



**THE
EXECUTIVE AGENCY
TRAINING PROGRAM**

**HOW TO:
SPEECHWRITING**



Speechwriting

Speechwriting is a unique discipline – writing to be heard, not read. The best speechwriters step into the shoes of the speaker & write in his or her words.

Factors that affect the type of speech you write:

- **What is the purpose of the speech?** There are three broad categories, though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive
 - **Information:** Convey information.
 - **Persuasion:** Advocate for the speaker's position on a particular issue.
 - **Entertainment:** Speeches delivered at events that are significant in themselves; may be solemn (ex. Veterans Day) or celebratory (ex. opening of a new factory).
- **Who is your audience?** Knowing your listeners will help you connect with them.
 - **Demographics:** Age, gender, culture (race, religion, ethnicity), education, profession and political affiliation.
 - **Issues:** What does your audience care about? Are there themes or phrases that would appeal to them? Put yourself in their shoes – what do they want to hear?
 - **Size:** Large audience = greater formality; smaller audience may require just talking points. But keep in mind the extended TV and internet audiences.

Speechwriting

- **What is the occasion / How important is the speech?** The tone and content of the speech should fit the occasion.
- **Complexity:** Balancing act between accuracy and maximizing impact with bold, clear statements. It is often the case that the strongest speech on a complex subject is actually a simple speech on guiding principles rather than policy objectives.
- **Length:** Depends on speaker preference/style, audience and occasion
 - **Time:** Most listeners tune out after about 20 minutes. Treat this as your time limit. But keep it even shorter if you can, particularly at events where the speaker is a guest but not the main attraction (aim for 5-10 minutes). Also depends on speaker style (big talker or person of few words?)
 - **Word Count:** Depends on the speaker *preference* (Stick to text or ad lib?) and *style* (fast talker?). As a general rule, assume 115-175 words per minute.
- **Delivery:** The delivery can make or break a speech and should always be in the speechwriter's mind as a speech is written. Become familiar with the speaker's speaking style – his or her pace, mannerisms and pronunciation difficulties.

Writing the Speech

- **Preparation:** Since you won't have too much time to prepare for a speech, there are a few things you can do so you're always ready to go:
 - Keep up with the news. Get a copy of every memo that comes across your boss' desk. This will give you base knowledge on the issues you may be writing about.
 - Read great speeches from the past 20-30 years. Find ones you like and think about how you could rephrase/rework them into speeches for your boss.
- **Research:**
 - Develop an understanding of the issue until you feel comfortable with it. Talk to people who work on the issue. Find the nuance; What is controversial?
 - Read what the speaker and superiors have said in the past on the issue.
 - Find characters or historical context to build a story around.
 - But don't spend too much time preparing. It's necessary to start writing early!
- **Outline:** After researching, prepare an outline from which to develop the speech.
- **Theme:** Strive to maintain a single clear theme throughout the speech. Do not try to say too much - stick to no more than three major points.
- **Rough Draft:** Don't go for eloquence right away. Write a clear speech, then make it sound good.

Writing the Speech

- **Structure:** Most speeches have a 3-part structure (introduction, body, conclusion):
 - **Introduction:** State the theme and make it connect with the audience
 - **Body:** Develop the theme with strong arguments (without getting too complex). Convince your audience with appeal to reasonableness, emotion & morality.
There are many ways to write the body. Two include:
 - Attention-Problem-Solution: Grab the audience's attention with examples of a problem to be addressed; Define the problem; Propose a solution.
 - This or Nothing: advocate by presenting and refuting proposed alternatives.
 - **Conclusion:** Summarize the central message, restating the theme and main points in order to fix them in the audience's memory.
- **Quotes:** Using quotes is acceptable, but don't overdo. Always cite. In many cases, it is better to paraphrase and adapt existing materials to one's own purpose instead.
- **Punctuate** (commas, dashes, colons, semicolons) according to the rhythm and pace of the speaker. Pause to let important points sink in and to give the speaker time to breathe. Don't use punctuation to craft long sentences that are difficult to process.
- **Post-Speech Evaluation:** Go listen to everything you write. Edit the text as its spoken, so you can make it better next time. An effective speech is defined by the response and feedback it evokes. Search out audience opinion and reaction.

Style Guide

The best speeches sound natural, low key and casual, as if the speaker is in conversation with the audience. Let your speech communicate personality so that the speaker is perceived to be sincere and trustworthy.

- **Tone:** Speeches should be delivered in a conversational tone and volume.
- **First person:** Writing occasionally in first person can help connect the audience to the speaker. But avoid overuse and “I” strains.
- **Active vs. Passive Voice:** Use the active voice and simple, declarative sentences to make important statements. Intersperse the passive voice to add grace and variety to the speaker’s flow.
- **Words Choice:** Use natural words and phrases. Avoid jargon and trendy neologisms (i.e. “impact” as a verb; “stakeholders;” “outside the box;” etc.).
- **Sentence Structure:** Use short, simple and direct sentences that flow like conversation. The average spoken sentence is 8-16 words. Anything longer will be difficult for the audience to follow. Avoid redundancy from excess verbiage.
- **Grammar and Syntax:** Clarity is more important than adherence to the rules of written language. Grammar should be appropriate to the occasion and audience.

Rhetorical Devices

There are numerous **rhetorical devices** available to the speechwriter to help make complex wording and sentences more accessible to the audience.

- **Imagery:** Animate your speech using imagery, metaphors and analogies. (ex. “Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms.”).
- **Sentence Creativity:** Use different sentence styles to avoid monotony.
 - **Fragments:** Reduce your sentences to short, stark declarative phrases. The speaker can add to the effect by pausing after each fragment to let it sink in (ex. “Homes have been lost. Jobs shed. Businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly. Our schools fail too many...”).
 - **Rhetorical Questions:** Lead the audience to your conclusion by asking a question that makes the point (ex. “Should we just give up in the face of such difficult challenges?”).
 - **Inverted Order:** Invert the normal order of your words to embellish the flow and give special emphasis to a sentence (ex. “With what dignity and courage they perished in that day”).

Rhetorical Devices

- **Cadence** imparts movement & poetic effect to a speech by ordering groups of words into rhythmic patterns. Requires close cooperation between speechwriter & speaker.
 - **Rhythmic Triads:** Group words into sets of threes (ex. "...when we've been told we're not ready, or that we shouldn't try, or that we can't...").
 - **Alliteration:** Create a series of words with the same initial sound (ex. "It is the *poison* that we must *purge* from our *politics*...")
 - **Repetition:** Repeat the same word or words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences or paragraphs (ex. "Yes *we can* to justice and equality. Yes *we can* to opportunity and prosperity. Yes *we can* heal this nation...").
 - **Parallelism:** Link complementary ideas using similar grammatical structure (ex. "We are choosing hope over fear; unity over division..").
 - **Antithesis:** Contrast two points using parallel structure (ex. "9/11...is not a tactic to win an election, it is a challenge that should unite America" or "To some generations much is given; from others, much is demanded ...").
 - **Suspension for Climax:** Have the speaker come to a complete stop, using the ensuing silence to concentrate the audience's attention on the next phrase. (ex. "The challenges we face are real... But know this, America -- they will be met.").

Tricks of the Trade

- **Humor:** Self-deprecating or gentle humor is an effective tool and usually goes over better than satire or ridicule.
- **Statistics:** Use statistics in moderation. It is better to allude to statistics in context than to cite them in tedious detail.
- **Test Your Speech:** It may be helpful to read the speech to someone with about the same level of familiarity with the subject matter as the audience.
- **Are Your Sentences Too Long?** Speak out loud any long sentence – if you find it taxing on the lungs, so will the speaker.
- **Write Backwards:** One helpful approach is to write the speech in reverse: begin with the conclusion, which should summarize the central message, while abridging and restating whatever goes before. This will help impart unity, coherence, and emphasis to the speech as a whole.
- **Plagiarize Yourself:** Recycle the best parts of your previous speeches to save time and to preserve the sound of your speeches.

Notes