

# Give speech a chance: Crafting a winning address

Since elementary school, strategist and speechwriter Pete Weissman has been interested in communications, media and politics. As early as sixth grade, he was competing in oratorical contests and, during high school, he traveled to national competitions with the speech and debate team.

Weissman interned at the West Wing press office after graduating from Washington and Lee University and decided to forgo law school plans because he was “getting a fascinating education in media, policy and politics in the White House.” Soon, the President’s national economic adviser hired him as an executive assistant.

After honing his skills in the White House briefing room and then learning about national policy for nearly two years, he moved to the U.S. Senate to work for a senator as speechwriter and deputy communications director.

Eight years later, Weissman joined the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta as director of leadership communications for the then-chairman and CEO. He traveled the world gaining insights into communication data, one of the most valuable brands and how a global company operates. When his boss retired, Weissman launched his own firm, where he currently pro-

vides speechwriting and executive thought leadership training. —Amy Jacques

**For many people, starting the writing process is the most challenging step. What advice do you have for beginning an assignment?**

My general counsel — when you’ve been handed a speech assignment — is to begin with research. Research the audience, research the event, understand what your speaker wants to accomplish. And as you talk to [him or her], look for stories and examples, talk with people who know the specifics and get down to writing.



Pete Weissman (on phone at left) with President Clinton in the West Wing.

might not have the title or the years of experience. You never know where you can get a good idea, so I’m always happy to have a conversation with someone who has an insight or a perspective or some experience on the topics.

**What makes good writing?**

A great speech changes the way people think about an issue or an organization. It gives

them a new perspective that ultimately changes how they act. And that’s a powerful force.

**Do you have a favorite speech or one that you’re most proud of?**

There’s one that comes to mind, but as a speechwriter, you’re also kind of a ghost so you don’t take public credit for [speeches].

**You said that as a speechwriter, you’re also kind of a ghost. Are there ethical dilemmas you’ve encountered or things you feel you wish you’d gotten credit for that you didn’t?**

You hit upon something that’s unique about [my job]. When you write an article, your name is on it. When someone writes a speech, the speaker’s name is on it. And confidentiality and trust are requirements for a successful speechwriter/speaker relationship. The speech always belongs to the speaker. They always make it their own. And that means speechwriters need permission from their speakers before discussing whatever role they may have had in the development of a speech.

But at the end of the day, the speech does reflect the speaker’s point of view, the speaker’s experiences and the speaker’s vision and message. And in an effective collaboration, it truly does belong to the speaker. They should claim ownership of it because it is theirs.

It’s like any supporting role — you take pride in the success of your client. And when they succeed, when they’re effective, when they get a standing ovation, when their speech generates media coverage and when their platforms establish them as thought leaders, there’s a quiet, internal satisfaction that’s hard to match. **T**

## Q&A

**What’s the best piece of advice that you’ve received about writing?**

When I worked in the Senate, I was sitting at my desk in the Russell Senate Office Building, and I heard that Rev. Jesse Jackson was going to be speaking at a press conference down the hall. As he was being hustled out of the building by his aides to catch a flight back to New York, I asked him: “Rev. Jackson, what is your best advice for giving a compelling speech?”

He put his hand on my shoulder and said eight words that I’ve always remembered: “Go to the point and to the passion.”

**What common mistakes do you see when teaching writing classes?**

The belief that a speech is an advertisement — that we can just put our core commercial message in the speech and people will somehow be interested, find it credible and memorable. And they won’t. I try to figure out what the audience’s biggest needs are and then how my speaker can help them solve those challenges.

Another mistake is thinking more about yourself, your speech [and] your organization than you do about the audience. It’s helpful to think about someone sitting in the last row at a conference that’s running late and has gone on too long. What are they interested in and what’s going to hold their attention?



## Getting to Know... Pete Weissman

**Favorite line from any speech you’ve heard?**

“I want you to say this before you enter the church at which I’m going to be buried. You tell them, ‘I wear the ring.’” — Best-selling author Pat Conroy as he invited the Citadel Class of 2001 to his funeral in a powerful commencement address

**Favorite writer?**

Billy Collins, poet laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003



**Preferred source of news?**

“Does fake news count? It’s a tie between ‘The Daily Show’ and *The Onion*.” **T**

