



# THINKING OUT LOUD

## A PSA WHITEPAPER

# One Step at a Time: A Practical Process for Writing Any Speech

*A simple, six-step guide to writing a speech  
(or any other long-form communication).*

By Michael Long, Resident Writing Coach  
*Professional Speechwriters Association*

## FOREWORD

Writing speeches requires a set of intellectual skills and emotional capacities so complex as to be nearly contradictory.

One must have the sheer mental tools required to help powerful leaders think through and communicate their ideas. One must have an ego sufficient to *presume* to do so—and simultaneously, the humility required to relegate to the back seat his or her own ideas, emphases and linguistic preferences.

It's a tall order to find someone who can execute the series of jobs required by every speech—astute audience analysis, research and interviewing, idea development and organization, evidence gathering, writing and editing.

Now, put yourself in my position, in charge of the Professional Speechwriters Association: You have to find someone who not only can write exceptional speeches, but has the wholly separate set of skills required *to teach others how to write speeches*.

It's like finding a centipede that can teach you how it walks.

Mike Long is that centipede, and that's why he's the PSA's resident writing coach.

I'm grateful for the miracle of his existence, and in a moment I think you will be too.

David Murray, Executive Director  
*Professional Speechwriters Association*

## OVERVIEW

For most people, writing a speech is intimidating.

Why is that?

I think it's because it's difficult to know where to begin, what to do next, and when to stop. Even experienced speechwriters often feel this challenge. I believe this applies to every kind of writing, though: It's difficult for most people to write because it involves ad hoc imposition of order on a broad and often unkempt population of facts, stories, and ideas toward some goal that is often poorly defined if at all.

In other words, it's worse than herding cats: it's like herding cats without knowing what you're herding them toward.

Whether you're an experienced hand or a newbie, it's smart to start the speechwriting process with a map. I'm going to go through a simple, six-step guide to writing a speech. It's not difficult—all you have to do is follow directions. A speechwriter will spend a lifetime honing the craft, but the place to begin is the beginning—the basics. So here are the six steps to writing a speech.

**Step 1: Assess the Event and the Speaker.** Before you write a word, find out all you can about the audience, the location, and the topic. You can never know too much about a speaking event, but start with these:

- Why was the speaker invited?
- What do they want him to talk about?
- How does the speaker feel about this topic?
- Where can you get information about this topic?
- What is the big takeaway—the memorable idea—the speaker wants the audience to have in their minds at the end?
- What is his relationship with the audience?
- What does the speaker enjoy talking about?

**Step 2: Create a Spec Sheet.** Write down in a well-organized document everything you've learned so far about the event and the speech. Then go looking for more—especially mechanical details such as the physical layout of the venue, the order of the program, other speakers, and more. You'll need this later—and so will the speaker.

**Step 3: Identify the Big Ideas and Put Them in Order.** Don't write one long speech. Write several small ones. How? Break up the topic of the speech into subtopics or subordinate arguments. You will write tighter, easier-to-understand

material when you're focusing on three or four narrow points instead of trying to fill twenty minutes in endless intellectual directions.

**Step 4: Add Evidence.** The big ideas identified above are categories or claims, and evidence is what fills those categories or proves those claims. That is, each section of the speech is led by what you want someone to believe. The material that fills out each section is why they should believe it.

**Step 5: Write the Open and the End.** In a typical speech, the hard part is doing the research and converting it to content. The open and the end are exercises in rhetoric, not research, which means they are subjective and therefore less demanding to write. Having written the middle first, you avoid allowing yourself to put off that heavy lifting by rearranging the deck chairs of opening and closing rhetoric.

**Step 6. Make it Better.** Writing is mostly rewriting. Polish the work until you're out of time. That means replacing good stories with better stories, checking for ease of out-loud readability, double-checking for clichés, pushing for as many rehearsals as possible, and doing anything else that smooths off the rough edges.

## STEP 1: ASSESS THE EVENT AND THE SPEAKER

*You're not a mind reader. Start with research.*

Before you write anything, consider who will be listening and who will be speaking. Any information you can collect—anything whatsoever—might turn out to be useful. This is a step for gathering data, not casting out data. You can always ignore useless stuff later. For now, don't make judgments.

What kind of information might this be? Consider the audience. How many people will there be? Consider the demographics of the audience. Ask why they are attending and if they paid to get in. What is their relationship to the speaker? Do they like him? Do they trust him? Do they want something from him?

Consider the speaker. What is she supposed to talk about? What does she like to talk about? Does she prefer certain kinds of events over others? What makes her comfortable? What makes her nervous? How does she prepare? What does she use when she speaks, notes? A prompter? A text? Memorization?

And consider the venue and the event itself. When does it take place? Is your speaker going up during lunch? After? Before? What are the chairs going to be like? What about the audio system? Will people be sitting at tables?

A lot of this stuff may not affect what you write or how you write it, but some of it will, and much of it will be useful in later steps, so set it aside.

As you assess the event and the speaker, consider also the practicalities and mechanics of speechwriting—the basics, the bones. Start by asking yourself this: What’s the big takeaway? What do I want the audience to be thinking about when they leave?

Before you begin to write, be able to state this in a pointed, pithy sentence of no more than ten or so words. If you can’t narrow it down to a short sentence, you’re either trying to write about too much, or you don’t understand the topic well enough to write it up in the first place. Speeches cannot go on and on and on—oh, some do, but those are not effective. Don’t kid yourself otherwise.

Speeches need to make a point and move on, not make “a bunch of points” and move on. A single speech should convey a single idea. While that idea may be supported by a variety of evidences and claims, the whole of the thing must point to one big idea. Identify that thing, write it down, and be sure it is the thing you want the audience to remember.

Finally, hang on to these little facts and insights as you make your assessments in preparation to write:

- **Speechwriting is collaborative**, but rarely in a good way. It’s not typically, “You write this part and I’ll write that part.” It’s “You write the whole thing, then I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it.” I’m kidding, but not entirely. Principals aren’t being difficult because they want to be. They require guidance on how to ask for changes. A speechwriter’s job is not to be a stenographer. A speechwriter should facilitate the editing process by co-exploring, as much as possible, the topic and material before the writing begins, not after.
- **Iterative versions can help** the writer and principal understand the requirements of the speech. Speechwriting is ultimately about helping an audience understand, but preliminary drafts are often about helping the writer and speaker understand.
- **Plan deadlines** so that, if possible, a speaker gets a draft with an assignment attached: revise, rehearse, or discuss. Leaving a speaker with a free hand over a long period of time will almost always yield edits that may not account for how a speech fits together. For example, a speaker might cut a line at the end whose appearance is critical to a point set up a thousand words earlier. Speechwriters think of the whole thing while speakers-as-editors often do not.

## STEP 2: CREATE A SHEET OF SPECIFICATIONS

*Before you begin writing, collect as much useful information as you can find.*

Before you begin writing the speech, collect in a single place information about the speaker, the venue, the topic, and anything else that might be important. This spec sheet will not only help you focus your writing, it will also add value to the speech when you give it to the principal along with the text.

You'll want to include all the things you collected from Step 1, plus anything else you feel might be of use, plus these:

- **Name of the speaker.** Make it the first item on the sheet. It's a valuable reminder of why you're working.
- **When the event takes place.** Include the day and date, plus a minute-by-minute countdown of activities up to the second when your speaker takes the stage. Also find out if your principal speaks, for instance, just before or after lunch, or as the first or last speaker of the day—that is, find out if the audience might have anything else on its mind when your principal goes up.
- **Where the event takes place.** Include the location and street address. If your principal does not have a "body man" or a scheduler, include directions on how to get to the building, and parking procedures and costs. Also include directions to the location inside the building where the event takes place, the names of contact people, and guides to check-in activities. As the writer, visit the venue before you begin to write, if you are able. You never know what kinds of great ideas will come to you just by being there. White House speechwriter Peter Robinson wrote, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" as a result of an off-hand remark during a scouting visit to Berlin for Ronald Reagan's famous visit there. For a speech that opened with a harrowing story about a woman nearly killed in a fall from a collapsing bridge, my research on the venue revealed that the archway under which the audience entered was the same height as the bridge, making an already gut-wrenching tale even more gripping.
- **The duration of the speech.**
- **How to provide the speech: as text, notes, outline, or something else.** Also: contrary to popular myth, there is no font that is "best" for public speaking. The best font is the one that makes the principal most comfortable.
- **The nature of the audience.** Note all the demographic information that you can, along with the physical layout of the seating area. Find out if people are sitting in benches, swivel chairs, or something else. Consider whether movable chairs may generate unexpected sound: folding chairs scraping on a concrete floor, one-piece desks with fold-out tops, etc.

- **The topic of the speech, what you want the speech to achieve, and the subtopics.** What it's about is not necessarily the same as what the speaker is trying to achieve. If the topic is "Our company is entering some hard financial times," the unspoken purpose of the speech could be anything from "Let's pull together to save money" to "Read between the lines, people: I'm going to fire a third of you this Christmas."

## STEPS 3 & 4: FIND THE SUBORDINATE ARGUMENTS AND BACK THEM WITH EVIDENCE

*Don't expect to persuade with a blast of random facts.*

At this point, you have the topic for the speech and what you want the talk to achieve. Now think of several subordinate assertions. What are subordinate assertions? The best way to understand them is to consider them in action. Let's say I'm writing a speech to advocate for the end of capital punishment. (Another note: I've chosen this position because I need a straightforward example, not because of my feelings for or against capital punishment.)

The writer will probably state the claim—*Let's outlaw capital punishment!*—then bombard the audience with facts, statistics, assertions, stories, and anything else that might win them over.

But there is a more effective way.

Let's find some narrower positions which, if the audience can be persuaded of them, might lead them to consider or even agree to the larger point. For instance, perhaps I could get the audience to open their minds to these smaller arguments:

- Capital punishment does not seem to deter other criminals.
- Capital punishment is more expensive than life in prison.
- Capital punishment is applied inconsistently with respect to race and circumstance.
- Defendants who can pay for a lavish defense avoid capital punishment far more often than those who can only afford a minimal or even typical defense.
- With the rise of DNA evidence, we now see that we have put many innocent defendants to death.

These are *subordinate assertions*, subordinate or *in service* to the overall argument of the speech. A 15-minute speech might cover three or four of these subtopics. In this way, the speaker gets to make his case three or four ways—and three or four times. If you're in the audience and you don't "buy" the first argument, *hang on. Another one's on its way.*

Subordinate assertions let you take several swings at the ball, so to speak. In addition, it gives the audience a change of topic every few minutes. This is so much easier to listen to than what could quickly become a rant. Remember, when it comes to the middle:

- Pick your topic.
- Pick your subordinate assertions.
- Back each with evidence that matches the audience's interests and passions.

It's not just elegant simplicity. It's effective argument.

## STEP 5: WRITE THE OPEN AND THE END

*Don't spend hours writing a "fancy" opening. Give the audience what they naturally anticipate.*

At the beginning of a speech, audiences expect to hear certain things. This is not because we've been taught to listen for A, B, C, and D, but because we are hard-wired to have certain matters set up or settled when someone demands our attention for an extended period of time.

Most speakers flub the beginning because they have thought more about the subject and their own interest in it than they have about the capacity of the audience to absorb it. As a colleague of mine once put it, *Listening is hard*. Think about it: In a formal speech setting, you can't browse Facebook, fiddle with your phone, or talk to your friend. You have to sit up straight, look at the speaker, and at least act like you're paying attention. Listening is hard. As a speaker, your obligation is to make the job easier.

By opening a speech with ARTS, you get the job done. ARTS is so easy, you can extemporize it, yet it sounds focused and professional without all the sweat and tears we imagine usually go into clear prose. What is ARTS?

**A = Acknowledgements**

**R = Rapport**

**T = Topic**

**S = Subtopics**

**First, acknowledge any VIPs.** Get this out of the way so you can jump into your talk without having to stop the flow and go back to pick this up.

**Next, establish rapport.** Say something—briefly, very briefly—that shows the audience you know something about them and that you're interested in them beyond the topic. Mention something about your last time in the city, or do



some homework to find out something fun or interesting that they know but that they wouldn't expect you to know. For instance, don't just congratulate a college audience on a football win over the weekend. Find out something about the parties or the parades or the campus gossip and mention that as well.

**Then identify the topic explicitly.** This frames your talk in the mind of the audience. So what if the topic is written on the marquee and the program? When people sit down, they are thinking about a lot of things besides what you're going to say. Remind them of your topic, and thus focus them.

**Finally, list your subtopics. In other words, give 'em a map.** Speakers and speechwriters don't often think of this because it's not very flattering to them, but a prime question for any audience member is when will this be over? By listing up front the subtopics of your talk, the audience gains a map that tells them how far along you are and how much is left. This unburdens them from having to wonder, and that in turn frees them to think more about what it is you're saying.

As for a closing, it's even easier: List your subtopics again, then issue a call to action and *siddown*. If the speaker has any personal or ad hoc remarks to make at the end, be sure they get said before the call to action, so the last thing out of the speaker's mouth will always be what he wants the audience to do.

Not every speech structure is "friendly" to these patterns. A long story-speech, for instance, probably doesn't have subtopics. There are lots of other kinds of openings and closings—I teach them, myself. But the basics behind these patterns always apply: Provide focus and a "map" of some kind at the beginning, and reinforce audience memory and the call to action at the end.

## STEP 6: POLISH EVERYTHING

*Don't just review and revise. Do these things before you submit it.*

- 1. Test your speech by reading it out loud.** The speech is going to be heard, not read. Test it in the appropriate medium. You'll find redundancies you missed on the page, phrases that aren't "mouth-friendly," and issues with flow that come clear only when you hear them out loud.
- 2. Look for complicated sentences and reconsider them.** Typically, speakers are most effective when they use short, declarative sentences. Remember, audiences are listening, not reading. That means they have to interpret sentences as they hit the ear. Long, complicated sentences do not in general make for easy listening.

- 3. Reconsider “lost in the weeds” detail.** Detail in a speech exists to lend authority or expertise to the speaker, and to make descriptions more interesting. Once detail goes beyond establishing the scene in a colorful way, it’s overkill, and overkill makes audiences stop listening.
- 4. Get rid of leading language.** At the end of each subtopic, minimize or eliminate summarizing language. It may reinforce what you just said, but even that will be forgotten quickly. Instead, focus on keeping the attention of the audience by making the switch to the next topic more of a surprise. Recaps at the end of subtopics telegraph that a new topic is coming. Instead, end the subtopic on an interesting fact or story, then switch without warning to the next subtopic. The surprise reignites attention. (As always, frame each subtopic on entry.)
- 5. Avoid stage direction.** If the meaning of your prose depends on how it’s read out loud, you as a speechwriter have not done your job. You were hired as a writer, not a coach. If you must use stage direction, make it so obviously different from the text-to-be-read that it will be nearly impossible for your speaker to accidentally read it out loud. No matter how strong your principal is, protect him from himself as if he were capable of Will-Ferrell-in-Anchorman-style mistakes. Just keep telling yourself, “Anything you put on that prompter, Burgundy will read,” and write accordingly.
- 6. Source appropriately.** Facts that the audience may doubt need citation in the text itself. Make it simple: “According to a May report from...” is fine. Every fact that is not easily provable ought to be sourced in a page of endnotes; this for the speaker’s curiosity and for reference in case she is asked. Put the citations in a separate page at the end of the speech. Footnotes tempt the speaker to take himself out of the flow of the text and read the note. Endnotes remove the temptation.

## IN CONCLUSION

That’s it. Each step brings you closer to the finished product. Slow and steady wins the race.

If it’s not on this list, don’t worry about it, at least not in your earliest efforts to learn the craft. What’s omitted in this primer is omitted for a reason: to illustrate by its absence what is a waste of your time. Nearly every element described in this method is found in every speech you will write, whether it follows this structure or some other. Stick with that.

One topic not discussed here is tone – how the text of a speech reflects the personality of the speaker. Again, I omitted this for a reason. Style should arise

from the work and not be imposed upon it. If you stick to the facts of the matter and respect the mood of the occasion, style will take care of itself. Do not attempt to “capture the speaker’s voice.” Instead follow Hemingway’s dictum to write the truest sentence you know. His “good and severe discipline” will bring your point into focus and elevate the audience’s understanding. This is among the speechwriter’s most important assignments, along with making things memorable and compelling.

In that spirit, think of speechwriting like this: your job is to make people breathless to hear whatever is coming next. The particulars of doing this will become the center of a speechwriter’s pursuit, but I have returned over and over to this: If you wish to be interesting to other people, be interesting to yourself. See a stage play. Learn some chords on the guitar. Paint a picture. Look at quotidian things closely. Travel. Those metaphors and allusions that make a speech unique – where do you think they come from? Appreciate what is around you. When the time comes to write, you will have a trove of images, feelings, and ideas to call on. And for those experiences that never end up in a speech – well, at least you had a good time.

And that’s why we write in the first place.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Long is a writer, speechwriter, educator, and award-winning screenwriter and playwright. He is the resident writing coach at the PSA and lectures on writing at Georgetown University. He is available for seminars and writing assignments.

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