

The Lost Art of the Great Speech

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— CHAPTER NINE —

“Secrets” of the Pros

Today we are bombarded with offers of “secrets” that are guaranteed to help us live longer, play a musical instrument, hit a golf ball farther, lose weight, pick winning lottery numbers, get rich in real estate, beat the stock market, or restore sexual vigor to a 98-year-old great grandfather. Always there’s the implication that we’ll be “let in on” inside information, good stuff heretofore known to a few cognoscenti who have selfishly kept the information to themselves. Now, so goes the advertising copy, one of the chosen few has broken ranks and will make the miracle-working secrets available to you—for only \$19.95, \$39.95, or \$99.95, plus shipping and handling and sales tax where applicable, allow six to eight weeks for delivery.

In this chapter I’m going to share with you some “secrets” of professional speech writing—immediate delivery, no charge for shipping and handling. Well, actually, the things I’ll be discussing are not secrets at all. They’re proven techniques that speech writers use to make their speeches more interesting, more meaningful, and more dramatic. You can find them not only in well-written speeches but in many kinds of writing, from ad copy to fiction. This chapter will tell you what these techniques are and how to use them in a speech.

The rule of three

Churchill’s famous “blood, toil, tears, and sweat” has been widely misquoted as “blood, sweat, and tears.” Although I would never presume to edit the writing of Churchill, I must admit that the misquoters have a point in their favor. There’s something almost mystical about the number three. It’s as if two are not enough and four are too many. Writers, especially speech writers, have long

recognized this phenomenon and often use a rhetorical device called a triad. Or, as some prefer to express it, “the rule of three.”

“The Rule of Three” is something of a misnomer because there’s no rule involved, just a principle. That principle is that the human ear has a peculiar affinity for triplets. Writers with a good ear for cadence use triads routinely.

A triad is the expression of related thoughts or ideas in a group of three, often with the initial words or sounds the same for all three, and almost always with each element of the triad using the same grammatical form. The elements of a triad can be single words—nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or verbs. They can also be phrases, clauses, even sentences. Some examples will serve better than my definition. Here are some well-known triads:

From the Bible: And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, but the greatest of these is charity.

From the Declaration of Independence: . . . [W]e mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

Julius Caesar: Veni, vidi, vici (I came, I saw, I conquered).

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

Sir Walter Scott: Unwept, unhonored, unsung.

Abraham Lincoln: . . . [T]hat government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

And here’s one of my own that’s not yet famous but a triad can give force to our ideas, eloquence to our words, and rhythm to our sentences.

If you read the examples carefully, you probably noticed that with the exception of *faith, hope, and charity*, each has words or sounds that are repeated in each element of the triad, but not always the initial sounds. If that didn’t register at first, reread the examples.

In the quotation from the Declaration of Independence, our appears as the first word in each element: “our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor.” It’s worth noting also that the last part of the triad is “our sacred honor.” Writers know that the end of a sentence, not the beginning, is the point of greatest emphasis. The authors of the Declaration, being men who placed the highest value on honor, put honor above, which is to say *after*, both life and fortune. If they had said, “our sacred honor, our lives, our fortunes,” the emphasis would have shifted and the effect diminished. It would have left the

Anaphora: repetition that doesn't bore

My triad that begins with "We don't need" provides an example of anaphora, another device professional speech writers use often. Anaphora is nothing more than the repetition of a word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. Speech writers often combine triads with anaphora, but anaphora is also used when more than three elements are needed. For example, the keynote speaker at the 1928 Democratic convention used a sort of double anaphora very effectively to compare the philosophy of Alexander Hamilton with that of Thomas Jefferson, whose philosophy was said to have been the foundation for the ideals of Democrats. This was the convention, by the way, that nominated New York Governor Al Smith to face Republican Herbert Hoover in a contest to succeed Calvin Coolidge.

The keynoter, one Claude Bowers, stated his thesis this way:

To understand the conflicting views of these two men on the functions of government is to grasp the deep significance of this campaign.

Then he supported it with no fewer than six sentences in which he repeated the name *Hamilton* at the beginning of each and the name *Jefferson* at the beginning of a second clause in each.

Now, Hamilton believed in the rule of an aristocracy of money; and Jefferson in a democracy of men.

Hamilton believed that governments are created for the domination of the masses; and Jefferson that they are created for the service of the people.

Hamilton wrote to Morris that governments are strong in proportion as they are made profitable to the powerful; and Jefferson knew that no government is fit to live that does not conserve the interest of the average man.

Hamilton proposed a scheme for binding the wealthy to the government by making government a source of revenue to the wealthy; and Jefferson unfurled his banner of equal rights.

Hamilton would have concentrated authority remote from the people; and Jefferson would have diffused it among them.

Hamilton would have injected governmental activities into all the affairs of men; and Jefferson laid it down as an

axiom of freedom that government is best which governs least.

The effectiveness of the keynote speech evidently did not carry forward into the campaign, for Hoover and the Republicans prevailed in the election.

Here is another fine example of anaphora:

Today, twenty-seven million Americans, one in five—more than the entire population of Canada—are functional illiterates. That means, basically, they can exist. Like turtles on the beach. They are there. Period.

They can write their names—maybe.

They can't read a street sign.

They can't look up a phone number.

They can't count change.

They can't follow directions on a medicine bottle.

They can't fill out a job application, to say nothing of reading a newspaper or Huckleberry Finn.

They are lost, just lost.

The speaker began eight consecutive sentences with *they*. The last one, "They are lost, just lost" gives the listener the feeling of despair that an illiterate person must feel being unable to do all those things.

In his most famous speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. began eight sentences with "I have a dream." Not only did the phrase echo and re-echo throughout the speech, it continues to echo throughout American society today. For good reason, "I have a dream" is the most remembered part of the speech.

Although anaphora is defined as repetition at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences, I have heard speeches in which key phrases are repeated with several sentences or even several paragraphs between them. This device was used to good effect in a commencement address at the Southwest Texas State University several years ago. The inspirational speech was titled "Living With Abandon." The speaker used "If you would live with abandon, you must . . ." five times during her speech—for example, "If you would live with abandon, you must have a self you respect," and "If you would live life with abandon, you must learn to enjoy life's processes, not just life's rewards." Each such use introduced a related discussion ranging in length from a half to more than one full page of typewritten text.

Tongue-twisting repetition

Repetition in various forms can be effective if used with reasonable restraint. Alliteration is one form of repetition that ought to be used with special care. Alliteration is the repetition of several similar sounds in sequence, which is itself an example of alliteration. The late Spiro Agnew, who was Richard Nixon's first vice president, was famous for a speech in which he criticized pessimists for being "nattering nabobs of negativism."

New York Times columnist William Safire, who at that time was a speech writer in the Nixon White House, claims to have originated that phrase, and I assume it served its purpose. Alliteration, however, is difficult to read and may cause even a seasoned speaker to stumble. Occasional alliteration included on purpose is fine, but alliteration that is accidental can be troublesome. I might have said that a good speech writer will "always avoid any accidental alliteration." Try reading that aloud.

Even the best speakers can sound as if they need speech therapy when they come unexpectedly upon some tongue-twisting phrase and sometimes even when they know the phrase is there. A line in a speech to the Democratic Convention in 1984 by the Rev. Jesse Jackson was "I am not a perfect servant; I am a public servant." When Mr. Jackson delivered the line, he almost committed a spoonerism by transposing the first syllables of *perfect* and *public*. He said, "I am not a pu. . ." Then he caught himself and said it right.

If he hadn't stopped himself, the line might have come out "I am not a *public* servant, I am a *perbluc* servant"; or, perhaps worse, "I am not a public servant, I am a perfect servant."

Jackson, incidentally, is a master of rhyme, alliteration, and other rhetorical devices. He speaks with the fervor, color, and richness of an old-time country preacher. Whether you agree with his positions or not, you can learn much from listening to or reading his speeches.

Antithesis

Antithesis, another common and useful device, is simply placing an idea next to one to which it is sharply contrasted or directly opposed. Technically, the first idea is called the thesis; the opposing one is called the antithesis, or antithetic statement. But in the study of rhetoric, the device is usually referred to as antithesis. Again,

some examples make the definition clear. Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" is a classic one.

The main function of antithesis in a speech is to give emphasis to an idea by placing it next to a contrasting idea. The often-quoted lines from Tennyson's poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," illustrate this point:

*Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do or die*

So does John F. Kennedy's memorable dictum from his inaugural address:

Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.

Incidentally, the opening line of that speech was a triad of antithesis:

We observe today not a victory of a party, but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning, signifying renewal as well as change.

Think for a moment about how powerful and appropriate those ideas were, and how much more effective they were because of the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas—"not a victory but a celebration," "an end as well as a beginning," "renewal as well as change." Imagine the passage without the contrast: "We observe today a celebration of freedom, symbolizing an end, signifying renewal." Not a bad triad, but not to be compared with the original.

Articulate speakers and writers throughout history have used antithesis to great effect. Shakespeare often used the device in the speech of his characters. In the play *Julius Caesar*, Cassius said, "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more," and then "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him."

The philosopher Socrates, condemned to death in a highly politicized trial, said this in a statement to his judges:

To die is one of two things: for either the dead may be annihilated and have no sensation of anything whatever, or, as it is said, there are a certain change and passage of the soul from one place to another.

And Lincoln, in his annual address to Congress, on December 1, 1852, used antithesis combined with an anaphoral triad when he said:

Our national strife springs not from our permanent part, not from the land we inhabit, not from our national homestead. Our strife pertains to ourselves.

Antithesis is conflict, and like any conflict, it ought to be resolved when it can be. Drawing again from a speech by Jesse Jackson, here is an example from his speech to the Democratic Convention in Atlanta on July 20, 1988. Mr. Jackson was comparing his background with that of Michael Dukakis, the nominee who eventually lost to George Bush. Here is the antithesis:

His parents came to America on immigrant ships; my parents came to America on slave ships.

And here is how the two contrasting ideas are reconciled:

But whatever the original ships, we're in the same boat tonight.

One of the finest examples of antithesis in a speech comes from an address delivered in Boston more than a century ago by Henry W. Grady, the esteemed editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*. The speech dramatized the economic plight of the South, which then was still largely agrarian. Mr. Grady describes the funeral of a poor farmer:

They buried him in the midst of a marble quarry . . . and yet the little tombstone they put above his head was from Vermont. They buried him in a pine forest, and yet the pine coffin was imported from Cincinnati . . . The nails in his coffin and the iron in the shovel that dug his grave were imported from Pittsburgh. . . . The wool in the coffin bands and the bands themselves were brought from the North. The South didn't furnish a thing on earth for that funeral but the corpse and the hole in the ground.

The last sentence was the dramatic highlight that brought the antithesis points into sharp focus.

Similes tell it "like" it is

A simile is the comparison of one thing to another, usually something of an entirely different category—in other words, a *figurative*

comparison. For example, "Honesty is like pregnancy; either you *is* or you ain't" or "My love is like a red, red rose." A simile almost always uses the word *like*. But a simple comparison does not make a simile. If you said that the Kennedy tax cuts of the 1960s were like the Reagan tax cuts of the 1980s, that would not be a simile.

To be effective, a simile must strike a responsive chord in the audience or make a point relevant to the subject. The honesty-pregnancy comparison is humorous, if a bit gray-bearded, but it does make a point: You cannot be "a little bit honest" any more than you can be "a little bit pregnant." Although similes are often humorous, a simile does not have to be funny to be good.

Often a good simile evokes a mental picture. The Bible tells us that a righteous person is "like a tree planted by the water." That brings forth an image of a tall, sturdy tree.

Like many good speakers, Ronald Reagan knew how to use similes. In a proclamation for Education Day 1986, President Reagan said:

Education is like a diamond with many facets. It includes the basic mastery of numbers and letters that give us access to the treasury of human knowledge, accumulated and refined through the ages; it includes technical and vocational training as well as instruction in science, higher mathematics, and humane letters.

Metaphors evoke powerful images

A metaphor is also a comparison of one thing to another, but it differs from a simile in that it describes the thing being compared as if it actually were the other. For example, "When it came to standing firm, he was the Rock of Gibraltar." The comparison can be made also by attributing characteristics or actions of one thing to another. "In his resolve, he was solid as the Rock of Gibraltar." Here is an excerpt from a speech by a bank executive in which the financial markets are given the attributes of a life-support apparatus:

To one degree or another, the financial markets reflect just about everything that is occurring—or is expected to occur—throughout the world economy. As the economy's life-support system, they provide measures of the blood pressure, heart rate, brain waves, and general health of the system.

Sometimes an entire speech, or a large part of it, is built on a metaphor. An executive of a high-tech company concerned about an impending recession and growing competition from foreign producers of electronics began a speech by announcing that he would be speaking on herpetology, the study of snakes:

The snake I would like to talk about this morning is the boa constrictor. Now . . . some of you may have labored in the past under the impression that the boa constrictor drops out of a tree on its victims and quickly crushes them in the powerful folds of its body. That is not how it operates. On the contrary, extensive research on the part of my staff, which consisted of my secretary looking up "boa constrictor" in the Encyclopedia Americana, has revealed the true modus operandi of this dangerous reptile. Let me read it to you:

"Ordinarily the snake places two or three coils around the chest of its prey. Then, each time the victim relaxes and exhales its breath, the snake simply takes up the slack. After three or four breaths, there is no more slack. The prey quickly suffocates and is swallowed by the boa."

This deadly phenomenon of a victim becoming a willing accomplice in its own destruction is not confined to the animal world.

The big boa we are facing—or rather failing to face—is the aggressive . . . hungry . . . efficient offshore competition, and each coil of the snake is another recession.

The speaker continues the boa-constrictor metaphor by talking about what happens when economic conditions improve and the industry breathes a sigh of relief. Then, he says, "the boa constrictor smiles as we relax again."

This metaphor creates some powerful images, especially the one of the boa smiling and tightening its grip. The boa metaphor slithers along for several paragraphs.

Unless you're trying for a laugh, be careful not to mix your metaphors. I once heard a CEO say, "Our company is at a crossroads today, and we are going to have to navigate some stormy seas in the next few months."

Analogies help explain

An analogy is another type of comparison. Analogies usually compare real similarities—for example, the functioning of the human

heart to that of an automobile fuel pump—but an analogy might also have metaphorical characteristics.

Analogies are especially useful in explaining something that is difficult for an audience to grasp. It is easier to understand a concept if it is explained in terms of something you're already familiar with. When I was learning how to use a computer, my mentor suggested that I think of the computer's hard drive as an office with filing cabinets and shelves containing various equipment and material I would need to work with, and the RAM as a desktop where the work would take place. This helped me to understand some things that had been confusing.

A fine example of an analogy that's part metaphor is found in a speech by Daniel Webster, one of the greatest orators of all times. This is the opening of a speech he delivered to the United States Senate on January 26, 1830:

Mr. President: When the mariner has been tossed for many days, in thick weather, and on an unknown sea, he naturally avails himself of the first pause in the storm, the earliest glance of the sun, to take his latitude, and ascertain how far the elements have driven him from his true course. Let us imitate this prudence, and, before we float farther on the waves of this debate, refer to the point from which we departed, that we may at least be able to conjecture where we now are.

As you have no doubt inferred from the examples, similes, metaphors, and analogies have characteristics in common. At times they seem to overlap. The terms themselves, however, are unimportant. What is important is their effects. The use of good figures of speech can help make your points clear and your speech dramatic and interesting.

Telling it like it isn't

Hyperbole, or exaggeration for the sake of emphasis, is another useful device. You must be careful, however, not to make your hyperbole sound like an advertiser's phony claims of product superiority. Hyperbole used for dramatic effect should be an obvious exaggeration, such as "He was as big as a grizzly bear and twice as mean." Or, "She ran so fast she left her shadow ten yards behind." Or, "This guy has a 500-megabyte memory; and that's 100 megs more than his computer." Or, "My memory is terrible. I went to an Easter egg hunt

for senior citizens. They let me hide my own eggs, and I never found a single one of them.”

And, on the opposite end, don't forget the value of understatement. The late Senator Everett Dirksen is famous for having said, in reference to an extravagant spending bill being considered by Congress, “A billion here, a billion there. Pretty soon it adds up to real money.”

Surprise! Surprise!

Some speakers like to spring dramatic surprises on their audiences. Here, as an example, is a quotation from a speech delivered at a Loyola University graduation banquet. The subject is “In Search of Heroes”:

I was fortunate to have had a friend and business partner who I believe was a hero. His upbringing was probably less promising than yours. His name was Marion Morrison. He was born of simple surroundings in a small Iowa town. His father was a druggist; his mother a telephone operator. He moved to California when he was young. He went to Glendale High School, then to USC. He took a summer job at a movie studio in the late 1920s and later started acting in movies for Raoul Walsh, who changed his [the young actor's] name to John Wayne.

Had he been less skillful at constructing a speech, the speaker might have started that little story by saying something like, “Let me tell you about my friend and business partner, John Wayne.” Instead, he gave the Duke's real name first and saved the kicker until last with a sort of matter-of-fact statement that Marion Morrison's employer had changed the young actor's name to John Wayne. It's not hard to imagine the surprise and delight the audience felt upon learning that the hero Marion Morrison was really the big guy who later dispatched hundreds of assorted train robbers, cattle rustlers, and other bad guys. It seems likely that the audience listened with anticipation to the rest of the speech.

Here's another example of dramatic surprise. It's excerpted from a speech I wrote for delivery by a Japanese government official at a conference in Orlando, Florida:

It is especially appropriate that we find ourselves here in Orlando, the gateway to Disney World, and in time to help

celebrate the birthday of one of the best-known and most-admired of all Americans—one who is loved throughout the world, and most especially in Japan—[LONG PAUSE] Mickey Mouse. Let us hope that this association will be as youthful and vigorous in its fiftieth year as Mickey is today.

Commentator Paul Harvey uses a similar technique in his commentaries titled “The Rest of the Story.” The difference is, Harvey's audiences are expecting a surprise ending and therefore the effect of the surprise is blunted somewhat.

From here to there

One of the marks of a professional writer is the ability to move smoothly from one subject to another—in other words, to use transitions effectively.

Good transitions are important in any kind of writing, but especially in speeches. If you're writing an article or a book, you can use subheads, bullets, or other typographical devices to tell the reader you're changing subjects—as I have done throughout this book.

In a speech, you must find other ways to make your transitions. Sometimes a slightly exaggerated pause or emphasis of a word or phrase serves as a transition. Pauses and emphases are the punctuation of speech: A short pause is a comma, a longer pause is a period. An even longer one might be equated with a typographical bullet. In writing speeches, I often skip extra lines or even write the word *PAUSE* in parentheses to indicate a pause used as a transition.

Without transitions, your speech can seem choppy or jarring. Transitions help ensure clarity by helping the listener shift mental gears. They are used to connect major parts of a speech—for example, the opening to the body and the body to the ending—and points to subpoints. They also signal the listener that a change of position, a contradiction, or an example is coming.

A transition can be a single sentence, a phrase, a word, or even a number, as in a list of numbered points.

Some common and simple transitions are *nevertheless . . . for example . . . let's examine that . . . however . . .* The list is almost endless.

The repetition of a word, sentence, or phrase can be a transition. In the discussion of rhetorical devices I gave several examples of anaphora, the repetition of initial words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or paragraphs. In one of the examples, the keynote speaker at the 1928 Democratic convention began

six consecutive sentences with the name *Hamilton*. He was, you will recall, comparing Hamilton with Jefferson, and each repetition was, in effect, a transition to another comparison point.

Here is a good example from a speech by the executive director of the Georgia Ports Authority in which he is delivering a progress report of port improvements:

This project, plus the new Savannah River Bridge, which is opening this spring, will catapult the Savannah harbor into the modern era of shipping—at least so far as channel width and height requirements are concerned. Channel depth, however, is another matter.

The last sentence, “Channel *depth*, however, is another matter,” is a transition. It leads to a several-paragraph discussion of the need to deepen the channel in order to accommodate modern cargo vessels. The use of *however* and the stress on the word *depth* make the transition especially effective.

A question can sometimes serve as a transition. An executive of a company involved heavily in international trade spends several minutes discussing developments in recent years that have turned the world into a global marketplace. Then, abruptly, he asks, “What does all this mean to our company?”

The question is a transition that moves the discussion from the general—world events—to the specific, the practical effects of those events on his own company.

In reading and listening, we are barely conscious of transitions, but they are there, nevertheless, in all good writing. We usually become conscious of them only when they are not there.

As you continue to refine your speech-writing and speaking skills, you will find yourself becoming more conscious of transitions and how they contribute to ease of understanding.

In the next chapter, we’ll continue the discussion of rhetorical devices and other professional speech-writing techniques. Incidentally, many of the techniques we’ve discussed, and will be discussing in the next chapter, can be found in writing other than speeches. Watch for them as you read newspapers, magazines, and books, and, of course, listen for them in any speeches you might hear. As you become more conscious of the techniques, you’ll become more adept at using them.