

MODULE

16

Basic Guidelines

Ten rules from a dozen of the world's
best speechwriters

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

Steve did not trust his own forty years of speechwriting enough to answer this alone. He interviewed about a dozen of the best speechwriters in the world and asked for their top ten. Every single one led with the same rule.

The interviews covered speechwriters for political, business, legal and academic leaders. Every one of them named the same guideline first, and it surprised Steve until he heard the rest of the list.

One. Write a speech no one else could give. Cody Keenan travelled with Obama for almost a year before writing a major speech — he needed to know what was in the man's heart and head, what made him angry, what made him happy, so he could write in his voice. The test: if you could give the speech yourself rather than the person it is written for, it is a bad speech.

Two. Have one core message. Two or three messages confuse the listener. Ask yourself: what headline do I want tomorrow? If you cannot answer that, the speech is too generic. Obama had change. King had equality. Mandela had freedom and opportunity.

Three. Use stories. Every speechwriter said it is a missed opportunity if you do not. Stories show character and values, and they paint a picture people keep.

Four. Write to your message, not to the invitation. A senator asked to address a medical association wanted to speak about medical issues. He was not a doctor and was never going to out-know the room. Instead he spoke about why their work saves lives and how he could help them do it. It worked.

Five. Write for the ear. No more than four or five words before a break. Tested, people follow one sentence of ten to twelve words, most manage two, but by the third they have fallen behind and stop trying. "We will hunt, find and destroy our enemy" became "We will hunt our enemy. We will find our enemy. And we will destroy our enemy." Far more powerful.

Six. Shake hands with the audience. The grab, at the top. It can be a story, an anticipatory pause, or a question. Without it you begin while a third of the room is on their phones or talking.

10

guidelines from the interviews

12

speechwriters interviewed

1

core message per speech

4-5

words before a break — always

KEY CONCEPTS

Seven — do not believe the humour myth

If you deliver humour well, use it everywhere. If you do not, leave it out entirely. A speech can be extraordinarily powerful with no jokes in it at all.

Eight — give them a roadmap, and bookend it

Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them. Some writers draft the ending first so they know where they are steering.

Nine — do not write by committee

One politician wanted ten people to review every speech. Ten reviewers produce ten versions, and when you use none of them you have turned the team against you. The single exception is military content, where technical accuracy demands expert review.

Ten — speak to the heart, not the head

Most speakers write to show how smart they are. Tested, audiences do not think you are smart. They think you are arrogant.

Make it about them, not you

Steve sees this across corporate, academic, legal and political speaking: the speech is about the speaker. Why I know the issue, why I am the CEO and you are not. It turns people off, and the depth of that reaction surprised the researchers.

The crescendo

End on rising energy. "And that's why today, we can do this. We can do this." Not "and so I think together we could make it happen, thank you," delivered flat. End high and the room reflects it back and comes out of their chairs.

Give statistics context

Do not let a number hang. Twenty-one percent of American children go to bed hungry — is that a lot? Add: more than in any of the other twenty industrialised nations. Now it means something.

Conversational transitions

"Let me tell you something." "Listen to this." "This is important." It is how people actually talk, it humanises you, and it tests very well.

FROM THE VIDEO

The I Have a Dream test

To measure the power of a repeated phrase, Steve's team took Dr. King's 1963 speech and edited out every instance of "I have a dream," leaving the rest intact.

They played the edited version to audiences and asked what they thought. Overwhelmingly people said: that is a pretty good speech, but it is not as good as his I Have a Dream speech.

It was his I Have a Dream speech.

REMEMBER

- If someone else could give your speech, rewrite it.
- One core message. If you cannot name tomorrow's headline, you have too many.
- Grab them at the start and refuse to let go.
- End on a crescendo. Flat endings get flat applause.

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.

EXERCISE 1

Name your headline

The fastest diagnostic in the whole course.

For your next presentation, write the headline you want to appear tomorrow.

Could you write a second, different headline from the same speech? If so, you have more than one core message. Which one goes?

EXERCISE 2

Write your grab and your crescendo

The first thirty seconds and the last fifteen. Build them deliberately.

THE GRAB — a story, a question, or an anticipatory pause. Write it.

THE CRESCENDO — the last line, built to rise. Write it.

Deliver both to camera. Did the crescendo actually go up, or did you trail off?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Wrote the grab
- ☐ Wrote the crescendo
- ☐ Filmed both
- ☐ Bookended — the close refers back to the open

EXERCISE 3

Write for the ear

Take the "hunt, find, destroy" treatment to your own strongest line.

Write your strongest line as you currently have it.

Now break it apart into separate sentences with repetition, the way "hunt, find, destroy" became three sentences.

Read both aloud. Which one is stronger?

EXERCISE 4

Add context to your numbers

What statistic do you use most often?

What comparison would tell an audience whether that number is good or bad?

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

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

When and where I will use it: