

4

Research

It's 4:30 in the afternoon on a fall day in 1984. At an upstate New York high school football stadium, three people dressed like Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and Harold Ramis are onstage, in front of a giant American flag, warming up the crowd.

They're singing a parody of that summer's box office hit. But instead of "Ghostbusters," they yell "Fritzbusters," poking fun at the Democratic candidate for president, Walter "Fritz" Mondale.

Then comes the main event. To chants of "Four more years! Four more years!" President Ronald Reagan steps onstage and begins his campaign stump speech. He starts this way:

During our flight into Link Field, Air Force One might have gotten off a little, a little off course. The pilot said he had a little trouble finding Broome County. I told him to radio down and ask a simple question: Which way EJ?

The crowd roars. But one teenager listening to the speech is amazed.

The boy knows his local history—how a Binghamton-area entrepreneur built a shoe factory, Endicott Johnson. EJ. How word of it spread to Europe. How immigrants arriving down at Ellis Island looking for work asked people in the only English they knew, "Which way EJ?"

But how did Reagan know that?

Eric knows now. The answer comes at that moment of truth when speechwriters realize their real title is often "speech researcher."

Research—what to look for and where to look—forms the subject of this chapter. Traditional speech texts urge a certain method when it comes

to research: select a topic, narrow it, investigate different views, and evaluate every source for VCR (validity, currency, and reliability).

That's great when you have the time. But in politics, you're more likely to experience what Bob did while working for House Majority Whip David Bonior. Once, Bonior walked by Bob's desk at about 11:45 in the morning and said, "I think I want to do a one-minute." One-minutes are the sixty-second speeches any member of Congress can deliver in the half-hour after the House goes into session.

"Great. When do you need it?"

"Noon."

Not much time for research when you're typing as fast as you can, pulling a draft from the printer, and racing up the back stairs of the Capitol and onto the floor just before your boss walks to the lectern.

In politics, one constant is the impossible deadline. That doesn't make research less important. It is essential in political life. Much of what traditional textbooks urge does get done in a political office—by someone, at some point.

There are three key areas, though, that speechwriters should research themselves:

- The event—the logistics about the group, audience, format, and venue
- The ideas—the substantive points you'll make
- The poetry—the stories, examples, and quotes that can enhance the ideas

For each, we begin with the basics: what you need to find and the sources that help.

RESEARCHING THE EVENT

"Hey there."

You look up. Looming over you is a legislative assistant, the LA—or your boss's scheduler; the chief of staff; or, depending on where you work, maybe the boss.

"We've got a speech to some trade group. They put it on the schedule yesterday. Need it by tonight."

The ubiquitous *they*. That's so you know complicating your life isn't their fault.

"No problem," you say, wondering what you'll have to cancel to get it done. Dinner? Certainly the softball game. "You got the invitation?"

And soon you do. It tells you the date, time, place, and maybe a sentence about the group's mission and what it hopes to hear. But you have questions the invitation doesn't answer, starting with one that goes to a steadfast rule of persuasion.

Who is the audience?

How large is it? If the audience is forty people, talking points might be more appropriate than a formal text. If it's a thousand, you might want to use a teleprompter.

Knowing your audience also means answering the questions that fall under the catch-all term we described in Chapter 3: *demographics*. Age, religion, sex, income—knowing this and more about your listeners provides clues to what will make people cheer or sit on their hands.

You'll want to know:

Why did this group invite you or your boss to speak? Are audience members likely to be happy or upset about a vote—and should you write about that?

Has the speaker appeared before this group in the past? If so, when, and what was the context?

Whom does this crowd admire? Will quoting people, mentioning their accomplishments, or recognizing them if they are in attendance have particular resonance?

Does the audience include “influencers”—other legislators and policy makers? Will acknowledging their interests help further yours?

What about members of the media? While these days, it's best to be safe and assume that someone will share whatever is said, you and your speaker will want to know if the event is officially “on the record” or not.

Now you have a clearer picture of the audience. But you need to ask logistical questions, too.

Where is the speech: what town, what building, what room? Did anything significant happen in that spot, recently or in history?

What's the setup of the room: dais with a podium, auditorium style, round tables? Will it be awkward for the speaker to go down into the crowd to shake hands and mingle? Or does the group expect that?

What does the stage look like? Are there screens, and what's on them? Should you use slides or video?

Is there Q&A after the speech? If so, what tough questions are people likely to ask? Do you want to deal with those questions preemptively in the speech, where you can shape an answer the way you want?

Who else is on the program? Who is introducing the speaker; do they know each other?

What time of day is the speech? Audience members are likely to be more focused for a serious policy discussion during a morning keynote than they would be during an after-dinner speech or a reception where everyone is standing and trying to balance a plate of hors d'oeuvres with a glass of wine.

How long is the time slot; how long have the organizers asked your boss to speak? Conference organizers often divide up speakers into 30- to 60-minute segments. That doesn't mean speakers have to talk that long. In fact, we recommend they don't. "Typically," writes educator and researcher Wilbert McKeachie, "attention increases from the beginning of the lecture to 10 minutes into the lecture and decreases after that point."¹ There is a reason TED Talks are 18 minutes or less. As curator Chris Anderson puts it, "18 minutes is short enough to hold people's attention span . . . it's also long enough to say something that matters."²

Questions about audience, venue, and format influence what issues to cover, how to cover them, and for how long. That's why many speechwriters, the authors included, start with this list of questions, sometimes taped to the wall next to their computer.

Sources That Work

Other Staffers

Even if your boss is a state legislator, you can be almost certain that someone on staff or at the state party headquarters has worked with the group that issued the speaking invitation. Those people will know about the event—why the invitation came, what the group cares about, and whether it wants a Q&A. Call them. They will also know who can answer the questions they can't. Beyond these specific questions, they will want to be involved, and you will want them to be. They'll add expertise, and the relationship you build will come in handy later.

The Group's Communications Director

Always deal with communications directors. The odds are they can answer a lot of questions themselves, and if they refer you to other people, using their name will get you faster and more candid results. Meanwhile, since communications directors often have an eye for effective detail, you can pick up important information about the event.

The Website

Often the group's website provides important details about the event not included with the invitation: ticket prices, a picture of the hall, info on other speakers. Exploring the website has many other uses as well. Clicking through issues, speeches, the "About" section, or the "Our History" tab for half an hour should give you plenty of useful information.

RESEARCHING THE IDEAS

Like your family doctor, a speechwriter can't know everything about every issue. That's what specialists are for. In politics, all staffers are specialists. Learn to use them. Speeches take a team effort. Even if you are listed on a staff roster as *the* speechwriter, don't think you're on your own. Other staffers should know off the top of their heads what might take you a day to find out. And buried somewhere under the piles of memos, bills, clips, and reports on their desks is material you should read.

Equally important, political speeches shouldn't start from scratch. Whether you're writing a floor speech on a fisheries bill or a convention keynote on children's health, memos and white papers covering these issues already exist. Ask around the office. Explore the research services available for Congress, state legislatures, or executive agencies. Whether you are the sole staffer for a small-town alderman or one of many legislative assistants for a U.S. senator, the times that *nothing* exists for you to use will be very, very rare. Your workload is too great to ignore those who can help.

Sources That Work

Other Staffers

Just as other staffers are vital sources about the event, they also know issues. But like you, your fellow staffers are overworked. That doesn't mean they're too busy to sit down and talk about what should be in the speech. And they'll happily hand you a stack of memos, too.

While you must check for conflict-of-interest problems, you might also ask staffers from cabinet agencies for ideas, or even the media relations staff of the group that sent the invitation. To let them *write* the speech, or even a draft, would be both unethical and fraught with danger. To see what approaches they value or seek out their views on a policy, though, makes good sense.

Just remember that you're consulting people for source material, not for actual writing. Speechwriters sometimes laugh at the clichés and turgid boilerplate that other staffers are known to suggest. We're ashamed to admit we've been known to join the laughter. But who cares about the writing style of a policy expert? *You* know why active verbs are essential to a speech on the stimulus package. Policy wonks know how the stimulus actually works.

Old Speeches

The story you'll find in this chapter's "Behind the Scenes" box is here not just as an interesting bit of historical trivia but as an object lesson for speakers and speechwriters. Like those Martin Luther King Jr.'s aides in 1963, staffers sometimes complain about hearing the same old material. Pay no attention.

First, powerful material doesn't grow on trees. Finding something good, then discarding it, is like throwing out a great recipe for chocolate chip cookies because you've already made a batch.

Second, audiences are most likely hearing material for the first time. They haven't been overexposed the way some staffers have.

Third, even listeners who have heard the speaker want to hear the greatest hits. Nobody goes to a Rolling Stones concert and says, "I hope Mick skips 'Satisfaction.'" In politics, the well-known lines can create a sense of communal anticipation and shared accomplishment. Think about the Bernie Sanders stump speech in 2016.

Our campaign's financial support comes from more than 1 million Americans who have made more than 3.7 million individual contributions. That is more individual contributions than any candidate in the history of the United States up until this point in an election.

And, you know what that average contribution was?

[Crowd yells in response] Twenty-seven dollars!

If Sanders skipped this "call and response," the crowd would have felt deprived. He also would have deprived himself of the chance to remind people why they supported him and bask in the applause. Recycled material allows

speakers to recite lines and, like any actor, get good at them. It lets them look out at the crowd and build smoothly toward a climax with the confidence that comes only from knowing the material.

Political speech is one time when familiarity shouldn't breed contempt. Everyone in politics has seen candidates stammer over a stump speech at the start of a campaign—and become powerful before Election Day. Practice makes perfect. As you amass the material you will use in a new speech, begin by looking back at old ones to see what's worth using again.

Journals and Magazines

Serious does not mean dry. The term *magazine* derives from the rooms that used to store ammunition. Today, plenty of magazines hold the ammunition politicians need. The *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, the *Economist*, *National Review*, the *New Republic*, and the *Nation*, as well as publications geared toward technology, the workplace, and the economy, like *Inc.*, *Fortune*, *Wired*, and *Fast Company*, all feature interesting articles, full of substantive nuggets to use—or to note and file for later.

Beyond providing ammunition, sources like the ones mentioned have the broadening effect those who speak or write about complex issues need.

And because people in political life can't limit their concerns to narrowly partisan issues, we also suggest including a regular diet of academic journals, whether about global issues like *Foreign Affairs*, or economic issues like *Harvard Business Review*, or specifically politics like the *American Journal of Political Science* or *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, or specifically the intersection of speech and government like *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*.

With so many magazines and academic journals now online, you may need to subscribe. It's worth it. The authors spend some time every day—usually with morning coffee—clicking through our favorite list to see what piques our interest.

You should also make a conscious attempt to read views you oppose. It is sometimes uncomfortable. We are as subject to cognitive dissonance as anyone else. But we all need to escape the limitations of an office or circle of friends where everyone shares the same biases.

Web-Based Research

With so much content online, it's easy for deceptive websites to fool harried researchers. Writers, beware.

It is also easy to overdo web-based research. You don't have to become an expert; for most political speeches, it's a waste to spend hours and hours

wading through the tons of position papers you can click through. No matter how important they consider their own issues, most audiences don't expect to hear about them the entire time a speaker is at a podium.

That said, writers should still use the internet to research issues and details, even if they know the topic well. To write from memory about, say, Hurricane Maria or the crowds during the "March for Our Lives" rallies is to deprive yourself of the best details—not to mention to trust your memory more than your memory may deserve.

Go beyond articles and position papers to spend a few minutes clicking through pictures of splintered boats piled on top of one another, or children on their parents' shoulders holding homemade signs. A huge advantage of the internet is that you can essentially return to a time you're writing about and experience the happenings right along with the people who were posting on social media or being covered by reporters. Take advantage of that to bring speeches to life.

The Speech Conference

You may notice that so far, we haven't referred to the way that political staffers, nurtured on stories about Ted Sorensen's long hours spent with John F. Kennedy, or Jon Favreau's partnership with Barack Obama, envision the speechwriting process happening: through meetings with the boss.

Speech conferences can help enormously when they happen. They allow speakers to bless the general thrust of your approach and allow you to get a sense of what the speaker wants. It doesn't hurt that a speech conference also helps the boss appreciate your brainpower. If you come armed with a perceptive comment—even one—it can help your career.

At a meeting in 2005, after Condoleezza Rice became secretary of state, Chris Brose—then a junior writer—raised his hand and asked a thoughtful question. Rice asked her chief of staff, "Who's that skinny, red-haired guy?" Soon Brose was her chief speechwriter, traveling around the world with her and offering advice on policy as well as language.³

Such stories are exceptions, and what staffers call "face time" doesn't always produce the best material. Consider these meeting from the point of view of the speaker.

The boss gets off the phone after twenty calls spent winning support for a vote on the floor to see a few people poking their heads in the door. "Speech conference about tomorrow's event. Chamber of Commerce," someone says.

The boss struggles to remember. "How'd that get on the schedule?"
"You approved it."

“Okay. Come in.”

You hear the reluctance as you step in the office and take a seat.

The boss suggests a few lines. (*Do something about innovation. You know. Helping entrepreneurs with small business loans.*) There might be fifteen minutes of conversation, during which you can ask a few questions that will help. (*Do you want to be partisan? Do you want to mention your vote on House Bill X?*) You walk off feeling you didn't gain much, while the speaker happily thinks you now have everything you need—except for a bit of what nonwriters like to call wordsmithing.

Occasionally this might even be true. If speechwriters do their jobs, you will transcribe the notes and make sure to include the page of usable material the meeting produced; speakers will see their words and feel they haven't been ignored.

A better approach is to do your homework. Enter the meeting armed with ideas and questions. Expect that a busy schedule has left the boss little time to think about a speech in advance, much less formulate a cohesive argument or outline. Don't expect much from asking, “So, what do you want to say?” Instead, like a good investigative reporter, offer something that could provide a thoughtful response. Ask about things you already know, but haven't heard from the boss's mouth.

“I heard you say once that your parents owned a small business. What was that like? Did your parents talk about business at the dinner table? Did you ever work for the family business?”

A politician may answer, “Well, you would never use this in a speech, but . . .”

“You'd never use this” is a sign to start typing. Speechwriters find ways to connect personal answers to policy positions in ways that will bring the boss's speech to life. And don't forget: the audience response to that kind of interesting and concrete detail will make the boss more likely to sit through another speech conference.

If you can't get face time with the boss before a particular speech, don't despair. The people who do spend more time with the boss know a lot; it's worth the time to build relationships with them. When the chief of staff returns from an event you didn't attend, ask how it went. Talk to the executive assistant about what the boss said about the event. Call the boss's college roommate, or tennis partner, or spouse.

And, of course, whenever possible, go listen to the boss speak. You'll see for yourself what material worked and what didn't. You'll hear what the boss added while in the car on the way to the event. Then, if there is one, make sure to stay for the Q&A. This is when you will discover the anecdotes you can use again and again.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Wyatt Tee Walker

He has been a theologian, antiapartheid activist, author, and pastor, but Wyatt Tee Walker is best known for being Martin Luther King Jr.'s chief of staff during the days of the March on Washington. In 2008, he told CNN what it was like to be behind the scenes.

It turns out King's staff were distressed that King would use the same old speech. "The inner circle of Dr. King," Walker told CNN reporter Soledad O'Brien, "felt that the 'I have a dream' portion was hackneyed and trite because he used it so many times in other cities."

So, the night before the 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, they decided he should have a new ending. They called it "Normalcy never again."

Wyatt said, "I remember very vividly Andy Young and I going up and down the strips of the hotel taking drafts of what we thought should be a new climax."

King took the new speech with him to the National Mall the next morning. He came to the new ending. And paused.

"I was out in the crowd somewhere," Walker remembered, "and when he swung into 'I have a dream,' I said, 'Oh [expletive deleted]' . . . after all that work."

Walker had forgotten what staffers often forget at their peril: what they hear every day, what they find hackneyed and "trite," is fresh to almost everyone else.

Source: This "Behind the Scenes" box is based on Soledad O'Brien's interview for CNN's *Special Investigations Unit* titled "MLK Papers: Words That Changed a Nation," which aired February 24, 2007. The transcript of the program can be found at <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0702/24/siu.01.html>.

RESEARCHING THE POETRY

"Devote more time to the poetry than substance," Peggy Noonan, columnist and former Ronald Reagan speechwriter, says.⁴

She means that for a speechwriter, more important than the actual points you'll make are the stories, details, examples, quotes—and, yes, sometimes even poetry—that make speeches inspire, excite, and move audiences.

She is absolutely right. Policy people can hand you policy ideas. No one but a speechwriter, though, is likely to suggest the kinds of things that affect an audience: a clever analogy, inspirational story, or genuinely funny joke.

We've been in lots of speech conferences that go something like this: Policy people are asking about nuances in a bill and wondering whether we're using "current numbers."

After a while, the speaker looks at the speechwriter. *What do you need?* her face asks.

“Did you see Trevor Noah last night?” the speechwriter asks. “He said something you could use.”

Sometimes other staffers roll their eyes. But as you will see, the “poetry” some view as useless ornament is what audiences remember. It’s what moves audiences to march. Because no one else on staff usually cares about that material, the speechwriter must. Because there is no one else to help, it takes the longest time. It’s not unusual to spend an entire day finding the right story or detail—and then an hour to write the whole draft. That isn’t a mistake; it’s a sign you’re doing things right.

Sources That Work

Personal Contact

The more time you spend with the boss, the more chance you’ll have of uncovering something unexpected.

Once, when Bob worked for Lloyd Bentsen, the senator from Texas, he heard Bentsen tell someone else a story about how his father took him to get his tonsils out.

“Thirty-five dollars,” the doctor said.

“Kind of steep,” Bentsen’s father replied. “If I had five kids, could I get a discount?”

“You don’t have five kids.”

“My brother does.”

The next day, Bentsen remembered, he and his cousins all came in and got their tonsils out, and Bentsen’s father got a discount.

Bentsen thought he was telling a funny story. To Bob, the story was funny—and said a lot about the strides the country had made in health care. Furthermore, Bentsen could tell the story well, and it wasn’t just surprising for the audience. It had the virtue of being true. That’s why the story found its way into a speech about health care—and about ten speeches after that.

Websites

We’ve already discussed the way web-based research helps with the ideas. It helps with the poetry, too. Speechwriters should search for quotes, quips, and stories that complement the substantive points to make speech memorable. There are infinite ways to do that with web-based research. Below, we offer just a few.

Sites like *history.com* or *onthisday.com* list noteworthy events, famous birthdays, and deaths. Will you find an anniversary or something else interesting that has a direct connection to your speech? The answer is “yes” too frequently to call it serendipity.

Google “political jokes” and you’ll see links to cartoons, the best late-night jokes, and a wealth of other items. Many of them are useless. But sometimes, all you need is one.

You can even visit *mentalfloss.com*, *howstuffworks.com*, and other general knowledge sites to discover interesting and usable tidbits.

The authors have gone to websites to find song lyrics, lines from movie scripts, the etymology of words and phrases, the genealogy of speakers, and passenger logs of ships arriving at Ellis Island. All, and many, many other searches, have helped make points more memorable.

Newspapers

Of course, newspapers are sources for ideas. There are great websites that aggregate important stories for economical reading, like *theweek.com*. Others focus specifically on politics, like *Axios*, *Politico*, *Roll Call*, and the *Hill*.

But look at the front page of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or any local newspaper. You will see as many as half its stories now use anecdotal leads relevant to some public policy issue. They’re the issues that matter to voters and elected officials: jobs, health care, education, climate change, poverty, taxes. Use those stories; they are often moving as well as true, making them as valuable as the ideas they illustrate. And cite the paper and the journalist. It will make clear that your boss doesn’t just read position papers but—like the audience—reads the newspapers.

TV Late-Night Shows

“I see the Iraqis are writing a constitution,” Jay Leno said once, as the Bush administration was beset with news about Abu Ghraib prison, not to mention its own illegal wiretaps. “Why not give them ours? Written by some smart guys, it’s lasted for two hundred years—and we’re not using it anymore.”

Ancient as that seems, one of our clients, who runs a nonprofit that tracks judicial appointments, has been using that joke ever since. “Always gets a laugh,” she says.

In Chapter 9, you’ll read more about the challenges of using humor in politics: It needs to be edgy—but not raunchy. Politicians love Chris Rock, but they can’t quote anything he says. On the other hand, they *can* quote the late-night talk show hosts. And now it’s easier than ever to use jokes from Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, or some of the cleaner Trevor Noah or Samantha Bee routines. All are online.

Other Speeches

Speechwriters should make a daily stop at Stephen Lucas’s *www.americannrhetoric.com*. There you will find hundreds of great speeches, many with

not just text, but audio and video as well. You might find a moving story to suit your immediate needs, and you'll run across stories and memorable lines to save for other days.

Similarly, *TED.com* has speeches that are not only well produced but noteworthy for their use of story, humor, evidence, surprise, and brevity. *Vital Speeches of the Day*, a magazine that has been reprinting speeches since 1934, appears each month with a collection of notable speeches, sometimes about political issues, but always presented without editing.

You can find other political speeches on C-SPAN, in the *Congressional Record* (www.congress.gov/congressional-record), or posted on the personal websites of individual members of Congress. Regularly comb through them. Often, when politicians publish speeches, staffers remove the jokes and clean up places that didn't work. They will label speeches "As Prepared" vs. "As Delivered." All versions are useful because they were written for people with the same needs as your boss.

As we were writing this tip, we decided to test whether online speeches do in fact contain usable material. We picked a Democratic senator at random—Dick Durbin of Illinois. One of us went into his website and clicked on a speech from May 21, 2018, about the state of American politics. In it he quotes Franklin Delano Roosevelt:

In his first inaugural address, in the midst of America's gravest crisis since the Civil War, Franklin Roosevelt acknowledged: "Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment." But he also reassured us that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

Interesting. Durbin quotes the sound bite we all know, but he includes some of the lesser-known context. Not bad. A Democratic politician could use that. We might find even more of the details about how that line came to be, and make it into a story. We'd certainly put the FDR quote into a file and note it for future use. Test successful.

Books

Books still exist. We googled it.

Despite the wealth of material on the internet, anyone speaking often—or writing speeches often—should amass a library of the immensely useful books of quotes, anecdotes, jokes, and other materials that can bring a speech to life.

Some look down their noses at quote books, arguing that they allow speakers to fake erudition.

Within limits, using such books is ethical and useful. Without quote books, you sacrifice the best way to find the wealth of pithy, insightful, and witty things others have said, or the moving—and often true—accounts of people whose stories can move, inspire, or illustrate your points. Among them: CQ Press's *Respectfully Quoted*; Lewis D. Eigen and Jonathan Siegel's *Macmillan Dictionary of Political Quotations*; the humorous books written by, or the collections edited by, James Humes, such as *Speak like Churchill, Stand like Lincoln* or *Roles Speakers Play*; Clifton Fadiman's *Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*; Mo Udall's classic, *Too Funny to Be President*; or any of the books published by former senator and presidential candidate Bob Dole.

One particularly useful book: Ralph Keyes's *Quote Verifier*. It's incredible how often the speaker who usually gets credit for a famous line never uttered it. Did Benjamin Franklin say, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"? Check Keyes's book.⁵ You'll learn that Franklin did, but he didn't claim credit. He would say it was an old saying or a proverb. You can still use the quote. Mentioning who really said it makes listeners see that speakers care about telling the truth.

In addition to quote books, speech anthologies such as William Safire's *Lend Me Your Ears* offer not only a treasure chest of significant speeches but contextual analysis as well.

Biographies and historical accounts—like those by David McCullough (*Truman, The Wright Brothers, 1776*), Ron Chernow (*Hamilton, Grant*), Walter Isaacson (*Benjamin Franklin, Leonardo da Vinci, Steve Jobs*), and Doris Kearns Goodwin (*Team of Rivals, No Ordinary Time*)—offer the kind of detail that can make analogies moving and memorable.

Even books you might find in the business section or under social psychology can be helpful. Malcolm Gladwell (*Tipping Point, Blink, Outliers*) and Dan Pink (*When, Drive, To Sell Is Human*), for instance, each offer loads of interesting findings that can help illustrate your point. That's not surprising. Dan's a former speechwriter, and, full disclosure, Eric shared an office with him.

To be clear: Leafing through a book in the moments just before a speech is due creates a sure way to strike out. At times like that, nothing looks interesting, funny, or remotely usable.

Instead, read books when you have time to think. One of us once gave a book of political jokes to his boss, suggesting he leave it in the bathroom and check off the ones he liked.

He came back a week later. He'd checked off only fifteen jokes. That made it well worth the purchase price.

Podcasts

Podcasts have become an invaluable research tool. Political podcasts like *Pod Save America* (created by former Obama scribes and press aides Jon Favreau, Jon Lovett, Tommy Vietor, and Dan Pfeiffer) and *Slate's Political Gabfest* (run by journalists John Dickerson, Emily Bazelon, and David Plotz) offer sharp commentary. NPR's *Freakonomics Radio*, WNYC's *Radiolab*, and *TED Radio Hour* might be considered general interest but cover ideas essential to anyone in politics. Even the storytelling of the *Moth* has material you can use. Thanks to each, and many others, it's possible to find poetry while exercising on the treadmill or commuting to and from work.

Admittedly, it's difficult to affix a sticky note to a podcast. It's like that old political joke about putting campaign bumper stickers on cars: it's easier when they're parked. When you hear something great on a podcast, make a note in your phone of which episode you heard, or work out some other system to help you remember. It's worth the trouble.

This brings us to a final "source" for research: become your own source.

Personal File

Every time you see, hear, and then use a joke, story, or interesting fact, you have found a bit of material with an important stamp of approval: yours. Whether you are a politician thinking about your own speeches or a staffer writing them for a boss, begin a file. Years ago, this would have meant a cumbersome system of note cards in a file drawer. Now it is easy to copy and paste each joke, quote, interesting litany, startling statistic, or even—it's possible—thoughtful or clever line you have thought up yourself. When you find something great or watch the speaker use it wonderfully, you think you'll remember it forever. In fact, if you don't add it to your inspiration file, you'll forget it next week. Don't let the good ones get away.

FINAL WORDS

Keeping the sources we've talked about in mind, let's return to the 1984 Ronald Reagan speech in Binghamton, New York, that began this chapter.

It wasn't a big event. For the Reagan White House and reelection campaign, it was a *typical* event. Yet Eric has repeated the anecdote for years—not only as an "origin story" for how he became interested in speechwriting, but also for what Reagan's speech teaches other writers. We thought using it could help you see how research affects a speech and its audience—how a narrative helps people remember and, ultimately, act.

Still, for the sake of an academic text, Eric thought he should obey another Reagan lesson: “Trust but verify.”

He began by visiting the Reagan Presidential Library’s online archive. There he found the transcript. Reagan started talking at 4:34 p.m. Just as Eric remembered, Reagan began and ended by praising the audience members and reminding them that their special story was America’s story.

I know this valley holds a special story—one of hardship overcome, of determination, hard work, family, and faith. And in many ways, your story is America’s story.

When those immigrants came to our shores and said “Which way EJ?,” they were asking which way opportunity, which way peace, which way freedom.

Check.

A Google image search showed Reagan standing on a stage with an American flag as the backdrop. The entire speech, along with the “Fritzbusters,” is on YouTube.⁶ The song is more amateurish than Eric remembers. Nevertheless . . .

Check. Check.

Next, he found details in stories from the local Binghamton newspapers. That a high school chorus performed “God Bless America.” That the crowd approved. That speechwriter Peter Robinson, a graduate of nearby Vestal High School, wrote the draft.

Wait a second. That’s where Eric went.

Soon, thanks to more research that included a visit to LinkedIn, he was on the phone with Robinson, and they discovered they’d shared the same tyrannical soccer coach. But at first, the conversation was disappointing. It turns out “Which way EJ?” didn’t exactly validate the purpose of this chapter. Robinson didn’t have to research the phrase at all because, like Eric, he’d known about it from childhood. (He did say the White House researchers made sure the story was accurate.)⁷

But then Eric and Robinson began talking about a speechwriter’s life. And Robinson happened to mention another speech he’d written—one of Reagan’s most famous, actually. The one the president delivered in Berlin in 1984.

Peter Robinson may not have needed research for “Which way EJ?,” but the Berlin speech showed that he knew how indispensable research is. For here is guidance he received for the assignment:

“Audience of about 10,000. Length: 20–25 minutes. Subject: foreign policy. Period.”⁸

That didn’t satisfy Robinson. He flew to Berlin. He visited the embassy. He interviewed diplomats. All he heard was boilerplate, material he could have

gotten without crossing the Atlantic—until he had dinner with some Berliners. A woman told him that if Gorbachev was serious, he'd just get rid of the slab of concrete that divided her city, east and west.

That's usable, he thought. The president will respond because it's concrete, literally, and to the point. Robinson scribbled in his notebook. Others had similar ideas, but it was Robinson who, when he returned to Washington, put it in the draft.

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

What should you make of this chapter—this window into the life of a speechwriter? Here are a few things we hope you'll take away.

First, despite what colleagues say about a new speech, it will not “write itself.” A speech doesn't research itself either. And no matter how much other staffers know, research and a speechwriter's ability to find compelling details often make the difference for the speaker *and* the audience.

Second, even with robust tools, we can never reduce research to a science. Some days, you take a break, pick up the newspaper, and see the perfect detail jumping off the front page. Other days, you spend hours rejecting one piece of material after another, all for a short, five-minute speech. When your boss calls and asks, “Hey, where's the draft?” you gulp, say, “Forty-five minutes,” and go with what you have.

Third, speechwriting can be a lonely exercise, but speech researching shouldn't be. Don't just use other staffers. Cultivate them. Be grateful. Go out of your way to return the favor. Help them if they need advice on how to phrase something. Show your respect. Then, when you need research, they will show theirs for you.

Fourth, don't just rely on an email. Talk to people “on the ground.” That's how Peter Robinson came up with a memorable phrase and how, researching for this book, Eric learned about it.

We'll come back to this subject again in Chapter 14. But so far in *The Political Speechwriter's Companion*, we've covered four areas: the special needs of the politician; the ways people have tried to persuade others for almost 2,500 years; the needs of those listening to speakers; and some steps regarding research.

Time now to examine what goes into the speeches themselves, how to use all that good stuff you've researched.

Soon we will cover the LAWS of political speech first mentioned in Chapter 1: language, anecdote, wit, and support. They are the elements that can do for a speech what brick, glass, and stone can do for a building: make it beautiful.

You can't have a building without structure. You can't have a good speech without it, either. And while there are many kinds of structure in persuasive rhetoric, Chapter 5 will focus only on one, because of its incredible utility in politics.

THE SPEECHWRITER'S CHECKLIST: RESEARCH

Researching the Event

- How large is the audience?
- Who is in the audience, and what do they want to hear?
- How will the room be set up?
- Does the speaker want a Q&A session?
- Will the speaker need a microphone? Teleprompter? Lectern?

Researching Ideas

- Have I benefited from other staffers' ideas?
- Have I talked with the communications staff of the group sponsoring the event?
- Have I looked at the group's website?
- Have I reviewed old speeches for elements I can recycle?

Researching Poetry

- Have I talked to my boss specifically about the stories, jokes, quotes, personal reflections, and other elements that add color?
- Have I looked through recent news stories for anecdotes?
- Have I asked other staffers for stories they might remember?
- Have I looked at speeches I admire?
- Have I checked my personal files and library for quotes, jokes, and anecdotes?
- Do I *feel* ready to write?