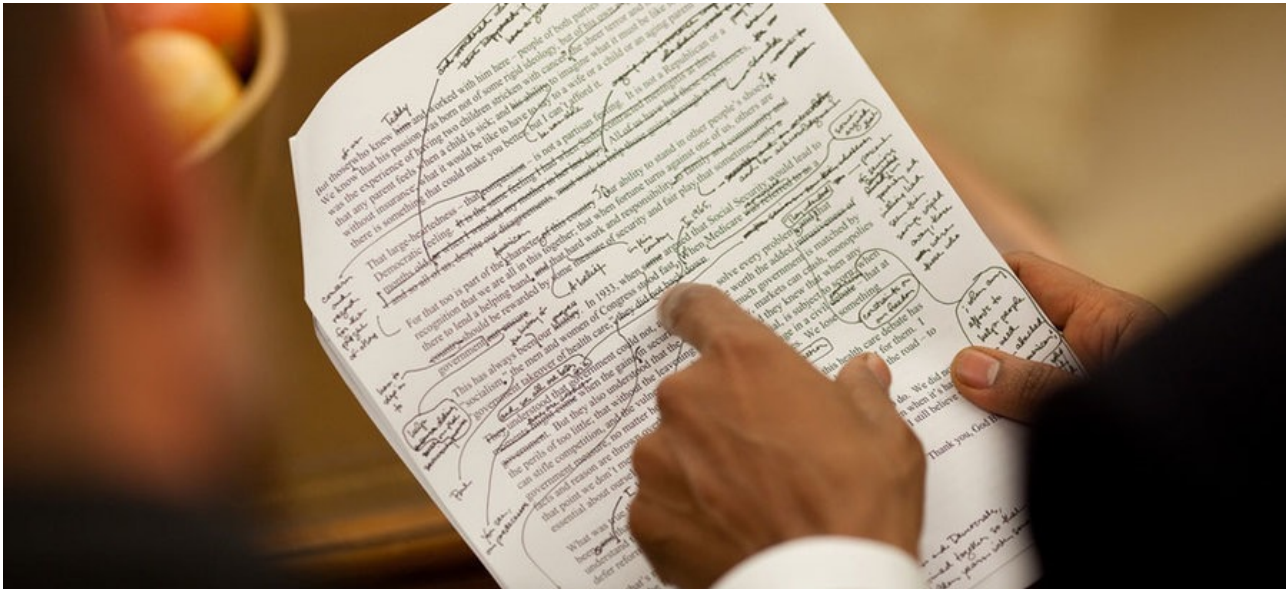


Storytelling Tips from Obama's Speechwriter, Unpacked

Steve Seager, Storywise, April 2017



[Obama's (typically massive) edits to healthcare speech for Congress, 2009, with Jon Favreau. Credit: Pete Souza/White House]

In [Five Rules of Storytelling](#), [Jon Favreau](#), Obama's former Director of Speechwriting, offers advice on how to improve your speechwriting skills. However, with some judicious unpacking, Favreau's advice can help you become a more effective storyteller, regardless of discipline.

1. Outcomes first, words last

*"In my experience communications too often focuses on finding the right words. Of course, words are important at some point in the process. But the first question you have to ask yourself is, 'What's the story I'm trying to **sell**?' That is essential, and should be the starting point"—Jon Favreau*

On first being tasked, it is tough to resist the temptation to immediately sit down and write. I still have to resist, after more than 20 years in the game. Jotting down initial ideas helps. Having done that, follow Favreau's cue and ask, 'What's our end goal?'

Terms such as engagement, influence or persuasion are not end goals. At best, they are means to an end. Engage, influence or persuade to do 'what' specifically, is what you need to define. It takes time, but stick with it. It influences all that follows.

2. Structure a logical argument

“The interesting thing about the President is that he always instantly gave the most logical outline of a speech I had ever heard”—Jon Favreau on working with Obama

Having persuasive logic and argumentation is the key to reaching an end goal. It forms the backbone of your end-deliverable that you'll flesh out with words and story, and helps with clarity and readability too.

As Adam Westbrook writes on crafting storylines for Breaking Bad, *'The structure, progression, tempo and arcs of each episode are drawn out, discussed, ripped down and rewritten, before a line of dialogue is written.'*

Structure using tried and tested logic and rhetoric techniques. A simple one for business communication is Problem / Solution / Proof. Good for propositions especially, it involves sketching:

- A sentence on the challenge you will tackle
- A sentence on how you will solve it
- A sentence providing proof as to why it will work

Typically, I develop no more than three sets of these statements for a single piece of content. That helps with stickiness for the reader and keeps you to the point.

3. Test your argument from your audience's point of view

“When Obama was trying to deliver his Health Care Reform Plan in 2009, the most important part of his speech was to find the arguments that the Republicans would think of, and contradict them”—Jon Favreau

Every time we make a statement, such the ones in the example above, questions or objections automatically pop up in people's heads. This is an audience's 'internal dialogue'. Typically, those questions are 'how' or 'why' questions.

Thinking from someone else's point of view is hard. But much like the role of empathy in design thinking, uncovering an audience's internal dialogue (through role playing, for example) yields insights that shape your whole approach.

Putting yourself in your audience's shoes, revisit your outline and adjust where needed by adding a supporting point or argumentation wherever you note an audience question or objection. The example above might now look like this:

- **(Adjusted) sentence on the audience challenge you will tackle**

- Clarification that addresses the audience's question
- Clarification that addresses the audience's question

- **(Adjusted) sentence on how you will solve it**

- Clarification that addresses the audience's question
- Clarification that addresses the audience's question

- **(Adjusted) sentence providing proof as to why it will succeed**

- Supporting proof
- Supporting proof

By now, you will have created a basic storyline. As I wrote some time ago, a storyline is to plot what storytelling is to dialogue.

Now it is time for some word-smithery!

4. Use their language not yours

“One of the reasons why Obama’s speeches are so successful is because they are written in the language that his audience understands”—Jon Favreau

The language that resonates the most with an audience is their own. When fleshing out a storyline with text, I pepper words and phrases ‘belonging’ to my audience, often drawn from the earlier role-playing.

This is a simple, effective way of connecting emotionally. But adding those phrases in meta-text too, helps you better connect with what people actually search for online, so increasing reach.

5. And so, to Storytelling...

“The best way to connect with people is through stories that are important to people’s lives. In the victory speech in 2008 we had a clear message: sometimes change can come slow, but change is always possible and history has proved that”—Jon Favreau

The story of Ann Nixon Cooper lay at the heart of Obama’s 2008 Election Speech:

“She’s a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old.

She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn’t vote for two reasons: because she was a woman and because of the colour of her skin.

*And tonight, I think about all that she’s seen throughout her century in America - the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can’t, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: **Yes, we can.**”*

Powerful stuff. Two things to reflect on when choosing the story that will best bring your words to life:

First, Ann Nixon Cooper’s story was the right choice because it **best served the goal and storyline**. With a different goal and storyline, a different story would serve them better.

Second, immersing yourself in the audience’s worldview helps surface the most potent story to imbue your key message with emotional resonance.

Last words...

When combined, logic and emotion are irresistibly persuasive. To master the art of story, we need to master both storylining and storytelling.

Be splendid, and write well, my friends.

— Steve

About Steve Seager

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