

10 Steps to Great Speech Writing

The Best Speeches Create a Positive Feeling in the Audience

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” “... a thousand points of light.”

Most Americans know that Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Kennedy and George Bush uttered those celebrated lines. Few realize that Sam Rosenman, Ted Sorenson and Peggy Noonan wrote them. While speech writers may not get the credit, they do get heard, quoted and *paid*.

For 16 years, I’ve written speeches and coached speakers from New York to Los Angeles to Austin. I’ve done keynotes, a monologue for Bob Hope, motivational talks, sales pitches, commencement addresses, wedding toasts and eulogies. Along the way, I’ve made my share of mistakes and learned some painful lessons.

For those of you who may be faced with crafting a presentation, I’ve distilled my experiences into 10 speech-writing basics. No matter what the occasion, whether I’m writing a speech for myself or an executive, I’ve found that these principles apply.

1. Speech writing requires a good ear, thick skin and personal access to the speaker.

Because speech writing is a collaborative medium, it is important to meet with the speaker in person—preferably without anyone else in the room. If you can’t arrange a meeting, talk on a speaker phone and tape record the conversation. Ask lots of questions and urge the speaker to be specific. Come to agreement on what the speech is about. Only if you understand what the speaker wants can you build a speech that achieves those goals.

In addition to writing speeches, videos and annual reports, Jim Comer is an executive speech coach, gives workshops on presentation skills and speaks on audience-friendly communication. His articles have appeared in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Reader’s Digest and @Austin.

By Jim Comer

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2. Make two points well, not eight points badly.

Too many speakers—especially corporate executives—treat speeches like laundry lists. They feel that they must make at least eight points and show 40 slides or they haven’t done their job. In trying to say everything, they often say nothing at all.

If you doubt me, consider the last speech or sermon you heard. Can you remember two of the speaker’s points? Okay, how about one? Speech writers must help the speaker make hard choices and focus on a limited number of messages.

3. Connect with the audience up front.

Speeches are not primarily about information or facts. They are not a showcase for charts or a display case for bullet points. That’s why God created handouts. *The best speeches are about creating a positive feeling and connecting it to the idea, cause or company the speaker represents.*

Ronald Reagan understood the importance of connecting with an audience as well as anyone who ever occupied the Oval Office. He once invested the first six minutes of a State of the Union address in kidding himself and the leadership of Congress. By the time he got to the point of his speech, the audience was primed and ready to listen.

4. Illuminate your points with stories and anecdotes.

From Abraham Lincoln to Ann Richards, great speakers tell stories that connect with the audience on a personal level. It’s the writer’s job to help the

speaker find stories that communicate a sense of humor and humanity. The right anecdote can bring an otherwise dry point to life and help the listener remember it an hour—or a year—later.

5. Write for the ear, not for the eye.

Keep sentences short. Unless you’re William Buckley, never use a 25-cent word when a 10-cent word will do. Even if you work for IBM or Dell, avoid jargon, acronyms and high-tech catch phrases.

A speech should sound like the person giving it, not the writer. Do not use words, expressions or references that the speaker wouldn’t normally use. Employ his or her speaking rhythm, not your own.

6. Acknowledge the obvious.

No written line is more powerful than unscripted spontaneous moment. Encourage the speaker to use whatever is going on in the room and the world. It’s essential to respond to the unexpected immediately. For example, if a dog wanders into the hall, every eye in the audience will soon be on the pooch. Only when the speaker acknowledges the presence of the canine intruder—and has some fun with it—can he or she move on with the rest of the speech.

7. Impose the Mama Comer test.

If the speech is for a general audience, ask yourself if your parents would understand it. My mom is a retired third-grade teacher with common sense to spare. I know that if she gets it, America will get it. If she doesn’t, neither

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An Old Lady's Vanity

74-Year-Old Can't Wait for Publishers or Take Chances on Their Changes

I wish my name were Joe Nick Patoski (the *Texas Monthly* editor who spoke in May to the Austin Writers' League meeting). Whoever heard of a writer named Frances?

Frances Anything. Nobody, that's who.

My name was my first handicap; my age was the second. They say it's never too late, but what do they know? Did they ever try to write a first book at 70? Nearly 71? As a matter of fact, neither did I. I didn't intend to write a book when I sat down at my old typewriter, which wouldn't even double space, to put down some old family stories for my children. It was September of 1994 when I wrote my first story.

My first story was so darn good that I sent it to *Texas*, the Sunday magazine of the *Houston Chronicle*. They publish a personal Texas essay every Sunday. Ken Hammond, the brilliant, handsome editor of that magazine, who knows talent when he reads it, published mine in two weeks and sent me a check. A check!

It's a shame, but nothing can convince you faster that you are a writer than money. I know some rich ones who aren't, and some poor ones who are, but money will keep you at it. Your affirmation comes in the mail.

By Christmas, *Texas* had published two more essays and I had written 15

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By Frances Nail

stories on a word processor, which my daughter, The Editor, made me buy. Thank you, Jesus. I was reading these stories at Christmas for John Aielli on his "Ekλεκtikos" program for Austin's KUT radio, when a publisher appeared.

In the fall of 1995, I had my first book, *Crow in the House, Wolf at the Door*. It was a finalist in the 1996 Violet Crown Awards competition. It still sells well in its second edition, with an audio version in a first edition. *Texas* has published eight essays from *Crow*.

My first story took longer to type than to write. The rest have flowed like the Red River through the valley where I was born. Since the first, I have not been able to stop writing. You know how old people are. Turn 'em on, and you can't turn 'em off. Here I am at 74—with a longer book—a book of essays, to be titled *God, Among Other Things*.

A publisher might be found for this book, since my first still sells so well. But I have had a publisher. She folded, and I had to do the second edition myself. I know now how to do it, and I'm too old to wait. I might get to old to read it or have any fun with it. Or dead.

And publishers might not accept my editor-daughter's editing, or my artist-daughter's illustrations, or my granddaughter's violin on the audio. They might not want to buy nice paper, big beautiful type for the old folks who love my old stories, or a linen hardcover with a heavy jacket. Too many ifs and might's. I'm too old for all that jazz and too set in my ways. We old folks get that way. We get stubborn, talk too much, brag, and we don't give a hoot. I'm a writer. The checks in the mail prove it. I am a possessive and paranoid writer.

I don't want anybody messing with my book. I will publish it this summer, and I know that even if my name were Joe Nick Patoski, I couldn't have written a better one. ■

Frances Nail painted for 20 years. One of her paintings is in the permanent collection at the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas-Austin. An essay from her new book will be published in a forthcoming edition of Texas Co-Op Power magazine.

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will many in the audience—and that means the speaker is in trouble.

8. Don't tell jokes unless you are a celebrated joke-teller.

Most people don't tell jokes well and shouldn't try. Even if the joke works, it doesn't tell the audience anything about the speaker—except, perhaps, his level of taste.

In this age of hypersensitive political correctness, even the best-intended joke may backfire. If you have a question about taste, always err on the side of caution. You can't get in trouble for what you didn't say.

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When in doubt, don't.

9. Don't let the speaker hide behind slides or overheads.

Unless you're an engineer, slides are not a sexy medium. No one ever left a presentation saying, "God, those slides were good!" In my experience, PowerPoint has caused more people to fall asleep than prescription drugs.

Slides should be used as audio-visual jalapeños. They are there to support the speaker, not replace her. Above all, slides should be easy to read—they should not make those over 40 have to squint and crane their necks.

10. Practice, practice, practice.

Even the greatest speech won't work if it's not well-delivered. For instance, imagine Dan Quayle or Michael Dukakis giving the Gettysburg Address.

While many executives had rather give blood than go over their speeches, rehearsal should not be optional. Remind speakers that Winston Churchill practiced his major speeches out loud for 10 to 12 hours before delivering them. If one of the greatest orators of the 20th century was willing to rehearse, it might be a good idea for the rest of us. ■