



By **ADAM COLEMAN**

**M**illions of messages are delivered by government each year, many of them through speeches. It is those bad speeches – and we’ve all sat through them – that can cause problems for governments. Bad speeches mean important messages can be lost and the orator misunderstood or ignored.

8M Media & Communications managing director, Thomas Murrell, says the biggest mistake that government speech writers often make is they put too much content in and the audience gets message overload.

Governmental speeches are particularly challenging, he says, because there are more restrictions, tighter deadlines and speeches

often have to be more structured with less creativity involved.

“Audiences are smart but they get confused. This is often the case if a government person is asked to speak at a conference where you have one speaker after another,” Mr Murrell says.

Many people who work in large

government organisations are often trained in writing language to be read silently by a single person such as a government minister, says James Groves in his guide *The Speechwriters Companion*.

“This writing style is informative but also dense and bland. If this is used directly in a speech it will sound stiff and formal,” he says.

“It would be hard to over emphasise how important it is to set this bureaucratic writing style aside if the speaker is to have their key messages understood.”

One characteristic of a bad speech is what Mr Murrell refers to as ‘death by PowerPoint’.

“This is how most people approach a speech. They turn on the computer, click on the PowerPoint icon and wait for the pretty background. They then start plugging in the bullet points. That is the totally wrong approach to a speech,” he says.

This problem often occurs when a speaker does not know their content well.

“They spend the majority of their time reading off the slides,” Mr

Murrell says.

“People get to know the back of their head really well and they really fail to connect with the audience. They also tend to have too much content, and not enough time.”

#### Setting the scene

In his book, Mr Groves says speakers will often open their speech with “When I was asked to speak here today, it occurred to me that...”

“The opening may well be interesting for the audience, as well as personally significant for the speaker, but it can make the speaker sound as though they have no special qualifications or experience that makes them worth taking the time of the audience,” he says.

Mr Murrell says a common mistake in the introduction of a speech is to begin with a joke.

“I ask people how easy is it to make a living as a stand-up comedian,” he says. “It’s very tough, so why begin trying to do that as an amateur in front of an audience?”

“There is a high-risk factor in



terms of it being offensive – sexist or racist. Secondly, are you likely to feel more nervous or relaxed telling a joke and trying to remember the punch line?

“Most jokes are not original content anyway. People may have heard it before.”

Mr Murrell says it is fine to use humour but advises the use of a personal story or anecdote.

He points to movies in highlighting the importance of a strong introduction.

“Why is an opening scene so important in a movie? It sets up the whole movie – it’s called the flavour scene,” he says.

“So in speech writing you need a really strong opening. However you don’t have all the tools Spielberg has. You have to connect with the audience in three ways: a visual way, auditory way and in a kinaesthetic way.

“A visual way does not mean putting up a PowerPoint slide. What it does mean in terms of telling the story is that you have to paint the word picture. Remember you are writing for the ear not for the eye.”

Mr Murrell says if describing the colour of a particular object, for example, do not just say ‘green’ – say ‘avocado green’.

“It just adds so much more texture for people and connects with them more at a visual level,” he says.

“If there are sounds, you have to describe those sounds. You have to build those anchor points.”

### The heart of the message

The body or the heart of the speech is where the speaker should present the messages, arguments or information that forms the purpose of the speech, Mr Groves says.

“The best result occurs if the whole speech presents the speaker’s perspectives honestly while respecting the audience’s frame of reference,” he says.

“The material needs to be set out logically using clear and flowing language.

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Frequent use of illustrative material will bring the points alive and make them meaningful for the audience.”

Mr Murrell says one of the biggest mistakes inexperienced speech writers make is not including a ‘call to action’.

“Every speech should have a call to action. That’s the reason for giving the speech,” he says.

“There’s also a rule called the 8/20/45 rule. People will sit and listen to a speech for 45 minutes, people will retain information for 20 minutes, people will be actively attentive to a speech for eight minutes and after that their mind will start to wander.

“So after eight minutes you have to change the pace, change the style or do something different to keep the audience engaged – like a rhetorical question.”

In a similar way to the introduction, the conclusion to any speech should engage the audience, writes Mr Groves.

“The conclusion is a good time to restate the key messages and draw out the significance of the event for the future,” he says.

“For a speech of 15 minutes or longer, it may be helpful if the speaker refreshes the audience’s memory by summarising the main points of the speech in the conclusion.”

### Talking trends

Australians generally have a low regard for speech making and place a low value on the benefit they will receive from hearing a speech, suggests Mr Groves.

“Practises contributing to this negative perception include parliamentarians padding their speeches to fill up an allotted time, speakers presenting a party political or company view rather than speaking honestly, and speakers using speeches as a means of providing media sound bites rather than focussing their speech on the audience at the event,” he says.

Australia does not have a culture of speech making to the extent of some other countries, Mr Groves says, and, as a consequence, “speakers and speech writers sometimes lack a supportive environment in which to develop their craft”.

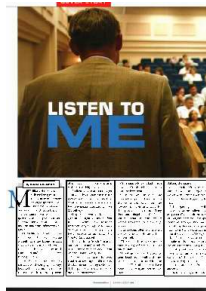
Mr Murrell suggests that in government, the person writing the speech often gets little or no feedback.

“Often the writer is someone deep within an agency who has been passed a ministerial briefing and has been asked to write a speech,” he says.

“So they come from a place of writing a speech for themselves rather than actually writing a speech for someone else and understanding that other person’s style of delivery,” he says.

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## GREAT SPEECHES FROM THE PAST

### > **'Friends, Romans, Countrymen ...'** by William Shakespeare c.1599

In the Shakespearean tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Caesar is slain by a group of conspirators who are distrustful of his ambition. At Caesar's funeral, his friend Marc Antony skilfully uses the power of speech to raise the anger of the people against Caesar's killers.

### > **Gettysburg Address** by Abraham Lincoln, 1863

Though there is dispute over the exact text of the Gettysburg Address – there are differences in the five versions still in existence today – the principles and sentiments expressed so eloquently are undisputed. Abraham Lincoln, at the dedication of the military cemetery at Gettysburg, enshrined the ideals of democracy, freedom, and human equality in a speech that was to become known as one of the greatest ever.

### > **Blood, Sweat and Tears** by Winston Churchill, May 13, 1940

Churchill's power as an inspirational speaker during Britain's 'darkest hour' was legendary.

### > **Quit India** by Mahatma Gandhi, 1942

During World War II, Gandhi led the civil disobedience movement seeking to establish independence from British rule in India. Though the movement was suppressed and Gandhi was imprisoned, the 'Quit India' campaign eventually succeeded.

### > **Light on the Hill** by Ben Chifley, 1949

Delivered by Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley in 1949, 'The Light on the Hill' speech still resonates in Australian politics today.

### > **'Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You ...'** by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 1961

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was inaugurated as President of the United States in January 1961. He was the youngest ever President and the first Roman Catholic to be elected, and he won by a very slim majority. His inaugural speech was the beginning of a new era in American political history.

### > **'I Have a Dream ...'** by Martin Luther King Jr, 1963

From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King Jr delivered a speech that was a rallying call for justice. This powerful speech galvanised an entire nation and helped bring about legislative change to end racial discrimination.

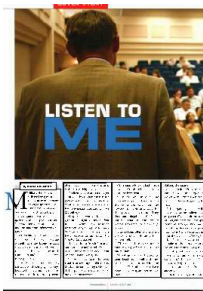
### > **Inaugural Address Pretoria** by Nelson Mandela, May 10, 1994

In 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President of South Africa after a long struggle against apartheid that saw him become the world's most famous political prisoner.

### > **Opening Keynote Address, NGO Forum on Women, Beijing, China** by Aung San Suu Kyi, August 31, 1995

Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi has dedicated herself to the struggle for democracy in Burma through non-violent activism.

Source: ICMI Speakers and Entertainers



## Learning from the best

> In the public speaking industry anyone who earns \$300,000 for a 50-minute keynote presentation must be good, says 8M Media & Communications managing director, Thomas Murrell, who fulfilled a long-held ambition to hear Bill Clinton speak when he saw him in Perth on February 23, 2002.

"As a professional speaker, I wanted to see Clinton in action. I didn't want to only hear what he said, but how he said it," he says.

"Here's my analysis of what I learnt from hearing Bill Clinton in person and noting how he was presented. You should be able to adapt at least some of these points to fit your own circumstances."

### 1. The marketing strategy

In previous years a big advertising blitz brought audiences to see speakers such as former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov and others. Their marketing approach was very commercially focused with a massive advertising budget. The Clinton event had a more humanitarian angle with funds being raised for a good cause, namely sick kids through The Princess Margaret Hospital for Children Foundation.

This was a better match with Clinton's core values of building community and having an empathy with the concerns of ordinary people. The marketing campaign relied heavily on positive media coverage to create awareness of the event.

### 2. A memorable entry

Clinton's entry to the ballroom was brilliantly stage-managed. Everyone was asked to stand and then he walked into the room to his US Presidential election theme song *Happy days are here again*. The emotion in the room was electric and made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

### 3. Personal presentation

His dress and presentation was absolutely immaculate. (Maybe the \$500 haircuts help.) Many women at my table commented that Clinton was far better looking in the flesh than on TV.

### 4. The power of presence

There was a buzz about being in the same room as Clinton. His body language, smile and confident hand shake exuded charisma. His considerable charm reminded me of that high school science experiment when you tip iron filings onto a white sheet of paper covering a strong magnet. People were attracted to Clinton like metal filings to a powerful magnetic field.

### 5. Warm-up

Radio broadcaster Alan Jones was MC and the warm-up included a short film taking a light-hearted look at Clinton's last days in office. Scenes included Clinton washing the Presidential car, clipping the hedges and playing switchboard operator in the Oval Room. A great scene from a press conference showed Clinton waking a single sleeping journalist.

### 6. Introduction

A well-constructed introduction helped build empathy and highlighted that Clinton's life had not all been plain sailing. The fact that his father died when he was young, his mother was a nursing assistant and he was born in Hope, a town of 10,000 people, helped put his success and achievements in context.

### 7. Building on the sense of destiny

A strong personal brand is built on stories. The story of Clinton meeting President John Kennedy when on a youth leadership camp was used to great effect. Not only was it mentioned in the introduction but that famous photo of Clinton shaking JFK's hand was also used in the marketing materials.

Other brand-building shots included an intimate moment with Hilary, a shot of him playing the saxophone, a jogging photo, one with Chelsea and one featuring Clinton lined up with three past presidents. They all helped to define Clinton the man.

### 8. Customising the message

Clinton's speech in Perth was customised to include stories relevant to a Perth market, including his memories of Perth switching on its lights at night for a US space mission re-entry and comments on a former US President's career as a mining engineer in Kalgoorlie.

### 9. Using humour

Clinton had some great lines about how he could have helped previous presidents in dealing with the media in tricky situations.

### 10. Memorable one liners using opposites

This can be very effective. When talking about possible solutions to the war against terrorism, Clinton said "most of the big things in life are simple".

### 11. Repetition

Clinton used this proven technique to great effect.

### 12. Using metaphors

Clinton used the metaphor of the gap between the invention of the club and the shield to describe the present situation in the war against terrorism. He said "this gap needs to closed".

Metaphors can give intangible concepts more impact with an audience.

### 13. Develop empathy with the audience

Clinton told the story of how he was in Australia at Port Douglas on September 11 and how his daughter Chelsea was in downtown New York. He connected with every parent in the room when he talked about his feelings when he could not contact his daughter for three hours on that day.

### 14. A call to action

The aim of the event was to raise money for a children's hospital. Clinton's final words were "I want you to help". Simple, direct and powerful.