



The Professional Speechwriters Association Presents ...

SPEECHWRITERS' CENSUS 2021

Where the Speechwriting Profession Is Going, How Its
Practitioners Feel About It—and What We Can Do About It

Dear Speechwriter,

It took me awhile to absorb the results of the Speechwriters' Census 2021. We asked a lot of questions—and you gave a lot of answers: Including a lot of clearly heartfelt, sometimes even anguished commentary about the nature of your work over the last couple of years.

Reading and rereading these comments and talking them over with people close to the speechwriting profession, I've concluded that speechwriters actually have a great deal of ability, at this liminal moment between the pandemic and whatever is next, to drive, steer and in some cases even reverse some of the trends that have affected their work, and even their personal lives over the last couple of years.

So take your own time with this summary report, first digesting the "Quick Hits" in the first few pages—and then listening to the words of your speechwriting peers, and seeing how they compare with your own thoughts and feelings about speechwriting.

And I'll have some ideas of my own, to conclude.

All the while, though, please keep in mind that there is no profession as permanent as that of the professional rhetorician. And that however rudely fashions and circumstances affect the form, there will always be a need for the function—and as long as society is even nominally civilized, always strong demand for a good speechwriter.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David Murray, Executive Director, Professional Speechwriters Association
November, 2021

QUICK HITS: FORM, FREQUENCY, AUDIENCE OF SPEECHES IN THE NEAR FUTURE

Where do you see leaders delivering their speeches in 2022?

Almost 80% of speechwriters said they expect about half in-person and half virtual.

In general, what do you see happening with the volume of leaders' speechmaking in 2022?

"More than in 2021," said 52% of speechwriters; about the same, said 36%, with only 12% saying less.

What audiences do you see your leaders focusing on in 2022?

"About half external and half internal," said 56% of speechwriters, with the rest split evenly between "mostly external" and "mostly internal."

QUICK HITS: SPEECHWRITERS' WORKLOAD, WORKING CONDITIONS

Where do you see yourself working this time next year?

Only 6% of speechwriters see themselves working "strictly in the office," and only 14% see themselves working "strictly at home." The remaining 80% see themselves working in some kind of hybrid arrangement, slightly skewing toward mostly working remotely.

What type of work will you be doing in 2022?

Only 23% of speechwriters expect to be writing more formal remarks; most expect to be contributing "the same mix of formal remarks and other exec comms that I've been providing since the onset of COVID."

Many speechwriters reported an increase in direct collaboration with leaders during the first year of the pandemic. Has that continued apace?

The increased direct collaboration has "waned for me," said 43% of speechwriters, with 48% saying, it's "become my status quo."

QUICK HITS: THE STATURE OF SPEECHWRITING (AND THE PAY)

Since the outset of the pandemic, how has the stature of speechwriting been affected in your organization?

“It’s grown in importance,” said 41% of speechwriters, with 49% saying “it’s stayed about the same,” and only 10% saying “it’s less respected” than it was two years ago.

In-house speechwriters, how has your income been affected over the last two years?

It’s stayed the same, said 55% of speechwriters. It’s increased, said another 41%.

Independent speechwriters, how has your revenue been affected over the last two years?

It’s stayed the same, said 41%; it’s increased said 37%; it’s fallen, said 22%.

Your general sense of pride in your contribution as a speechwriter?

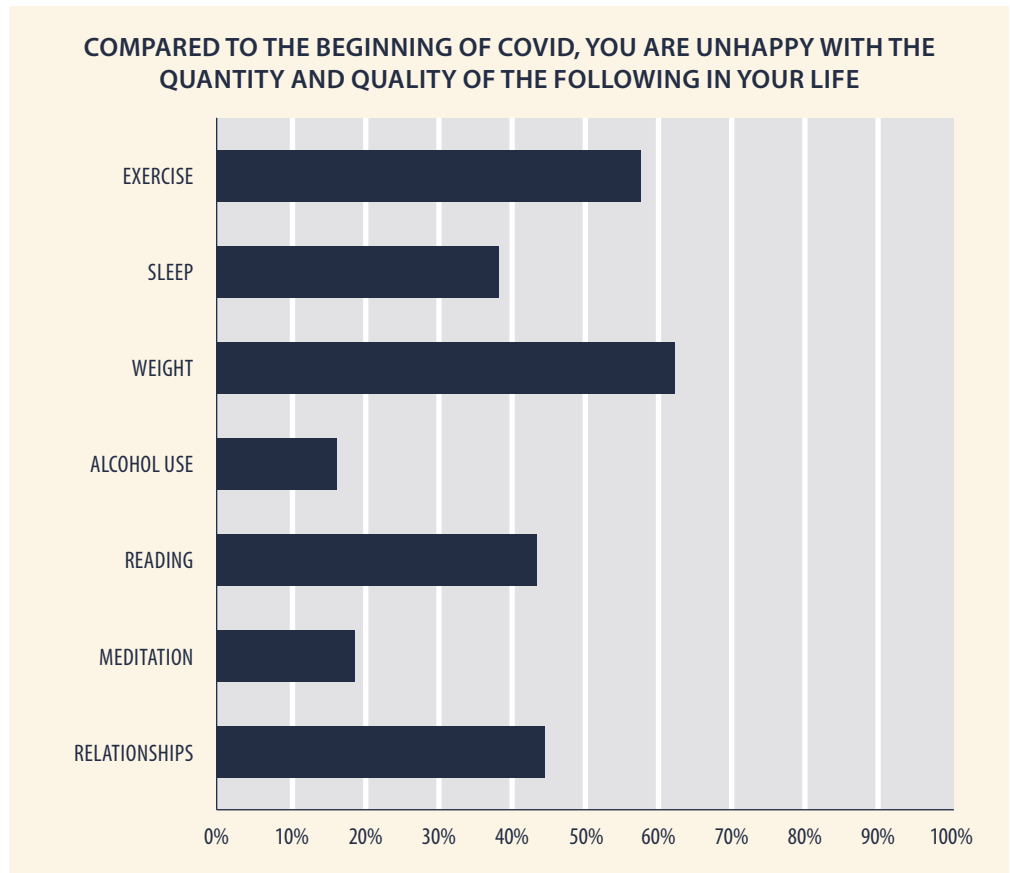
The same or higher than before the pandemic, said 85% of speechwriters. (But the 15% who said it was lower said it loudly, as we will see in the qualitative comments.)

QUICK HITS: SPEECHWRITERS' PERSONAL WELL-BEING

What effect has the pandemic had on your physical and mental health?

"Somewhat harmed," said 61% of speechwriters. Significantly harmed, said 8%. Adding up to a total of 69% of speechwriters who feel somewhat or significantly harmed by the pandemic.

Harmed how?



TELL US HOW YOU REALLY FEEL: AFTER TWO YEARS OF ISOLATION, SPEECHWRITERS UNLOAD

By the numbers, speechwriters' response to Speechwriters' Census 2021 was profound enough.

But as the old saw says, statistics are people with the tears wiped off.

In their answers to the open questions we asked, speechwriters expressed lots of feelings—as articulately as you'd expect from speechwriters.

See how you relate.

A few positives from the last couple of years

Many speechwriters have wished for many years for regular work-from-home days, in order to concentrate on their work. As organizations contemplate a hybrid office environment in the future, speechwriters might win that flexibility going forward.

Other speechwriters said they've appreciated the engagement of their leaders in communication, one saying:

"The emotional quotient of the leadership message has risen. Strategy still counts, but it has to be accompanied by compassion. And that compassion can't just be claimed. Audiences want proof."

"COVID leveled the global playing field and spared no one," said another. "That collective experience will forever reverberate in speeches through personal experiences. I predict many clients will be more comfortable introducing their personal journey through a COVID world and share vulnerabilities. Authenticity will be appreciated—and expected."

However ...

SPEECHWRITERS UNLOAD (CONT'D)

Virtual speeches leave speechwriters cold

"I feel disconnected from audiences, it's hard to measure response, and so I feel like I'm shouting things out into the dark and not even hearing an echo."

Virtual speeches leave speakers cold, too

"Speaker can't draw energy from the room and its reactions."

Speechwriters miss their communication colleagues

"This is my main complaint and source of professional pain. All of our interactions have to have a goddamn *purpose* now. There's no popping into someone's office to say hi, shoot the breeze, tell a joke or a story, stumble on an interesting fact, or even bounce ideas off each other—much less grab a bite or a beer at the end of the day. That was half the fun! Maybe more! Yes, we still have our work, and we work with each other to get it done as well as we possibly can. But we've lost our *work lives*! That in turn makes the 'ditch digging' drudgery part of the job loom much larger, while also making it harder to offset with interactions that aren't task-related. And I hate the hell out of it."

Speechwriters are harried

"It's nice to see leaders using my work but the process is full of rushed development and putting out fires so confidence in rushed projects is not as high."

"Without the big-stage keynotes in the mix, most of what I'm producing feels ad-hoc and workman-like. More tactical than strategic, with no opportunities for thought-leadership."

Some conservative-leaning speechwriters feel alienated from their society—including their speechwriting colleagues

"In the private conversations I've had with many over the past two years, it seems clear that just about everyone from the center-left on over has been plunged into deep, crippling, and depressing levels of anxiety and paranoia. They live in constant fear of seeing their lives or the lives of those they care about ruined for saying or doing 'the wrong thing'—yet have no way to actually know what that is given that the standards are arbitrary and constantly moving. Some cope with this by parroting what they think they 'should' be saying or doing even though they do not believe it, in an attempt to save themselves. Others just try to keep a low profile and pray they won't

do anything to offend those with systemic power. What a depressing time to be alive, especially for those of us in a profession that is supposed to be about exploring new ideas, connecting with people different than oneself, and just bringing a bit of joy to others by making them smile or laugh. We're losing everything that made our profession so colorful, and joyful, and amazing because we seem to be losing the humanity, compassion, and empathy in ourselves. What else can you do but cry? I didn't want to take this survey. I don't want to express my opinions anymore. But I suppose I am holding onto the thinnest reed of hope that maybe someone will read this and 'do something' (and hoping desperately that this is actually anonymous!)"

But mostly, speechwriters worry about speeches, and speechwriting

"Speechwriting as a function is being eroded as executives believe they can communicate just as well through social media. At least from my seat, they don't have the patience (or appreciation) for formal speeches."

"The pandemic and resulting shutdowns have weakened the perceptions of speechwriting as a valuable part of executive communications. The emerging (and I would submit short-sighted) view is that executives can do all they need to do via social media. The underpinnings of speechwriting have been knocked out and it may never return as social media *seems* both less expensive and more direct."

"The formal speech is dying. These days it is a framework for the speaker to weave their own narrative and thoughts around. The verbatim speech is on its way out. I have to be okay with that because my job is to help the speaker convey their messages clearly and succinctly."

"There is simply no appreciation for direct, look-them-in-the-eye speeches and the resulting leverage you can develop from those events. And that's very sad. We know from experience that people believe other people most. And they're savvy enough to know that most CEOs aren't writing their own blogs and social media content. So there's an emerging leadership vacuum where executives *believe* they're communicating because it's their picture on the blog; audiences know better and are increasingly turning to proxy sources of information to make their decisions. Executives are playing with fire because they're ceding their ability to influence to others."

ANALYSIS: WHAT CAN SPEECHWRITERS DO TO TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR OWN DESTINY?

Generally, fighting trends is like swimming upstream—it's not sustainable. But we must remember that much of the statistics and words generated by Speechwriters' Census 2021 were created by a remarkable series of events. And this moment is still so fluid that much is still negotiable—if speechwriters have the will.

Some suggestions—perhaps a bit heavy-handed—shared at the PSA's 2021 World Conference last month. PSA Executive Director David Murray and the other leaders of the PSA are just as interested as PSA members, in ensuring that speechwriting remains a discrete role, not subsumed in the maw of more routine, less rhetorically rigorous or linguistically rich, executive communication activities:

- **Speechwriters do have to embrace that you are more than a script writer**, that you must take more roles than just writing soliloquies for your leader. You must find inventive ways to help your principal communicate beyond the lectern.
- **But also, speechwriters must forcefully defend the traditional, form speech**, as at least an occasional necessity—to mark a moment emphatically, to show naked courage at a moment that requires it, to lay out a vision in long form, using precise words carefully chosen and using the most effective rhetorical structure. Speeches are the “there,” there, in organizations and in leadership.
- **Speechwriters should push hard to get their speakers involved in more in-person events.** What makes a speech a speech—what makes it thrilling for speakers and speechwriters, and everyone involved—is not when a speaker is reading and getting rapt attention from the audience, virtual or otherwise. But when the speaker says something and a ripple of feeling goes out into the room, people start looking at *each other*, galvanized by an idea—galvanized by their humanity! That can only happen in a room, in person. And that's the magic that makes speeches matter—speechwriters, too.
- **Speechwriters should help your exec comms masters get organized.** Exec comms has traditionally been the least strategically disciplined part of a communication department—speeches and other communications being so directly tied to powerful executives' personalities and preferences. In a department without a core mission, everything is a one-off—and there's less call for a serious sustained speech. If you believe in the importance of such speeches, you have to be able to answer the question: Importance to what?

• **Speechwriters are and must be natural defenders of a society of free and open speech.** If a particular speechwriter doesn't feel comfortable and safe among her or his own sistren and brethren, it seems to us that's on both parties to work out—and work *hard* to work out.

• **And speechwriters should go into the office,** as much as you safely can. Speechwriters think of themselves as loners or introverts, but *everyone* draws energy and inspiration and motivation as much from colleagues around them than the corporate mission or even, on many days, the content of the work. The unhappiest comments from speechwriters in response to this survey seems to come out of professional loneliness and boredom—and we truly hope that in 2022, some of that bad feeling will lift—and that we'll be able to celebrate that, in person, at our World Conference, next fall.

Speechwriter, what are your reactions to reading your colleagues' comments (and our advice)? PSA Executive Director David Murray wants to know. Email him directly at psaexecdirector@vsotd.com.