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By Colin Moorhouse

Whether you are a freelance writer offering corporate writing services to a variety of clients, or work in public affairs, communications, or public relations within a corporate setting, inevitably you will be asked to write a speech. You want to be able to say yes to such a request.

Speech writing is part craft -- part art -- and when things go right -- part magic. Without knowledge of the craft -- the art and magic rarely happen. What follows are suggestions that speak to the craft of speech writing.

The very moment you say yes to a request for a speech there are two non-negotiable mantras you must keep front and centre.

First Mantra

Speeches are about engagement. Not information. Although information may well be a desired by-product of a speech, without engagement - without a connection with the audience - all information will be lost on an unengaged audience.

Engagement usually comes from story, humour, event, language, or oratory. For most writers, it is next to impossible to write humourously for someone else. And you have limited control over the oratorical skills of your speaker. That leaves you with event, language, and story.

Second Mantra

The form and function of a speech should be primarily driven by the texture of the event and the needs of the audience, and not by the political or corporate needs of the speaker to deliver a favourite message. Sometimes, a very hard sell to your client.

Keeping these two mantras in the forefront of your preparations, you should next consider the following checklist.

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Speech Checklist

1. Insist on seeing the letter of invitation. It will contain vital contact information and sources for further research.
2. Similarly, get the agenda that outlines who is speaking when, and other event-related activities. Try to negotiate your speaker to go first. If not first, then last.
3. Discuss expectations with speaker ahead of time. At the very least, negotiate the messages the speech is to convey. And limit those messages to two or three only. Discourage your client from trying to include the kitchen sink.
4. Research. Client should provide subject and message related information. You should undertake supplementary research that might provide insight, story, and clarity.
5. Limit outlines to the extent that you keep in mind that certain messages have to be presented, and to keep you on track. But don't get obsessive about it. Outlines should just be a guide. They should not dictate the flow. Other than that just....
6. Write. Without editing. Just get the words, stories, and thoughts down on paper. It's called the puke draft for a reason.
7. Make sure your speech has a strong opening. A story or anecdote usually will get you off to a good start. Remember that *showing* is always better than *telling*.
8. The secret is in the re-writing. Less is always more. Simple better than complex. Omit words that are better read than spoken. Vary the length of sentences. Are your words interesting? Do they engage? Don't pontificate. Lean towards conversational language.
9. Remember that this is an oral medium. For the ear. Read your drafts out loud so you can check for rhythm, tone, and cadence. Listen for the silences between words/thoughts. Listen for the logic.
10. Visuals. Unless you are very good at designing, and your speaker very good at using visual supplements, such as PowerPoint - avoid them. It is easy to "do" visuals badly, and difficult to use them well.
11. Don't let your speaker hand out anything before or during the speech.
12. Make sure you know what you expect the audience to do as a result of listening to your speech. And make sure they do too.

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A word or three on openings....

Effective openings set the level of engagement. Three approaches...

1. Story telling is an extremely effective way to engage an audience right from the start. Good stories almost automatically catch attention, and create a personal link to the listener. And a well chosen story can also introduce the overall message. So, where do we get story ideas?

Read newspapers and take a cue from the headlines.
They can provide topical and timely subjects that
can be spun off into personal or social story
telling commentary.

One-on-one interviews with experts in the subject
of the speech can usually lead to fascinating and
unique stories.

2. Take a cue from the opening lines of novels, not with the objective of using them literally, but rather to give you ideas that suggest tone, humour, tragedy, or thoughts about the human condition.

“It was the best of times, it was the
worst of times...” Charles Dickens
Tale of Two Cities

“They shot the white girl first” Toni
Morrison. *Paradise*

“Maybe I shouldn’t have given my
number to the guy who pumped
my stomach.” Carrie Fisher *Post
Cards From the Edge*

3. Understand why the audience is attending the event, and craft your opening accordingly. If you know the audience might be hostile to your message, acknowledge the validity of their anger, and what your speaker proposes to do about it.

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