

Speechwriting: Talk that Talk

By Kimberly Easley

Right up there with the fear of death and a sequel to the movie *Ishtar* is the dread of public speaking; and like paying taxes, for most of us, it is inevitable. Yet, "inevitable" does not translate into "impossible."

Rendering a speech can be quite enjoyable, meaningful, and successful if the speech incorporates intuitive writing and effective delivery.

Don't talk unless you can improve the silence – Author unknown

President George W. Bush probably has some of the most gifted speechwriters in the country who combine clarity, character, and conviction in each address to the American public. Yet, the essence of brilliant storytelling often is lost when President Bush throws one of his elbows on the podium, which is a sure sign that he is about to digress from the flow of his speech and "go it on his own" with phraseology such as "smoke 'em out" or "in Texas, we have an old saying."

This is one of numerous examples wherein the delicate thread of speech and delivery can unravel.

When you get write down to it

It is a privilege to have a group of talented writers at your disposal for speaking engagements; these writers clearly understand the mechanics of speechwriting, including research, voice and tone, audience, and outline and organization. They make speech-delivery simple and efficient. But for those who are not heads of state, CEOs of Fortune 100 companies, celebrities, or executive vice presidents and directors, where do you start? What do you talk about? How do you make your words compelling?

Fortunately, there are countless online sources for writing speeches. One solid Google search will produce an array of useful sites. As well, traditional resources are quite valuable. Here are some suggestions by Richard Dowis, author of the book *The Lost Art of the Great Speech*:

- Select a topic and decide on a purpose
- Research your topic and acquire a working knowledge of your subject
- Outline and organize your speech
- Begin and close well
- Incorporate location, personal, and literary references
- Use simple language, strong action verbs, and vivid nouns
- Work humor into your speech effectively
- Make body language work in your favor
- Sound sincere, confident, relaxed, and knowledgeable into your delivery

Personally speaking

Over the course of my professional career, I have written speeches for politicians, collegiate administrators, and corporate executives. And although speechwriting does not follow a “color by numbers” approach, it does encompass consistency.

Currently, I work part-time at a local university, my alma mater, Texas Southern University, wherein I write for its president, who speaks with passion and purpose. Needless to say, writing for this individual is challenging yet rewarding.

When writing for someone else, it is imperative that you understand the orator. Spend the day just observing the speaker: Capture certain buzz words and phraseologies; take into account personality, mannerisms, or body language; and examine characteristics of interaction with other people such as humor, brevity in conversation, trust, and comfortableness.

Once you garner a solid “awareness” of your speaker, you can leverage the principle of “consistency.” In concert with the university president’s persona, I center on “theme” and “audience.” Be it a greeting, closing remarks, acceptance speech, or keynote address, chances are, there will be a “theme” for the event, and of course, an audience. The theme greatly assists in finding quotes of context, using anecdotes, and crafting repetitive phrases for emphasis and impact.

For example, the university president was asked to provide words of encouragement for a campus-held memorial service in fall 2003, in recognition of a distinguished and beloved faculty member. Consider the following for reference:

Good evening.

Thank you for attending tonight’s commemorative tribute that celebrates the life and legacy of a *respected* and *dedicated* member of the TSU administrative team, **Dr. Iris Perkins**.

On behalf of the Texas Southern University Board of Regents, administration, faculty, and staff, we extend our prayers and condolences to Dr. Perkins’ family and friends, the students she impacted, the staff whom she inspired in the Office of International Student Affairs, and the constituents of the entire International Community.

Renowned essayist and artist Kahlil Gibran says:

“Oh heart. If one should say to you that the soul perishes like the body, answer that the flower withers, but the seed remains.”

We are here this evening to acknowledge *those seeds* planted by Dr. Perkins and to *solidify* our commitment to their growth and development.

Her seeds are representative of her considerable accomplishments as an educator, counselor, advocate, and professional at Texas Southern University.

They are a testament to Dr. Perkins' courage, character, and conscience.

At Texas Southern, we are proud of our goal to close gaps ... open doors ... and build bridges to opportunity and academic excellence.

This aspiration is not a solo effort; it takes the patience and perseverance of devoted participants of this University.

Certainly, Dr. Perkins was an *active* participant in our vision to nurture students and assist them in negotiating the best educational path that successfully meets their learning and life goals.

Just take a look around.

Many of *you* are past and present students of Dr. Perkins. I am sure you will agree she not only helped to build bridges through her role as Director of International Student Affairs but she also *guided you or walked hand-in-hand with you* across those bridges.

[Pause for transition]

It is interesting, but out of *reverence* I am aware, that we place on tombstones the birth date and passing date. Often, they are the focal points of the headstones.

But it is the "*dash*" that is quietly positioned between those dates, which is truly the resounding significance of one's life.

... It is this *dash*, this *inscription* that represents the story of our lives ... a story whereby we are eventually accountable to our Creator.

I am *certain* that the narratives we will hear tonight will provide an indelible impression of Dr. Perkins' "dash."

May God bless you, and again, thank you for your presence tonight.

Like anything else, speechwriting is a skill that requires practice and patience. Great writers and orators such as Socrates, George Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have provided a viable record of strategic thought and indelible meaning.

To this end, embrace the challenge of speechwriting and you, too, could join the ranks of esteemed speakers who not only walk the walk but also talk the talk of excellence and achievement.

Need help crafting a speech? Contact WriteFusion today at message@writefusion.com or call 713.662.2405.

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Write On is a column published quarterly, which explores tips, trends, mechanics, and perspectives in content, information design, and writing.