

## 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 topical matters like 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 speech.<sup>1</sup> These are listed below.

While speeches have different purposes, many of these principles have relevance in writing advice for decision-makers.

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 advice 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.

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 structure<sup>2</sup> – which reinforces the storyline.

### 2 Keep it simple

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

Mayors and Councillors are busy people – they often have their own jobs to do, as well as attending to Council matters. Papers are often read at speed in short intervals in the day – when they have time or in the evening. 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.<sup>3</sup>

It’s a standard requirement of good policy advice to consider the issue from different viewpoints and perspectives, especially that of the stakeholders, e.g. Treasury’s Regulatory Impact Assessment<sup>4</sup> guidance or the DPMC Policy Project guidance.<sup>5</sup>

Important elements are:

- Seeking out alternative views and perspectives – from a range of experts, different stakeholders, and service users. And then addressing these matters in the paper.
- Looking at ways the issue is addressed by other local authorities, in related sectors and in other countries.

<sup>1</sup> <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))

<sup>2</sup> Masterclass brief 7 *Better use of headings and subheadings* [https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief\\_7\\_better\\_use\\_of\\_headings\\_and\\_subheadings.pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_7_better_use_of_headings_and_subheadings.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The discussion of this difference will be covered in a Masterclass in our next series.

<sup>4</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2020-06/coc20-2-impact-analysis-requirements.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-12/policy-quality-framework-full.pdf>

- A proper options assessment<sup>6</sup> – this means that a wide range of different solutions will be considered, and each of those is analysed against a set of criteria (including those things most important to various stakeholders).

#### 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, advice papers also need to be aware of their audience.

Obviously, you are writing for the Mayor and all the Council members. But some will know more about the topic than others – they may have been actively involved in workshops, seen earlier advice at sub-committee meetings, or have a personal or professional interest in the issue. Others will be less familiar. In contrast, you are the technical experts and have looked at the issue deeply in preparing the advice.

But your papers are also made public. So it needs to cater for that audience too.

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.

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#### 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, demands on individual Councillor time, and Council agendas (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. It can be hard to look up when you are in the depths of a policy issue and the associated analysis of the range and complexity of related matters. But the benefits are what counts in the end.

Another lens on this principle is recognising that the Mayor and councillors 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 they need to understand the matter and be able to explain it to others. A good summary helps enormously.

#### 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 – especially advice that 'engages the decision-maker and tells the full story'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Masterclass brief 18 *Options analysis*  
[https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief\\_18\\_options\\_analysis.pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_18_options_analysis.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-12/policy-quality-framework-full.pdf>