Therefore, reduced output to meet it." The speaker dramatizes the situation by reducing it to a stark declaration, which he renders more striking by pausing to let the facts sink in after each sentence fragment.

Inverted Order. "With what dignity and courage they perished in that day." This classic rhetorical practice, once more widely used, seeks to embellish the general flow of words, much like an ornament or a musical flourish. It also helps give a particular sentence special emphasis by causing it to stand out from others by its unusual form.

Suspension for Climax. With this device, the speaker comes to a complete stop in his remarks, using the ensuing moment of silence to concentrate the listeners' attention on his next phrase. "My obligation as President is historic; it is clear; yes, it is inescapable." Even periodic sentences, if used with care, repeating the "suspended" subject or verb before modifying phrases or clauses can contribute to the effect: "Thus did he prove to be a leader who—victorious in battle, magnanimous in victory, skilled in the arts of peace—was able, in the face of his most determined foes ..."

Use of Conjunctions. Repeating key words and using simple connective conjunctions (*and, for, because, but*) can make many complex sentences more easily intelligible to the ear by breaking them up into "bite size" segments. For instance, "Be a craftsmen in speech that thou mayest be strong, *for* the strength of one is the tongue, *and* speech is mightier than all fighting."

Imagery

No speech will sound fresh and vivid if it is not animated by imaginative imagery, by metaphor in its many forms: "the hatred of entrenched greed"; "America will always stand for liberty"; "Democracy is the healthful lifeblood which circulates through the veins and arteries of society ..."; "Whether in chains or in laurels, liberty knows nothing but victories."

Extended metaphors or analogies, comparing similarities in different things, should be used with care so that the principal subject will not be lost in the image. Two or more metaphors in a single sentence or thought can be safely ventured only by the most experienced writers—"To take arms against a sea of troubles"—without incurring ridicule (as in the famous example attributed to the newspaper *Pravda*, the onetime propaganda organ of the Soviet Communist Party: "The fascist octopus has sung its swan-song").

Above all, in the spoken word there must be an element of identity and rapport with the listener, whether the speaker uses a "natural" conversational tone or a more oratorical style. Effective speechwriting for Congress is not a branch of "creative writing." Its "rules" are meant to foster clarity of expression, whatever the occasion and purpose of any given speech. But mere clarity is not enough for persuasive rhetoric. Indeed, there are times when clarity, brevity, and the like are not appropriate. The issues may preclude such treatment, or the occasion may call for some measure of deliberate ambiguity. The best speechwriter will take into account the context of the speech and the speaker's personality, the image that is projected—that is, the speaker whom the audience sees and hears. The section on speech analysis in this report attempts a closer look at Lincoln's great Farewell Address at Springfield, illustrating many of the principles considered in this report.

Audience Analysis

What Jefferson Bates called "audience analysis" is probably the single most important factor to be considered in writing every speech: know your listeners, and you will have a much better chance of connecting with them.[5]

Demographics

Bates and others list a number of criteria useful in audience analysis, including, among others: age; gender; culture; education, profession, and income level; size of the audience; and affiliation.[6] Age is obviously an important factor; high school students, young parents, and senior citizens have different levels of life experience, different interests reflecting the challenges they face at their particular stages of life, and, to some extent, they even speak different languages. Although gender

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[5] Jefferson Bates, *Writing With Precision* (Washington: Acropolis Books, 1985), pp. 82-85.

[6] Wiethoff, *Writing the Speech*, p. 22.

differences in societal roles are less pronounced than a generation ago, some believe that certain persistent disparities of viewpoint between many men and women on certain topics persist. With respect to "culture," William Wiethoff, in *Writing the Speech*, states that it "has escaped a standard or preferred definition. Speechwriters, however, may envision culture as the race, customs, and religion shared by members of an audience."[7] The factors of education, profession, and income level can be a pitfall for the unwary speechwriter. Never confuse education with intelligence, or professional status and worldly success with moral superiority or virtue, or modest means and educational attainment with the opposite.

The writer must be sensitive to these varying frames of reference found in an audience. Draft remarks should be familiar, sympathetic, and topical, without being condescending. They must, as always, be phrased in a way that is natural for the Member; it is painfully obvious to an audience if a Member is not comfortable in his role or with his words.

Audience Size

The size of an audience is another important factor in preparing a speech. A large audience and a formal occasion usually call for greater formality in language and delivery, lengthier remarks, and greater reliance on some of the classical rhetorical practices cited in this report. By comparison, many Members will require only talking points for a town meeting, and will almost certainly speak extemporaneously in still more intimate gatherings. In the age of community cable television and satellite hookups, the Member is often asked to address what may appear to be a very small group of listeners physically present at the broadcast venue; at the same time, however, many others, perhaps thousands, may be viewing from other locations, or from their homes. It is the writer's task to craft remarks that simultaneously take into consideration the people physically present in the studio or location, and those who may be watching from home or other locations.

Degree of Political Affiliation

Speechwriters must also condition their words to the degree of political affiliation, or lack thereof, in the intended audience. A gathering of the party faithful is usually ready for some "red meat." An audience consisting of a non-partisan citizen's group, such as the League of Women Voters, is almost certainly not. The writer must also always remember that, while the Member is affiliated with one political party, and comes from a particular part of the state or district, he or she represents all the people, and gives due attention and respect to the legitimate views and aspirations of all constituents.

Occasion and Purpose

Speechmaking at public gatherings has been an integral part of western culture since the time of the great Greek and Roman orators. It has been reinforced by such

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[7] Ibid., p. 23.

historical and contemporary elements as the traditions of raucous debate among Anglo-Saxon tribes at their *althings*, discussions of local policy alternatives at New England town meetings, and the giving of testimony by members of evangelical churches. In contemporary life, it is an expected, if not always welcome, element in any secular public ceremony, and many religious services.

Another of the speechwriter's tasks is to assess the occasion at which the Member has been asked to speak and tailor the remarks accordingly. The occasion and the speech should agree with one another, in both tone and content.

For instance, Veterans' Day and Memorial Day are among the most solemn public holidays in the calendar. For these two events, the speechwriter should focus on themes of commemoration, service, and sacrifice. The atmosphere should appropriately be both somber, and hopeful: "their sacrifice led to a better, more secure life for those who followed them." High school and college commencements are of a different genre altogether. The occasion may demand inspirational remarks, but as one observer noted, "I've heard speakers ... deliver a tedious, solemn policy address at graduation ceremonies in which the graduates and families just want to hit the exits and have a good time."[8] Conversely, a formal address to a learned society will differ dramatically from friendly remarks at a neighborhood picnic, town meeting, or retirement home. Simply put, the writer should exercise common sense in preparing remarks appropriate in tone and content to both the audience and the occasion.

Another useful consideration for congressional staff is to plan the delivery of substantive remarks on substantive occasions. If the Member is planning to announce a major policy statement or initiative, it should be delivered in commensurate surroundings, and on occasions when media coverage will be adequate. Timing is also a serious factor; speeches delivered at mid-morning, at lunchtime, or early afternoon at the latest, are far more likely to be covered that same day by local TV news.

The purpose of a speech and the occasion at which it will be delivered are closely related. Most frequently, the latter will govern the former. William E. Wiethoff suggests a "purpose" template for speechwriters in *Writing the Speech*.[9] In it he establishes three categories of purpose: *information*, *persuasion*, and *entertainment*.

Information

These speeches seek to convey facts or information to the audience. The speaker first identifies the information that is about to be presented, seeking to link the new facts with others the listeners may already be aware of. Next, the speaker elaborates on the details of the information just conveyed, while avoiding a level of complexity and detail that would confuse the audience. Finally, the speaker draws

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[8] Robert A. Rackleff, "The Art of Speechwriting," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, vol. 54, Mar. 1, 1988. p. 311.

[9] Wiethoff, *Writing the Speech*, pp. 34-42.

together the facts and ideas related earlier, ideally recapitulating the main points in order to fix them in the listener's memory.

Persuasion

The persuasive speech is a two-edged sword: it can seek to instill in the listeners either the acceptance of, or at least a more favorable opinion toward, a particular condition, fact, or concept. This variant is described as *advocacy*. Conversely, a speech may also attempt to change an audience's impressions, opinions, or most ambitiously, their convictions. Wiethoff calls this *dissent*, and asserts that it is more difficult than advocacy, since the speaker faces the burden of proving to the listeners that what they have heretofore accepted should be modified or rejected.[10] In both cases, the writer must marshal the arguments that will convince the audience.

Entertainment

Wiethoff's third category of speech purpose is entertainment. A great percentage, perhaps a majority, of Member speeches will fall into this category. The choice of title for this group may be misleading, however. These are not necessarily frivolous occasions, and they are not unimportant to the life and people of a town or village, students at a school, or members of a club. Speeches in this category serve the vital function of reinforcing the common ties and experiences that bind communities together and help reinforce the vitality of civic life in America. As Wiethoff notes:

> These speeches are delivered during ceremonies or rituals that are significant in themselves. They do not need clarification in order to be understood. They do not need proof of their importance. Instead, on these occasions people share an expectation of what will happen, and they are dissatisfied if the events do not take place as expected.[11]

Entertainment speeches may be solemn in nature, such as a Memorial Day address, or celebratory, at the opening of a new school, library, or child-care facility. They remind citizens of their joint identity as members of a community; these events, seemingly everyday, or even trite, are actually vital expressions of civic life. The Member's role as a community leader and spokesperson on these occasions should not be underestimated; it is a great honor for him or her to deliver remarks at these community rites, and a congressional speechwriter should devote talent and originality to them.

Obviously, the three purpose categories cited here are not necessarily mutually exclusive; in order to convince an audience, a speaker often needs to combine persuasion with information. Similarly, while some types of remarks are intended purely for entertainment, such as a celebrity roast, the careful speechwriter will always seek to entertain audiences in order to capture and retain their attention.

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[10] Ibid., p. 39.

[11] Ibid.

Time and Length

How long should a Member speak? The answer to this fundamental question of speechwriting, like so many others, depends on a wide range of factors. Audience analysis and occasion have been previously noted, but the habits and attitudes of the speaker must also be taken to consideration.

The natural inclinations of the Member must be examined. Is the Member a person of few words, or is he or she a good talker? Does the Member stick to the text, or lay it aside to share anecdotes, personal reminiscences, or even humor, with the audience? These and other related questions can be answered only through experience on the part of the congressional speechwriter. Learning the Member's style and preferences will result in a better product that communicates more effectively.

Time of Day

Time of day should be considered by the writer. In the morning, people are relatively fresh, and are generally better prepared physically to listen attentively. By late afternoon, or after a luncheon, however, the audience may need to be stimulated, either by coffee or by lively remarks. Also, lengthy after-dinner remarks should almost never be inflicted, especially on a paying audience. The potential auditors are full, tired, and ready to go home. It's best to give them their wish as quickly as possible.

How Many Words?

Finally comes the classic question: how many words should the speechwriter prepare? Once again, the factors of audience, occasion, Member preference, and time of day should be considered. The question of time, however, must be dealt with at some point. A number of classic speech authorities suggest that in most cases 20 minutes should be the upward limit. Conventional wisdom often holds that most listeners tune out, perceptibly or not, after that length of time.[12] Ritual or *pro forma* speeches, such as occasional remarks at schools, churches, or public functions where the Member is a guest, but not the main attraction, benefit from brevity, perhaps being limited to five to 10 minutes.

The question of pace is also important; is the Member a fast talker? Different speakers exhibit considerable variety in pace, ranging from 115 to 175 words a minute. Once again, the speechwriter will factor these personal differences into his work. As a benchmark, however, an often-cited rule of the thumb is that the average 20-minute speech contains about 2,600 words, or, about 130 per minute. Most word

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[12] Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson, *Writing That Works* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 73.

processing programs will provide a total document word count as part of their spell check feature.

Having a fixed time stimulates careful preparation. Both a time limit and notes or text help guard against logorrhea, or excessive verbiage. Time limits also encourage the speakers not to be overly comprehensive, saying everything there is to be said on the speech topic. This is a temptation difficult to resist, but a speech is, by nature, a precis or digest. Excessive complexity or verbiage are capable of transforming an effective speech into something ponderous and exhausting. Jefferson's sharp judgment of 1824 applies today with equal force: "Amplification is the vice of modern oratory .... Speeches measured by the hour die with the hour."

Speech Research

Theme, audience, time, place, occasion and purpose—once these are settled, the speechwriter's next concern is to gather ideas, facts, examples, illustrations, quotations, and humor, in short, whatever is needed to give substance, character, and interest to the speech. There is no shortcut for researching a speech, although a number of resources can speed the process.

Speechwriting Resources

Congressional speechwriters often consult the Congressional Research Service first when preparing a draft statement or address for a Member. CRS offers a range of speechwriting resources for the use of congressional staff. In print, CRS provides Info Pack IP 139S, which includes this report, a selection of relevant periodical articles, and CRS Report 97-26 L, *Public Speaking and Speechwriting: Selected References*, by Jean M. Bowers.

The CRS Home Page includes a section of links to resources for the speechwriter, such as historical speeches, books of quotations, and various writing guides. It is found at (http://www.loc.gov/crs). Congressional staff should click on the Congressional "Staff Reference Desk" icon and select "Speechwriting." Congressional staff may also wish to examine the wide range of speech-related sites available on the Internet. These range from commercial speechwriting services that will write, edit, or critique a speech, to resource guides and course outlines posted by major universities.

Policy Resources

Providing timely, accurate, and unbiased information and analysis on current policy questions is the most important function of the Congressional Research Service. CRS provides a full range of products to assist congressional speechwriters in learning about most public issues. Among these are CRS Info Packs, CRS Reports for Congress, and continually updated CRS Issue Briefs.

The texts of all CRS issue briefs and several hundred CRS Reports for Congress are accessible to congressional staff on the CRS Home Page

(http://www.loc.gov/crs); congressional staff should click on the "Full Text of CRS Online Products" icon. In addition, products with six or fewer pages can be delivered electronically to congressional offices on Capitol Hill by the CRS Fax-on-Demand line at 7-9943 (Capitol Hill only), or 202-707-9943 for state and district office staff.

Printed copies of all CRS products may also be ordered by voice phone at the CRS Products line at 7-7132 (Capitol Hill only), or 202-707-7132 for district and state office staff, or by Fax transmission at 7-6745 (Capitol Hill only), or 202-707-7132 for state and district office staff. A comprehensive printed list of all CRS products is provided in the quarterly *Guide to CRS Products: A Selected Listing*, which is supplemented by the monthly *Update to the Guide to CRS Products*.

The CRS Home Page also includes a range of other resources for the congressional speechwriter, including information on pending legislation, the legislative and budget processes; Internet resources by topic; basic reference works; and both the collections of the Library of Congress and the CRS Public Policy Literature File (PPLT) through SCORPIO.

Congressional staff who wish to discuss any policy-related issue with the appropriate CRS analyst should call 7-5700 (Capitol Hill only), or 202-707-5700 for district or state office staff, to place a request with the Inquiry Section.

In addition to these CRS products and services for congressional staff, the La Follette Congressional Reading Room (LM-212, James Madison Memorial Building, the Library of Congress), and the Longworth (B-221 Longworth House of Representatives Office Building), Rayburn (B-335 Rayburn House of Representatives Office Building), and Senate (SR-B05 Russell Senate Office Building) Reference Centers provide a full range of in-person assistance, including many standard reference sources and CRS products. They are staffed full-time by reference librarians.

Legislative information is also available from commercial publications such as *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports*, the annual *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, and the same publisher's eight-volume history of major legislation and national issues since 1945, *Congress and the Nation*. A journal of similar content but with greater emphasis on executive branch activities is *National Journal*, which also appears weekly.

Other Resources

Apart from these legislative and policy resources, there are other basic materials with which every speechwriter should be familiar. These include a good standard dictionary (spell check is not foolproof, and has a rather limited vocabulary). The preferable dictionary is prescriptive as well as descriptive, that is, it prescribes or recommends usage in addition to providing descriptions or definitions. A thesaurus, such as *Roget's*, published in numerous editions since 1852, or J.I. Rodale's *Synonym Finder*, is useful in finding the right word and generally superior to the thesaurus feature offered with most word processing programs. For quotations, consult the standard *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* in any one of its many editions, or *Respectfully Quoted*, a quotation dictionary compiled by the Congressional Research

Service. Annual almanacs, such as the *Information Please Almanac* and the *World Almanac*, are often essential for quick reference.

Literary and religious sources include the works of Shakespeare in any readable edition and the English Bible, especially the King James or Authorized Version. Aside from its obvious spiritual aspects, the King James Bible is important for both its literary quality and its tremendous influence on spoken and written English.

Access to some standard encyclopedia, such as *Americana*, or *Britannica*, is also helpful for fact checking and general information. *Chase's Calendar of Events* is a useful annual guide to special observances throughout the nation. A wealth of facts, statistics, and data useful in speech preparation can be found in the annual U.S. Government publication *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. For sample speeches on many topics of contemporary interest, the speechwriter may wish to consult *Vital Speeches of the Day*, published twice monthly. It provides examples of speeches delivered by recognized public figures on topical questions and major issues and events of the day, and is annually indexed by author and topic.

Daily newspapers are a familiar, if neglected, resource for speeches; a dedicated speechwriter will read or skim several each day, noting and saving background items that may prove to be useful later. Both national and hometown papers should be included. Other useful sources include weekly news magazines and more specialized journals that cover public policy issues.

Speech Preparation

Building Blocks: Suggested Principles

Certain general principles may be useful to guide the congressional writer in choice of speech content and style:

- Quotations and humorous anecdotes or remarks are like spices, and should be used with discrimination, mindful of good taste and effectiveness. Speeches overloaded with quotations and anecdotes can sink from their own weight.

- Pseudo-quotations should be avoided. Never use a quotation that cannot be verified in an authoritative source.

- Unless a writer is gifted with lightness of touch, self-deprecating or gentle humor is usually more effective than satire or ridicule.

- Jokes aimed at people's personal lives or at religious and ethnic groups are invariably offensive, regardless of the speaker's motives. Avoid them.

- Statistics should be used with care and moderation. Like the points in an outline, they are better alluded to in context than cited in tedious detail. A speech filled with statistics becomes a statistical abstract, not a speech.

- When selecting material, the responsible speechwriter will take great care to quote accurately and give full credit for whatever is borrowed outright. *Plagiarism is often illegal and always unethical.* On the other hand, it is entirely proper to *adapt* existing materials to one's own purpose in preparing a new speech for any occasion. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in response to accusations that he had plagiarized parts of the Declaration of Independence from other works, "I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether and to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before." Straining after originality, which has been defined by an anonymous wit as "imitation not yet detected," can ruin the best of speeches.

- Finally, the seasoned speechwriter soon learns to recycle the best parts of previous efforts, to save time and effort, and also to preserve a particularly fine turn of phrase.

The Outline

The task of actually writing the speech, once the preliminaries are completed, will be greatly facilitated in most cases by the use of an outline. The novice speechwriter may be tempted to dispense with this device, on the grounds that it adds a time consuming extra step to a process that is often constrained by tight deadlines. On the other hand, it forces the writer to plan and organize his thoughts, to determine in advance what he intends to say, and to begin at the beginning. All too frequently the alternative leads to undisciplined stream-of- consciousness rhetorical flights that lead to a dead end or outright disaster. The outline thus remains an important first step; it is a useful tool for analyzing information that has been gathered and ordering it into some kind of logical or reasonable sequence. The outline serves as a skeleton, a framework to carry the flesh and blood of the fully developed speech. At the same time, this skeleton should eventually be invisible, clothed in delivery with ideas and emotions, and as simple as possible; beware of explicitly enumerating too many points or topics. Outlines may be written in topics, or key sentences, or in complete thoughts, so long as there is an orderly sequence.

The frugal writer will retain speech outlines, since they can easily be reworked for future efforts. These can be placed in folders in a word processing program, or written out into a looseleaf notebook binder or on index cards. From any of these media, the outlines can be quickly cut, rearranged, or added to as future occasions may require. President Ronald Reagan, for example, was legendary for his expert use and reuse of note cards that included facts and themes he hoped to emphasize in various speeches.

Thematic Clarity

Throughout the speech, the writer ought to be constantly asking: "What is it I am trying to say?" and, after it is written: "Have I, in fact, said it clearly, succinctly, and well?" Every speech seeks in some way to move an audience, to win support, to motivate, to convince, perhaps to inspire or, simply to entertain. Adhere to the central theme or idea while addressing it in different ways, much in the manner that good sentences are constructed for a paragraph.

The arrangement of ideas and themes should follow a logical progression. Each fact establishes a certain point, which leads to the speaker's next point, and so forth, ultimately climaxing with the thematic conclusion. While it is more dramatic to gain an audience's attention by opening a speech with a grand conclusion, be sure that the initial dramatic assertion is followed up by the essential process of weaving the argument the Member seeks to make.

Do not try to say too much, particularly when the speech is intended as the vehicle for a major announcement or initiative. The most memorable presidential inaugural addresses have been those that set a single theme, or coherent group of related themes.[13] Stick to no more than three major points, rather than attempting to say a little something about everything. Anything more risks running afoul of Churchill's famous comment concerning a bland dessert: "This pudding has no theme."

Structure

Nearly every speech will have a basic three-part structure of introduction, body, and conclusion. An arresting introduction should lead into an emphatic statement of the main theme or themes. The argument that follows seeks to elaborate and develop the theme convincingly and effectively—that is, without too much detail. The central theme is restated in the closing peroration. One helpful approach for overcoming the feeling of word fright (what can I say and how?) is to write the speech in reverse: begin with the conclusion, which should summarize the central message, while abridging and restating whatever goes before. If the introduction sets the tone and establishes initial appeal or rapport, the closing communicates the final effect and is more likely to be remembered. Working backward is one way of imparting unity, coherence, and emphasis to the speech as a whole.

There are many techniques available for the actual writing of a speech. Almost all speeches delivered by, or on behalf of, Members of Congress, even those for ceremonial or *pro forma* occasions, will have a certain political character because of the Member's representative function, and also because of the way in which his or her office is perceived. In the rhetorical context, political means persuasive, including the expression of personal interest and concern, assuring and reassuring, conveying the Member's identity with each audience, and so creating a community of interest and trust. Three kinds of persuasive techniques are usually distinguished: 1) the appeal to reasonableness; 2) the appeal to emotion; and 3) the ethical appeal (that is, to the character of the audience). All three may be used in any given speech.

One popular option for developing a speech is the "attention-problem-solution" method, especially for longer speeches of a non-partisan character. Useful for many different occasions, this method begins by stimulating the interest of the audience, usually with attention-grabbing examples of a problem that needs to be recognized

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[13] For a selection of presidential inaugural addresses, see: Jefferson's first, 1801; Lincoln's second, 1865; Roosevelt's first, 1933; Kennedy, 1961; and Reagan's first, 1981. These and all others are available online at the CRS Home Page at (http://www.loc./ gov/crs). Click on the "Congressional Staff Reference Desk" icon and select "Speech Writing."

and confronted. The speaker then moves to define the "problem" situation, and concludes with the proposed "best" solution, presented so as to win listener support.

Another option, the "this-or-nothing" method, advocates a policy mainly by presenting and refuting proposed alternatives as inadequate or worse. It lends itself well to partisan occasions or to stirring those already convinced. In every case the speaker seeks to reinforce and strengthen his principal ideas as they are unfolded in the speech. Prior audience analysis and subject preparation will often help the speech "write itself."

No speaker should ever apologize for his or her presence, or for the content of the speech. If it truly deserves apologies, it is better left unsaid. Further, a prudent speaker, rightly wary of the impulse to speak "off-the-cuff," will make certain that "extemporaneous" or "impromptu" remarks are not unprepared. For most speakers it is also better not to memorize a speech (unless one has a gift for it), since memory is fallible and elusive at best.

Style

The congressional speechwriter should not shrink from commonly accepted contemporary usage: the all-day speeches and obscure classical allusions of Daniel Webster and Henry Clay make wonderful reading, but they are history. The development of public address systems, radio, and, finally, the "cool" medium of television, combined with other social changes to turn down the volume, both in decibels and emotions, of public speaking in the United States, for better or worse eliminating its more histrionic qualities.

The accepted style of contemporary oratory is generally low key, casual without being offensively familiar, and delivered directly to the audience in a conversational tone and volume. It puts the audience at ease and helps promote psychological bonding between listeners and speaker. The speaker is perceived as a neighbor or friend, as well as an elected official. This is, of course, what every Senator and Representative strives to be. Perhaps the first, and certainly one of the most effective, practitioners of this art was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his radio "fireside chats." His calm, reassuring voice and homey language revolutionized the bond of communication between the American people and their Presidents. It could be said that FDR spoke "with," rather than "to," the people, a standard to which Members can honestly aspire today. Once again, certain exceptions are allowed, but these are generally reserved largely to the President, or for only the most formal occasions.

Use natural words and phrases in a speech; let the sentences flow conversationally. It is helpful for some writers, time permitting, to prepare a first draft in longhand, shaping the sentences slowly, speaking aloud the phrases they intend to use. The first person is perfectly acceptable in modern public discourse, and when combined with other personal pronouns, it can help connect listener to speaker and create a sense of community within the audience. Writers should generally use simple, declarative sentences when making important statements of fact, assertion, or opinion. On the other hand, the exclusive use of the active voice can impart a choppy, juvenile cadence to even a content-rich speech. While the first

person singular and the passive voice are sometimes deprecated, it is their excessive use that should be avoided. The passive is sometimes the more desirable form, the fear of saying "I" can lead to verbal distortions, and even a familiar cliche can sometimes be unusually apt.

Just as there are points to emphasize in every speech, serving as clear transitions or aural signposts for paragraphs ("secondly," "nevertheless," "finally," "accordingly," "as a result," "in spite of," "as I have said," etc.), so there are things to avoid, and they are more numerous. While they are discussed in full in many reference works, they include:

- jargon and trendy neologisms: "interface," "impact" used as a verb, "parameters," *et al*.;
- redundancy resulting from excess verbiage, not deliberate restatement;
- mannerisms that may distract the listener, and trite phrases or cliches, with the exception previously mentioned, monotony of style or pace, and, in general, language inappropriate to the audience and occasion.

Punctuation, Grammar, and Delivery

Punctuation is crucial to an effective speech; it helps to clarify the delivery of the spoken word. Good punctuation in English, apart from a few basic elements, is less a matter of inflexible rules than of purpose and style, particularly where speeches are concerned. Historically there have been two broad traditions of punctuation: syntactical—that is, guided by syntax or grammatical construction; and elocutionary—deriving from the rhythm and pace of actual speech. One writer has further distinguished three methods of punctuating:

- by structure or logic to indicate the sense of what is being said;
- by the rhythm of word order and intended meaning—a subtle use best avoided by novice speech writers;
- and by respiration—that is, by the physical ease of natural speech, which assumes that what is read is really spoken.[14]

This last method, essentially the same as the elocutionary style, is the most widely used and certainly the most appropriate for speeches. In short, punctuate according to the ear and not the eye.

Commas and dashes are useful to the speaker and listeners alike as guideposts to what lies ahead in a speech. They also provide pauses where the speaker can let the import of the previous sentence sink in, or simply catch his or her breath. Opinion is divided on colons and semicolons; they can be considered as serving the same functions as commas and dashes, but they are sometimes criticized as leading to long

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[14] Herbert Read, *English Prose Style* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 33-51.

compound sentences that are difficult for audiences to process. One solution is to break compound sentences down into shorter declarative ones.

Correct grammar and syntax in the context of speechwriting and delivery mean using a level of English usage that is appropriate to the occasion. While it is highly desirable, the formal grammar of the written language is not an end in itself; it exists to further clarity of expression. Far more important than the grammarian's rules is the communication of personality by which a speech, as opposed to a lecture, is clothed with emotion and enthusiasm, so that the speaker is perceived to be sincere and trustworthy, neither "talking over people's heads" nor "talking down" to them. While this may belong more to the presentation or delivery, the writer should strive for it in speech preparation as well.

Speech Presentation

Effective delivery can transform a weak speech and make it sound very good. Poor delivery can ruin the best-prepared speeches, and sometimes does. Although delivery is not the concern of the speechwriter as such, it must be always in mind as a speech is actually written. The speaker's pace, his or her style, mannerisms, tendencies (such as departing from a text), peculiarities, or special difficulties (words to avoid)—these are elements with which the writer should be well acquainted before preparing any speech. Knowing how a Member speaks is essential in preparing a draft that is both useful and realistic.

Ideally, a speech draft ought to be reviewed three times—by the writer, by the prospective speaker, and by a disinterested third party. Of these three, priority should ordinarily be given to the speaker. The revised product is likely to be more effective. However, with speeches, as with food, too many cooks are undesirable. Moreover, time seldom permits this much critical evaluation and rewriting. It may even be easier to provide for some appraisal of the speech's impact and audience reaction after delivery. For example, it is said that Senator Robert F. Kennedy's speech writers would follow his delivery of a speech word by word, noting those phrases or ideas that were well received, or others that created problems.

An effective political speech is defined not by rules of rhetoric, but by the character of response it evokes. The speaker, then, is always concerned to measure that response and to elicit "positive feedback." This means a network of contacts that can report on the opinions and reactions of the audience, and evaluate the interest generated and evident a week or more after the event. It requires an awareness of media coverage and subsequent treatment from constituents, the sponsoring organization, and others. In short, it means adding a political relevance to the familiar phrase, "keeping in touch."

Although there are substantial distinctions between legislative and non-legislative speeches, the basic principles of preparation and presentation are identical for both. Good writing is nurtured by wide reading, which in turn fosters a sense of style, enriched vocabulary, accuracy in grammar, and a feeling for English syntax. The best speechwriters will, through regular daily reading, bring an ever more

abundant background to their work. Everything is grist for the speechwriter's mill. Moreover, nothing is surer in speechwriting than that "practice makes perfect." The more one writes, the easier the task becomes, and the smoother and more conversational the flow of the Member's remarks.

As with so many aspects of speechwriting and delivery, the physical form of a speech is a matter of personal preference. Some speakers prefer to work from a completely polished text, one that may include carefully tailored "spontaneous" anecdotes and jokes at appropriate places, and may even incorporate hints on speech delivery or effective body language in the text. Others prefer to speak from notes derived from such a text, proceed from a series of "talking points," or simply extemporize. Whichever method is used, preparatory notes or an outline are recommended, with the cautionary warning that dependence on a manuscript can deaden the delivery, just as the excessive use of notes or cards can stimulate verbosity.

Analysis of Lincoln's Farewell to His Neighbors

President-elect Lincoln's farewell speech at Springfield, Illinois on February 11, 1861 is probably the shortest great speech ever delivered from the back of a train. Its railway car setting recalls to mind the now-vanished connection between political events and the railroad, including the whistle-stop campaigns of most presidential candidates from William Jennings Bryan to Dwight Eisenhower. What Jacques Barzun called Lincoln's "workaday style [would become] the American style par excellence," undermining the monopoly exercised by purveyors of "literary plush."[15] The Springfield speech illustrates with extraordinary brevity—it is only a 15 line paragraph—the Lincolnian qualities of precision, vernacular ease, rhythmic virtuosity, and elegance.

The sense of right order and emphasis throughout culminates in the closing sentence— "one of the greatest cadences in English speech."[16] The effect is achieved by the simple yet artful devices of parallelism, the balancing of similar and antithetical words phrases, and ideas, evoking rich Biblical overtones among his hearers. Lincoln's style is rooted in the "speaking intonations" and "humanly simple vernacular" of everyday speech, heightened by form and rhythm, the distinctively American tradition seen at its best in such writers as Emerson and Frost.[17] Although some hold that today there is no place for rhetorical eloquence, arguing that "bluntness and clarity" and simplistic thoughts are the norm,[18] others assert that the

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[15] Jacques Barzun, *On Writing, Editing, and Publishing* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 57, 73.

[16] Ibid., p. 73

[17] Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1977), p. 13.

[18] Edward N. Costikyan, *How to Win Votes: The Politics of 1980* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), pp. 120-122.

craft of speechmaking, the impact of skilled political rhetoric is as significant as ever in our history.[19] Lincoln's mastery of that craft remains a formidable example.

> My Friends: No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.[20]

General Observations and Summary

The rise and, indeed, the virtual triumph in American political speaking of "the popular conversational idiom," with its emphasis on simplicity, brevity, and terseness, has tended to encourage "simplistic language together with slogans or catch words ...," influenced perhaps by the techniques of mass media advertising and particularly television.[21] "Repetition and retention of a few simple ideas are stressed more than a complex concept."[22] In consequence, some have noted a growing trend toward a numbing mediocrity: "Since the 1920s more political speakers have addressed larger audiences on a wider range of topics than at any time in history. Yet so marked is the decline in the quality of style that the majority of speeches are pedestrian, prosaic, and impotent."[23] This last may be an excessively pessimistic evaluation of the state of contemporary political speech. Few, however, would advocate a return to the florid style of public speaking that prevailed as recently as the 1920s.

The remedy, in part, may be the cultivation of style. "Time should be devoted," writes L. Patrick Devlin, "to using impressive language," which he defines as "the most vivid, clear, concise, and meaningful style."[24] It will be most effective if it bears the personal stamp of the speaker. "The process of persuasion is ... more a

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[19] Jeff Greenfield, *Playing to Win* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), pp. 109-130.

[20] Abraham Lincoln, "Farewell Address at Springfield, Illinois,"in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. IV, Roy P. Basler, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U. Press, 1953), pp. 190,191.

[21] James L. Golden, "Political Speaking Since the 1920s," in *Contemporary American Speeches*, Will A. Linkugel, R.R. Allen, and Richard L. Johannesen, eds., 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA:Wadsworth, 1969), p. 170.

[22] L. Patrick Devlin, *Contemporary Political Speaking* (Belmont, CA:Wadsworth), p. 14.

[23] Golden, *Contemporary American Speeches*, p. 178.

[24] Devlin, *Contemporary Political Speaking*, p. 14.

matter of communicating values than logical information."[25] In essence, good speechwriting requires that the speaker assume a role; to some extent, he or she must be able to impart confidence and to sense the character of an audience. We need not agree with Talleyrand's cynical observation that "speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts" to recognize that effective persuasion calls for the ability to win the hearts and minds of listeners. To seem natural is not easy; as George Fluharty and Harold Ross wrote in *Public Speaking*:

> The speaker is estimating his audience and his audience is estimating him. His ethics, his integrity, understanding, and humanity are strong forces for good and also strong components of his "ethos" or personal effect upon not only his present but also his future audiences. The speaker should therefore make sure that the actual situation permits him to use a given persuasive device.[26]

Once again, the words of Abraham Lincoln, himself no mean practitioner of the public speaker's art, may serve to summarize the speechwriter's ultimate goal:

> When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. It is an old and true maxim that "a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall." So with men. If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great high-road to his reason, and which, when once gained, you will find but little trouble convincing his judgment of the justice of your cause, if indeed that cause really is a good one.[27]

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[25] James H. McBath and Walter R. Fisher, "Persuasion in Presidential Campaign Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 55, Feb. 1969, p. 18.

[26] George W. Fluharty and Harold R. Ross, *Public Speaking* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1981), p. 276.

[27] Address before the Washingtonian Temperance Society of Springfield, Illinois, February 22, 1842. Quoted in Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, *The Lincoln Treasury* (Chicago: Wilcox and Follett, 1950), p. 43.