

Speechwriting

Selling Your Work · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

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Yes, I wrote speeches for other people for years. I worked for a speakers' bureau. I also wrote pieces to be spoken, kinds of scripts, for radio commentators, including John Laws.

Speechwriting is one of the best-kept secrets in freelance writing. Plenty of people need speeches written: politicians, business executives, community leaders, best men at weddings. Most of them are terrible at writing for the spoken word. That is where you come in.

The key difference between writing for print and writing for speech is this: a reader can go back and re-read a sentence. A listener cannot. If your audience misses a point, it is gone. So speechwriting demands even greater clarity than print journalism.

Here are the basics:

- Short sentences. Even shorter than journalism. A spoken sentence should be one breath long.
- Simple words. The audience does not have a dictionary. Use "buy" not "purchase", "end" not "terminate".
- Repetition is your friend. In print, repetition is lazy. In speech, it is powerful. "We will fight. We will win. We will not give up."
- Write for the ear, not the eye. Read every sentence aloud. If you stumble, rewrite it.
- Know the speaker. A speech for a corporate CEO sounds nothing like a speech for a football club president. Match the voice.

If you want to do this kind of work, write some sample speeches first. Then contact speakers' bureaus and event companies. Many corporations also hire speechwriters directly. It is steady, well-paid work, and it sharpens every other kind of writing you do.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.