

MODULE

# 09

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## The Words

The third leg — aspirational words, stories, and the 96% exception

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## WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

The words are the weakest leg of the stool. But there is one category of words audiences do remember, and this module is largely about that.

The words are placed third deliberately, and emotion fourth, because emotion is the umbrella tying everything together. Ninety-six percent of people cannot remember a word you said. But certain words help you find a rhythm, and one form of content survives the 96% entirely.

**Aspirational words** are words that make people feel good — love, hope, opportunity, freedom. Steve's company tested hundreds worldwide and identified the 55 most powerful, supplied as a handout with this course. Use them, because audiences associate the aspiration with you. Obama ran on "change you can believe in" — and long before he had delivered anything, people asked what they thought of him said: change. His team had tested a couple of hundred slogans, found that "change" alone reminded people George W. Bush had promised it and failed, and evolved it into a phrase that tested off the charts. Trump's "make America great again" works the same way.

**Descriptive words** do more than decorate. "This is a fantastic group" beats "this is a good group" — and notice that saying *fantastic* slows you down, lets you enunciate, and gives the line rhythm. Write your speech, then go back segment by segment and upgrade the weak words.

**Stories are the exception to the 96%.** People remember stories. Anthropologists suspect it is rooted in childhood — bedtime stories, warm and safe and vividly described. Every one of the dozen world-class speechwriters Steve interviewed said the same thing: if you do not put a story in, you have missed the opportunity.

Also worth using: words that elicit emotion (births, deaths, milestones), words that signal values and character, and references to culture — hometown, country, sporting teams. Culture grounds people in who they are and where they live.

Humor has one rule. If you are funny, use it — people love it. If you are not, do not. A speech can be extraordinary without a single joke.

**55**

tested aspirational  
words

**96%**

remember no words —  
except stories

**12**

top speechwriters  
interviewed

**100%**

of them said: use a  
story

## KEY CONCEPTS

### Aspirational words

Words that make people feel good: hope, love, opportunity, freedom, believe, change. Use them and the audience associates that aspiration with you. The full tested list of 55 comes with this course.

### Painting the picture

When you tell a story, the audience does not know it. Put in as much detail and colour as you can. Walk them to where you want them. Do not make them do it on their own.

### Values and character words

Language that signals what you believe rather than what you know. Tested, intellectual verbiage backfires — audiences call the speaker arrogant. Value arguments land because hope, opportunity and freedom carry near-universal meaning.

### The humour rule

If you are funny, use it. If you are not, do not. Try material on friends and tell them to be honest — they will tell you.

**FROM THE VIDEO****The Santa Claus story**

Steve's daughter ran an after-school programme in Rapid City, South Dakota, near the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations. She asked him to play Santa at a holiday show. He said no, then reluctantly agreed.

The first boy in line, Nathan, about nine years old, walked slower the closer he got and would not look up. On Steve's knee he refused to say what he wanted. His mother would be angry. Told it could be a secret, he finally said: can you just get us food? He and his brother were hungry all the time, and his mother had warned them that if they told anyone, social services would take them away.

Of the twenty-eight children in that class, six asked for food.

Steve tells this story in speeches about America's treatment of children. People line up afterwards. They cannot remember another word he said — but they remember Nathan.

**REMEMBER**

- Stories are the one thing that survives the 96%. Never skip them.
- Upgrade your weak words on a second pass. "Fantastic" beats "good" and slows you down.
- Lead with values, not intellect. Intellectual language reads as arrogance.
- Funny? Use humour. Not funny? Skip it — the speech will be fine.

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**PRACTICE**

# Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

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**EXERCISE 1**

## Find your story

Every speaker needs a small stock of true stories they can tell well. Start building yours.

**Write out one true story from your own life that shows something you believe. Put in the detail — names, places, what was said. Do not summarise it.**

**What value does that story demonstrate without you having to state it?**

**Where in something you have to say soon could this story go?**

**EXERCISE 2****Upgrade your words**

Write first, then go back and hunt the weak words.

**Take a paragraph you have written. Copy it here.**

**Now list every word you could make more descriptive, and the replacement.**

**Which aspirational words could you work in honestly? (Not eleven of them in a row.)**

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**EXERCISE 3****The humour test**

**Try a piece of humour on three friends and ask them to be brutally honest. What did they say?**

**Based on that: are you using humour in your presentations, or not? Decide now.**

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**BEFORE YOU MOVE ON**

**One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:**

**When and where I will use it:**