

Lessons from speechwriting improving the impact and effectiveness of policy advice

President Obama gave some great speeches over his time – most people will remember his first presidential acceptance speech, his inaugural addresses and some of his passionate speeches about health care reform. Of course, these were carefully prepared and designed to make an impact and inspire his audiences.

Jon Favreau was President Obama’s Director of Speechwriting for eight years. He now produces a regular political podcast, some of which focuses on a critique of other politicians’ speeches.

He suggests that there are five principles behind a successful speech¹. These are listed below.

While speeches have a different purpose, many of these principles have relevance in writing policy advice for Ministers.

Here’s a quick walk through them and how they might apply to policy advice:

1 The story is more important than the words

He was talking about an organising framework or structure for the speech. Only once that is established is it time for wordsmithing.

Equally, any policy paper needs to have a narrative arc or a story. It needs to start from the problem or opportunity and take the reader through a pathway of analysis and options to the conclusion.

The Policy Quality Framework (PQF) acknowledges this under the heading of ‘Advice’² and unpacks the key elements needed in quality policy advice.

So think and plan before you start writing.

A strong structure – whether for a single issue paper or a complex omnibus paper that deals with many related issues – makes for a better paper.

Storyboarding the structure of the paper can help, and this also helps with working out the heading structure³ – which reinforces the storyline.

2 Keep it simple

We’ve talked about this before! Often, in fact!

Ministers are busy people, and papers are often read at speed in short intervals in the day. To be effective, they need to be able to be absorbed and understood quickly – preferably without re-reading.

This isn’t easy. The issues you are writing about are complex and multi-faceted, and it’s a skill that has to be honed through practice.

3 Always address the arguments against your position in your presentation, not after

In speeches, Favreau’s advice was all about being able to address or deflect the likely criticism before it arose. It’s similar to policy advice.

It will never be a well-rounded paper if you don’t consider alternative ways of addressing the problem or objections to the proposed way forward. It rings of advocacy rather than balanced advice.⁴

The PQF requires considering different views and perspectives and a range of options – as does the Regulatory Impact Assessment⁵ guidance.

Important elements are:

- Seeking out alternative views and perspectives – from a range of experts, different stakeholders, and service users.
- Looking at ways the issue is addressed in other sectors and in other countries.

¹ <http://www.trevorambrose.com/obamas-speechwriter-shares-5-storytelling-tips/>; <https://www.steveseager.com/storytelling-tips-from-obamas-speechwriter-unpacked/>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Favreau_\(speechwriter\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Favreau_(speechwriter))

² <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-12/policy-quality-framework-full.pdf>

³ https://nzier.org.nz/static/media/filer_public/c9/f3/c9f3bd03-5d21-46d5-adae-b104237d1389/brief_15_make_papers_pop.pdf

⁴ The discussion of this difference will be covered in a forthcoming Masterclass.

⁵ <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2020-06/coc20-2-impact-analysis-requirements.pdf>

- A proper options assessment.⁶
- Seeking intelligence on the view of other agencies or Ministers and addressing them directly in the advice or in an aide-mémoire to your Minister to enable them to be well prepared to deal with any objections.

4 Empathy is the key

In the context of a speech, this is about understanding the audience and using language, concepts and examples that will resonate with them. This helps to get the messages across and persuade the audience.

Of course, policy advice papers also need to be aware of their audience.

Is it just your own Minister? They might be well informed about the issue. Or is it a range of Ministers or all of the Cabinet? – they will have different levels of interest and understanding.

So:

- Write in a way that is understandable and meaningful for all members of your audience – plain language and minimise the use of acronyms and jargon.
- Use different techniques to present information and analysis – visuals, for example.
- As mentioned above, understand the different perspectives of your audience and actively seek to address those in the paper.

5 There is no persuasion without inspiration

While this might look like it is straying into the political – there are still some parallels with policy advice papers.

Change often has a cost – agency staff time, money, political capital, Ministerial effort, time on the policy/legislative agenda (which reduces the time for other pressing matters) and usually, learning how to make the new system work.

So, be very clear about the benefits of the change.

We often see papers that clearly define the problem and a proposed solution but fail to crystallise the benefits that the change or new initiative will gain. When you are in the depths of a policy issue and the associated analysis of the range and complexity of related matters, it can be hard to look up. But the benefits are what counts in the end.

Another lens on this principle is recognising that Ministers don't just have to make decisions on policy matters. A critical part of their job is to persuade their colleagues, stakeholders, and the general public of the proposed change's merits and seek their support. So providing talking points, pitched for both your Minister and the audience, helps. It's all about giving your Minister an armchair ride.

In conclusion: it's about impact

It's all very well doing a great piece of analysis, but to get any traction, it also needs great advice. To quote the PQF, advice which 'engages the decision-maker and tells the full story'.

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