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Speechwriting: Creating Authenticity

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I HATE making speeches. I much prefer standing at the back of the room, cursing and tutting as my speaker mangles my carefully prepared text. This feels like a strange case of role reversal. It reminds of this story about Einstein.

In the 1920s, Einstein spent years going around Europe delivering the same lecture over and over again about the theory of relativity. On one of these occasions, his driver was taking him there and he said, 'Oh for god's sake, Albert. Are you delivering that same bloody lecture again today? I swear, I've heard it so many times, I could deliver it myself.' Einstein, who had a mischievous sense of humour, said, 'Ok zen! Why not! I got an idea. I will stand at the back of the hall wearing ze driver's hat. You can dress like ze professor and deliver ze lecture' 'Alright then' said the driver. 'We'll give it a go.' So Einstein stood at the back of the hall and he watched with wonder as his driver delivered his incredibly complex lecture about the theory of relativity and he got it absolutely word perfect! But then the professor who had introduced him said, 'Thank you very much, Professor Einstein. Now does anyone have any questions?' At which point, someone in the audience asked this total humdinger of a question. But the driver didn't miss a beat. He paused, put his hand to his chin, and said, 'Very good question. And of course it sounds very complicated... But the answer to it is so simple even my driver can tell you...'

I've been a speechwriter for 20 years now. I love what I do. I think it's the best job in the world, although it is a world of contrasts. You walk in the corridors of power, but you have no power yourself. Your words appear in the national press, but you can't lay claim to them. And although you do a job which is superficially very glamorous, the reality is total grind. You spend more of your time in a dark room with a wet towel on your head that you can possibly imagine.

I can still remember the moment I discovered I my passion for speechwriting. It was twenty years ago. I was on a train to Harrogate with the newly appointed Minister for Industry, Alan Johnson, as he went to deliver a speech on employment rights to the TUC. I was his young Private Secretary – the Bernard Wooley job in *Yes, Minister*. As his Private Secretary I had commissioned a speech for him by the officials in the department. I'd been through it and thought it looked pretty good. Lots of stats, long words – sounded very clever, a long list of achievements.

But I watched as Alan went through it. Now Alan is a lovely guy, but he could get a little cross from time to time. 'This is diabolical,' he said, tearing the speech up. 'I'm starting again.' So I watched as he took out his pen and started sketching his own draft completely from scratch. When he'd completed it, I suggested I clear it with the civil service officials responsible for the policy area. 'No, you're alright' he said. This was a problem. I was TERRIFIED! The civil service isn't keen on Ministers going off piste and here I was a new private secretary with a new minister and anything could have happened.

I stood at the back of the room in speechwriter position and will never forget the speech that followed. I was absolutely in awe. It opened like this:

'Stalin. Mussolini. Hitler. The first thing every fascist dictator did on their march to power was attack trade unions. That's because they knew trade unions are a fundamental part of a functioning democracy.'



And so there it was. His thesis set out expertly in just 30 words. And then he set out to prove that thesis through a whole range of measures.

There was a stat: ‘The Conservative Party have held power for longer in Britain in the twentieth century than the Communists did in Russia.’

A good joke (at my expense): ‘My private secretary’s so posh he thought Harrogate was the great public-school bun-theft scandal of the 1970s.’

A metaphor: ‘Employment rights are a safety net, not a trampoline.’

Imagery: ‘The 1970s was the trade unions’ glam rock period when we were all wearing tank tops and flares.’

And heaps of stories about his own experiences as a union general secretary including one where he described having a hot line phone on his desk with a special number on it that was only given to Government Ministers. He said it only rang once during the whole of his time as the CWU’s General Secretary – and then it was someone thinking they were calling the local Chinese takeaway to order a Crispy Duck.

The speech was not reported in any of the papers and has probably been long-since forgotten by everyone else who attended but me. I found this speech profoundly moving. It moved me in several ways.

Firstly it shifted the way I thought and felt – surely the main purpose of any speech. I grew up in London in the 1980s. My perceptions of unions were not very positive. Some of my earliest memories were of the bins piling up outside our flat because the bin-men were on strike. I remember the violent images of miners’ strike on telly.

But Alan’s speech gave me a completely new perspective. I didn’t go rushing straight out to sign up or anything like that, but I did see them differently.

The other thing that moved me was seeing this guy who’d come from a pretty humble background completely smashing his way through the class ceiling and proving that where you come from need be no barrier to where you wind up, simply through the power of words.

This was a speech that Alan had written himself. It was, to use today’s big buzz-word AUTHENTIC. That magical quality. Of course, everything must be authentic these days. Authentic denim. Authentic Thai food. Authentic rock ’n’ roll. And of course authentic leadership.

Trump probably tests to the limit how much we really want authentic leadership, but it is true that a great speech must appear to come from the speaker’s soul. This creates a dilemma. Because of course we know the truth. These speakers do not write their own speeches. Nor should they! It’s a time-consuming task.

Our leaders can either get on with their day jobs – you know, running multi-billion companies or the country – or they can sit around all day flicking through joke books and dictionaries of quotations. This is a task it makes sense to outsource.

This creates a challenge for us speechwriters as we need to write speeches as if they come from our principals. You see, there’s a myth about speechwriters that we’re like puppeteers. This image is projected in programmes like *Yes, Minister*, *The Thick of It* and *The West Wing*. It makes for an attractive narrative - the idea of a servant controlling their master - but it’s nonsense.

The first rule of speechwriting is that when it goes well, it’s because the speaker is a genius. When it goes badly, it’s because the speechwriter is a complete and utter gimp.

The secret to writing speeches for someone else is not to write the speech you want to give, nor to write the speech that you would wish them to give, but to write the speech that they would have written themselves if only they had the time. This makes speechwriting the weirdest job in the world. It’s an act of psychological



transferral. Total and utter empathy!

One of the first people I wrote speeches for was Patricia Hewitt. This meant that when I was a young boozing, smoking, woman chasing rapsCALLION, as Alan described me in his memoirs - I was writing speeches for a 53-year-old feminist. Every day I would get to my desk and try to slip myself into her world, donning my high heels and slipping on my make-up so to speak.

I was writing stories about the campaigns I'd run from Liberty in the 1970s. I occasionally talked about my time working for Neil Kinnock in the 80s. Occasionally, I wrote about my own family life and the challenges that having kids created – even though I had none. It was very weird!

It was most tricky when we disagreed. I remember once when she was giving a speech to One Parent Families, the successor organisation to Gingerbread. I had very strong views on single parenthood, being brought up by a single mum myself. I kept producing drafts for her which reflected my own perspective. They kept coming back. Red pen through thousands of words of text. 'No Simon! You're missing the point!' I felt that she was missing the point but of course the real point was that I needed to write the speech she wanted to deliver, not the speech I wanted her to deliver.

If we are writing for someone who is phenomenally boring, then it is our duty to write a speech that is also phenomenally boring. If you write a Barack Obama speech for someone who has the charisma of a dead slug, you will make them look ridiculous! You're not doing them any good at all.

They said of Ted Sorensen, who was JFK's speechwriter during the 50s, 'when Jack is wounded, Ted bleeds'.

Many of you will know Matthew Parris, one of the best newspaper columnists in the country today, who works on the *Times*. In the early 90s he wrote speeches for John Major. I heard him interviewed once where he talked about helping John Major on one of his conference speeches. He said he knew that the Prime Minister liked to drone and so he wrote a large portion of the speech which could easily be droned ... to his delight, the Prime Minister read it out beautifully.

This is the thing: you have to write to your speaker. It was easy for me with Alan Johnson because we had in common similar background, values and interests. We spent a lot of time together over a number of years, so I could hear his voice in my head.

But what happens if you don't have that access? What do you do if you only get a 15-minute slot with them to prep your speech? What then? Well, I'm going to set out three questions you should ask to get at their heart and soul.

The first question is: What's your favourite joke?

This question instantly gets anyone smiling so it's a good way to break the ice if nothing else. And even if they don't have any jokes to share you can easily share a few yourselves.

Everyone has some level of humour. You just need to work out what level your speaker's at.

At the lowest level, you have speakers who are unintentionally funny.

Like the trade unionist I saw giving a fist-thumping speech at TUC one year. He was talking about some wrangle he was in with his employers and he meant to say it was a Catch 22 situation. But instead of saying Catch 22 he kept saying Catch 69. 'It's a bloody Catch 69!' Worse, he was delivering his speech at a seaside resort where all sorts of illicit shenanigans were taking place.

Or the West African businessman I once saw giving a speech to all his staff about focus and he kept saying 'I want you all to fock us.'



Or there's the famous story about a pompous French Foreign Minister speaking to the European Parliament who kept talking about 'La Sagacite Normande' – the wisdom of the French. He couldn't understand why, whenever he said, 'La Sagacite Normande', the British delegation started laughing. The more he said it - La Sagacite Normande – the harder the audience laughed. It turned out the translator had been saying, 'Norman Wisdom. Norman Wisdom.'

Most people are capable of learning a good joke. I did my Einstein one earlier. Books of Jewish humour are a great resource. There are dictionaries of anecdotes you can get. And of course there are heaps of Churchill jokes for every occasion.

Most are a little bit naughty as well which helps. If you like toilet humour, my personal favourite is the joke about the time in 1951, just before Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, when Churchill went to the urinal and saw Clem Attlee, the then Leader of the Opposition already standing there. Churchill stood in the corner and positioned his body away from Attlee. Attlee leant over, 'What's the matter, Churchill? Something to hide?' Churchill replied instantly. 'Not at all. It's just that I know your first instinct whenever you see anything huge is to nationalise it.'

Some speakers are capable of spontaneous humour which is fantastic. Where the speaker can respond to an unexpected event in the room with a spontaneous quip. Someone laughs unusually loudly - 'Hi mum!' A phone rings - 'Can you tell Barack I'm busy right now...' There's a crash at the back of the room - 'Now look, I don't mind people checking their watch during my speeches, but I do object when they collapse in a heap on the floor.' The technology fails - 'I'm going to use every bloke's ultimate fall-back line now. I'm so sorry. This has never happened to me before.'

The best speakers however are capable of telling self-deprecatory jokes. These are wonderful. They can reduce the most pompous speaker, elevating the audience, making them feel superior. That's why audiences love them!

The comedian, Bob Monkhouse, was the master of this: 'Everybody laughed when I said I wanted to be a comedian. Ha! They're not laughing now, are they?'

Or the businessman I saw start a speech the other day recalling a conversation he'd had with his wife that morning at breakfast. He'd said to her, 'Did you ever in your wildest dreams imagine that one day I'd be running one of the biggest companies in the world?' She looked him in the eye and replied 'Darling, *you* never featured in *any* of my wildest dreams.'

Or the ageing politician who said, 'The other week, I dreamt I was giving a speech to the House of Lords. And then I woke up and discovered I actually was giving a speech to the House of Lords.'

Jokes like this can defuse even the most hostile situations. For instance, just a couple of weeks ago, Donald Trump delivered a speech to the liberal media in Washington at the Grid Iron dinner. He told one self-deprecatory gag after another. He joked about his thinning hair... Jared Kushner's lack of security... Melania leaving him... All issues where he was genuinely sensitive, and the media had given him real challenge. It was that combination that made it so funny. He had them laughing with him, not at him, for possibly the first time ever. A strange act of healing took place. To cap it all, he finished by saying, 'Nobody does self-deprecating humour better than I do. Nobody! It's not even close.'

So that's my first question. What's your favourite joke?

Second question: Where did you grow up?

No one minds being asked to talk about their upbringing, and I have found that you often get the best insights into people's soul by looking at their backstory.



I found it particularly fruitful to look at what they were up to between the age of 16 and 19. This is when some of the most formative experiences of our life take place. First loves. First travels. First homes. It's an exotic and exquisite time of exploration when a speaker's world view is formed.

For instance, when Churchill was 19 he was already developing a fascination with the power of words. He had already written this fantastic essay, *The Scaffolding of Rhetoric*, which you can read online. It is absolute gold dust.

When Margaret Thatcher was that age we were in the midst of the Second World War. There she was. Grocer's girl. Top of the shop. That bunker mentality lasted her whole life.

When Alan Johnson was that age, he'd just been sacked from his first job – stacking shelves in Tesco – and was playing in a band doing Beatles covers.

This knowledge put me in good stead as his speechwriter and I used to plug it mercilessly. When we were at the Department for Trade and Industry together I wrote a speech for him on innovation and globalisation which we called 'Sgt Pepper economics'.

The premise was that had the Beatles carried on producing albums like *Please Please Me* for all of their career then they would have failed after two or three albums. The thing that guaranteed their success was that every year they embraced new ideas, new innovations and new influences from overseas. Whether it was the Beach Boys' vocal harmonies from California or sitars and tablas from India. It made the point for innovation and globalisation nicely.

Now you can debate whether or not that line of argument was necessarily good or not, but what I knew for sure was that this was a line of argument which would resonate with Alan Johnson because of his love of the Beatles. I also knew that the Sgt Pepper reference would pep him up more than reference to some boring McKinsey study.

We played with Beatles angles some more in his speeches. When he did a speech on the Doha development trade rounds we called it 'the long and winding round'. When we went to Education and were talking about school councils, we did a speech on 'power to the pupils'.

I think my judgement is born out in the fact that all the volumes of his autobiography which have been published over the last few years have also had the titles of Beatles songs – *This Boy*, *Please Mr Postman*, *The Long and Winding Road* with the latest volume coming out in just a few months – *In My Life*.

I'm always trying to find out about my clients now. When I go into the office, I'm like Sherlock Holmes, looking at the books they're reading, photos on their desk, signs of what music they like, who they admire. Passions which will bring them to life on stage.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. I went to visit one of my clients at his office. I noticed it had completely empty white walls and I asked him whether he was planning to add any pictures or anything. He replied, 'Yes, I'm going to have a picture of my family over there and there will be an espresso machine over there and on the wall behind me there will be a framed football shirt signed by Pele which my mum got me for Christmas last year'. So that was great! We then went on to talk about his strategic plan for the next three hours but of course all the time I couldn't get the football shirt out of my mind. I knew it could be like gold-dust in selling the strategy.

In the end, we opened the speech with this line: 'Last Christmas my mother got me the best Christmas present that any Brazilian could ever hope to receive.' Incidentally, that is a sentence in which it is very important that every word is in exactly the right order or it can mean something completely different.

He then went on: 'I remember growing up as a kid on the streets of Rio and watching Pele on the TV; watching as he did amazing things like this...' We then played a video of Pele scoring the most magnificent goal, taking the ball from one end of the pitch to the other.



My speaker continued, 'You see what is going on there. He has the opposing team running at him, he has his own teammates trying to catch his attention to pass the ball and he has the crowds chanting. But look how he ignored all of them and just carried on until he scored the goal. Never once in that time did he take his eye off the ball. Now, ladies and gentlemen, this is our problem, the last few years we've taken our eye off the ball, the ball is the consumer, and I'm here to make sure we get our eye back on the ball and that is why I'm introducing this strategy here today.'

We then went on to talk about the detail of the strategy. Even more serendipitously, the strategy had 11 key points to it, so we were able to present these using numbers on football shirts. My speaker said the speech was wonderful.

I want to find out all about their heroes and villains, their triumphs and trials, their ups and downs. This all provides rich material that will liven up their speeches.

Third question: How do you see the future?

Everyone has a unique perspective on the world. It's critical as a speechwriter to understand what that perspective is.

Asking someone how they see things is the key to capturing that perspective. We all carry in our minds a weird surreal view of the world which can be positively psychedelic sometimes and will often be projected in metaphor. Understanding people's metaphors is key to understanding their view of the world. We use metaphor once every sixteen words on average and once you can decode someone's metaphors you've got real insight into their world view.

I work with one company where the CEO tends to talk about his business as if it is a game and he is in a casino having fun. And so, he might talk about rolling the dice, spinning the wheel, or hitting the jackpot. These phrases, which he uses regularly, are phrases that his Chairman would never consider using. The Chair is on a far more noble path, he sees what his business is doing as like being on a journey where there are bumps in the road, occasional roadblocks, and occasionally they might reach a crossroads.

You can work out whether someone's affectionate about something or not. Do they love their company? If so, they'll probably personify it and speak about the heart of the company, its DNA, its values, its attributes and so on. If they're not so keen about it, they'll probably speak about it as if it's a car. They'll be driving change, accelerating reform, putting their foot down and so on and so forth. It's a car crash.

You can tell whether someone has confidence in their share price. Do they speak about it as natural and organic, either through a nature metaphor or the metaphor of personification: i.e. today shares in Sainsbury's jumped, leapt, climbed or they stumbled, took a fall – which would suggest they think they'll get back on their feet again. Or do they talk about their shares sky-rocketing, driving higher or crashing, which suggests they think they'll run out of fuel?

You can even recognise people's political affiliations by the kinds of metaphors they use.

Labour tended to use war and conflict metaphors and so they talked about fighting for the NHS, confronting policy threats and not retreating to the trenches. The Liberal Democrats on the other hand see life as a journey and so they talk about moving forward, clear direction and arriving at a fork in the road. The Conservative Party on the other hand tended to see the world through the metaphor of nature and personification: so they might talk about the heart of our community.

These metaphors are deeply ingrained within the political parties. It was only afterwards that I realised that in fact all of those metaphorical ideas are reflected in the parties' logos: You have the Conservative party with a tree, a symbol of nature; you have the Liberal Democrats whose journey metaphor comes out in their symbol of a dove; and the Labour Party - well the Labour Party use the rose, but the rose was introduced by Peter



Mandelson in the 1980s when they were very deliberately embarking on a strategy of echoing Conservative language so a nature metaphor was appropriate, but of course the real metaphor of choice for Labour is conflict and their real symbol of solidarity is the red flag of revolution, and indeed the *Red Flag* is still sung at every Labour Party conference.

It's different in the United States of course. Traditionally the metaphors used by politicians out there has been very biblical – good versus evil, light versus dark, forward versus back. That was the language of Obama – both Barack and Michelle. Trump has thrown all that into disarray. His metaphors are drawn from a primitive caveman like view of the world. Whether it's women as 'bitches', refugees as 'vermin', African countries as 'shit-holes'.

It's language we've never heard before from a President, but it resonates. The reason it resonates is it's authentic.

That works. The best way to win people over is to speak your truth. What Trump says might not seem like truth to the rest of us, but it seems like truth to him, and that's the thing that makes it stick.

Not many people in politics these days do speak their truth. It's carefully calculated spin lines designed not to upset anyone. We all know that, so we all switch off.

What makes people sit up and listen is when people speak from their heart.

Like Reg Keys, whose son died during the Iraq War, who came out and spoke following the Chilcot Report and said he had 'died in vain'.

Or Tom Evans, the father of little Alfie Evans, the baby whose life support machine was switched off by Alder Hey Hospital a couple of weeks ago, who said, 'No one and I repeat no one in this country is taking my boy away from me. No one. They are not violating his rights and they're not violating my rights.'

Or Ismail Blagrove who said outside Grenfell Tower, 'Do not give me this bullshit about lessons will be learnt. Do not treat this community like some ignorant low life... We're in bullet proof vests – to you and all the billionaire media owners: Rupert Murdoch and all the other mother fuckers.'

These were real people speaking with real passion about issues they really understood. Theirs are the voices that are being heard. Theirs are the speeches which attract hundreds of thousands of views. That's because people are smart. They know when people are being true, and they know when people are not.

That's why I was privileged to work for Alan Johnson. No spin or vanish was necessary. He seems like a nice bloke because he is a nice bloke. I didn't have to do a job on him. He is who he is and that's that. I was basically an overpaid dictation machine. No more, no less.

And that's what every speechwriter should aspire to be. An overpaid dictation machine. If you have to do more than that, there's not a problem with you – the problem is with the principal.

That's how we create authenticity. By presenting people authentically. We must demand of our clients what every audience demands of our speakers: that they speak their truth.

This is my truth. Now tell me yours. I'm taking questions but if they're too tricky, I'll refer you to my driver who's standing at the back.