

Guy Bergstrom & Jennifer Waldref, House of Representatives, Washington state

SLIDE 1 – INTRO (GUY)

Same experience from K-12 through college – guaranteed to get read & graded.

Taught to follow rules – 5 graf essay, inverted pyramid, templates for every product, hero's journey for stories.

Lawmakers had similar experience. Top two out of every primary guaranteed coverage in press.

Crowded marketplace of ideas

WA = like your state – 98 House, 49, Senate, gov, Lt. Gov, Sec of State, 2 US Senators – all sending a growing sea of content out every day to a shrinking cap press corps.

The quality is fine. Produced by communication professionals. If graded, would get A's & B's.

But you're not getting graded. Have to fight to get noticed by press & public.

A better way

How do you persuade the press and public to pay attention & get inspired to act? Can't do it w/ inverted pyramid, a structure never designed to persuade. It's like trying to remove a screw with a sledgehammer.

Structure and storytelling is also the key to writing FAST and BETTER.

It's hard to write sentence by sentence. Most folks who write for a living type crazy fast. But let's say 50 words per minute, 60 minutes an hour. That's 3,000 words an hour. 24,000 words a day. One novel a month.

Nobody does that. But I know writers who work 12 hours a day. They're cranking hard. What trips them up? Not pretty words. It's always structure.

Instead of standard templates and what everybody else is doing, we'll point you to the whole toolbox of persuasion and storytelling. Because persuasion is the heart of the legislative process.

Lawmakers can't pass a major new reform w/out persuading the press, the public & fellow lawmakers that yes, this is a problem we care about. Yes, we can listen to each other – and yes, we can work together on a solution.

SLIDE 2 – 1st RULE OF RHETORIC (JEN)

The first rule of rhetoric is to KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

Communications professionals get this. Legislators often don't.

Ask them, "Who is the audience?" and they often respond, "Everyone."

But you're not trying to persuade EVERYONE.

Example: A couple of years ago, there was a controversial proposal under consideration in our legislature having to do with water rights and tribal treaties. One lawmaker asked me to draft an op-ed about why the proposal was a bad idea. I asked, "Who is the audience?"

His response: "Everyone."

After further probing, I figured out the actual audience was the members of his caucus who were on the fence.

He was choosing a very public venue – the opinion page of a major newspaper – to speak directly to this particular group of people and try to persuade them.

Once you know WHO your audience is, you need to know are they:

FRIENDLY, NEUTRAL or HOSTILE

There are 3 steps to persuasion:

- 1) Change their MOOD.
- 2) Change their MIND.
- 3) Get them to TAKE ACTION.

HOSTILE audience - maybe you're just trying to change their mood

FRIENDLY audience – maybe you want them to take action.

NEUTRAL audience – maybe you're just trying to change their mind so they become a friendly audience.

You are never trying to do all three steps!

Once audience is nailed down, decide which rhetorical tools you're doing to use.

2000 years ago, Aristotle divided rhetoric into three parts:

ETHOS, PATHOS, LOGOS

Today, these three parts are still very relevant.

SLIDE 3 – THE SPEAKER (GUY)

Biggest myth = it's all about delivery

Good delivery is fine, but over-rated. Conventional wisdom = good speech is standing at the podium and getting through the text without stumbling. No. A good speech is one that bonds with the audiences and inspires them.

Ethos is about more than delivery—and it applies to the written word. Just about everything we create is first person and persuasive – not just speeches. Opeds and LTEs, newsletters, emails to constituents, video scripts.

Art of ethos

- A) Candor and sincerity – are they motivated by selfish or unselfish reasons? Lawmakers only talking about their own bills = weak ethos
- B) Good will and likeability – Does the speaker care about people like me? Are they authentic?
- C) Knowledge & understanding – Is the speaker an expert on this issue, or are they winging it?

3) Science of ethos

First five seconds. Studies of professors. Holds true for written word. Job interviews. First dates. Meetings.

What is the audience looking for? The opposite of conventional wisdom.

Nonverbals = 90 percent of communication.

Competence vs incompetence

Every time a speaker looks down at their notes in an obvious way, it weakens their ethos. Speaking w/out notes = far stronger ethos, even if you stumble sometimes = far stronger ethos. Shows you truly know the material.

Velocity – natural to be nervous at first and stumble. Make sure you end strong. Worst case = start strong, stumble late.

SLIDE 4 – EMOTION IS ESSENTIAL (JEN)

No matter how knowledgeable or sincere someone is, they can't persuade or inspire without evoking emotion.
[Curt Stedron covered this in his LINC'S presentation on 10/23/19]

"Before statistics can prove, the heart must be moved."

Lawmakers like numbers and percentages and statistics.

Maybe because in school we're taught to use facts to back up our main point – not stories.

But compelling story vs. bunch of statistics – the story will always be more persuasive.

Use real stories about real people with real problems.

Example: The # of seniors in your state who can't afford their prescription drugs, or the story of June, the retired grandmother, who cuts her pills in half every day to stretch out the doses, putting her health at risk?

Tell the story – then use the numbers to enhance it:

“THERE ARE OVER 25,000 PEOPLE LIKE JUNE IN OUR STATE.”

Also, CONTRASTS can often help intensify feelings (i.e., someone played by the rules, but then suffered some kind of wrong).

Example: Washington state's high-stakes testing graduation requirement resulted in “the drawer of broken dreams” at schools – diplomas that were never handed out.

What's more effective – to cite the percentage of high schoolers who don't graduate each year because of this policy, or to talk about Cody, who was going to be the first in his family to go to college, but didn't graduate high school because of this policy?

Every legislator had a Cody in their district. It was the stories of those Codys that helped to get rid of the standardized testing requirement.

Lastly, remember that while emotion is essential, it should not be overdone.

People want leaders who feel their fears or anger, but they don't want angry or fearful leaders.

SLIDE 5 — STRUCTURE AND STORYTELLING (GUY)

Three kinds of debates

About the past – forensic

Used to assign blame. Deals in facts, threatens punishment.

Useful for trials. Terrible for persuasion – starts a fight about blame.

About the present – values. Typically seen on social issues.

About the future – risks versus rewards.

Competing visions for the future. Most legislative debates are about the future.

Storytelling

Raise narrative questions you don't answer right away. Opposite of inverted pyramid, which is inherently boring. Can't stop reading after the headline.

Mysteries, thrillers. Dramas and love stories. Comedies & tragedies. Dystopias and utopias.

Tools

Setups and payoffs. Reversals and revelations. Public stakes vs private stakes.

Type of story ties into what Jen told you about emotional velocity and pathos. Mystery = down beginning (murder or problem), up ending. Tragedy = up beginning, down ending.

Learn from bad stories

Boring stories are boring in the same way – they're flat and repetitive.

Examples: BREAKING BAD – who's the hero? Who's the villain? (tragedy--starts up, ends down)

KARATE KID & ROCKY (underdog stories, starts down, ends up – great structure, has emotional velocity)

Bond movies & Michael Bay explosions (flat, bad structure and \$100 million in CGI can't fix that)

Good story = like a roller coaster. Uses all the tools of storytelling: setups and payoffs, reversals and revelations – and different levels of intensity.

SLIDE 6 – STORYTELLING IN ACTION (JEN – REP. LAURIE JINKINS FLOOR SPEECH)

Link: <https://youtu.be/Cq4eDiOYoQ0>

Example of a lawmaker staying away from citing numbers and percentages, and instead using story to evoke emotion.

In this case, the details of the bill were a bit complex. If you read the bill report, your eyes would glaze over.

Imagine if this speech had been structured using the inverted pyramid:

“This bill helps schools do the right thing for students like Stella. Here's three ways it does that, and why that's so important for Stella and others.”

Snooze fest!

A good story is like a roller coaster – it has twists and turns. That’s what you get here (Stella’s story).

List of names at the beginning of the speech - way more effective than reciting a list of statistics.

Surprise mention of the lawmaker’s own son. It doesn’t get more real than that.

The representative doesn’t list eight different policy changes the bill makes. She cuts to the chase: “This bill helps schools do the right thing.”

That’s what this is all about, in eight words.

She uses a good counterpunch tactic: being crisp and focused. Others before her took longer. She sticks to 3 minutes.

The speech ends on a positive, hopeful note. We can help Stella and other kids if we join together to pass this bill. Everyone gets to maintain their viewpoint and their conscience, but kids won’t have to suffer.

SLIDE 7 – LEGISLATIVE-SPECIFIC SITUATIONAL SPEECHES (JEN)

There are 3 types of speeches lawmakers tend to give:

IMPROMTU – very short (1-2 minutes), no notes

EXTEMP(ORANEOUS) – medium length, some notes (bullets or talking points). Often floor speeches are this type.

KEYNOTE – longer speech, full remarks or teleprompter, lectern or podium.

In the Washington state legislature, we prepare a lot of floor remarks, but they're not always used.

NO WORRIES – WE REPURPOSE THAT STUFF!

You can always repurpose remarks for op-eds, newsletter blurbs, social media posts, etc. Keep everything you're asked to draft – it will be useful in some form.

HOT TIP: A speech should always leave the audience wishing it had been longer, not the other way around.

Even the greatest orator will eventually lose the audience if they go on too long.

In the Washington legislature, we have something called the “Three Minute Rule.” At a certain point in the session - when we're close to a cut-off deadline - floor speeches can only be a maximum of three minutes.

Members fret, but...three minutes is actually plenty of time! If you can't get your point across in three minutes, you're doing it wrong.

SLIDE 8 — THE FOUR POLITICAL STORIES (GUY)

Myth = politics is left, right and middle

Where to libertarians go? Not the middle. What about populists or authoritarians?

More accurate: baseball diamond -- Left-right on social issues, up-down on economic issues.

Four political stories

Home base = populists

First base = conservative

Second base = libertarian

Third base = progressive

Four bases, four questions

Every political story answers the same four deep questions:

- What causes problems in society (who are the villains and what weapons do they use?)
- How do you solve problems (who are the heroes and what tools do they use?)
- What's an ideal society look like (unattainable utopia, not what happens if the House passes Second Engrossed Substitute Bill 2394)
- What nightmare are you trying to stop (utopia vs dystopia)

Every bill fits into one of those four political stories. Don't try to create a separate message for each bill.

People will not get excited about Second Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1293. They WILL unite and fight for a dream – zero unemployment. Zero red tape. No high school dropouts. Free tuition. No traffic gridlock. No more filling out the same information on seven separate pieces of paper at the doctor's office.

Tying smaller bills into a bigger political story also creates a far better dialogue with the press and public. It puts the bill into a larger, more interesting context than if you try to tell dozens (or hundreds) of separate and individual stories.

SLIDE 9 – YOU ALWAYS NEED A CALL TO ACTION (JEN)

Link: https://youtu.be/-HaKxlZv2_s

Whether a speech is 30 seconds or 30 minutes, it always needs some kind of call to action.

An effective call to action can change moods.

It can change minds.

And, in some cases, it will move people to act.

Each year, the Washington State House honors the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr with a proclamation and some floor speeches – usually one or two from each side of the aisle.

These speeches are generally assigned to freshman members, who don't often speak much on the floor.

In 2015, Washington state Rep. Strom Peterson was chosen to speak in honor of MLK Jr. Day. His speech is a great example of a call to action.

It takes a common speech and makes it uncommon. MLK Day speeches tend to be relatively safe and tame - boilerplate.

Here, Rep. Peterson evokes emotion by tying the history of MLK to the problems of today.

His call to action is to honor Dr. King not just with words, but with DEEDS.

He doesn't just say, "Vote YES on this resolution" (which they all do every year anyway).

He challenges his fellow lawmakers to DO SOMETHING real and meaningful and hard.

So even if you're writing a speech that's pretty boilerplate – you can make it new and fresh and interesting – with an effective call to action.

SLIDE 10 — DISCIPLINE AND STRUCTURE BEATS TALENT (GUY)

Further reading

We threw everything at you, just to introduce you to the tools. To learn more, here are three good sources.

For speechwriting and rhetoric:

THANK YOU FOR ARGUING by Jay Ambrose

For storytelling:

SAVE THE CAT by Dan Snyder

STORY by Robert McKee

You can email us to talk about speechwriting and storytelling. We geek out about it.

guy.bergstrom@leg.wa.gov or jen.waldref@leg.wa.gov

Think about all the products you create

Press releases and statements, opeds and letters to the editor, newsletters and video scripts, podcasts and speeches.

With the exception of press releases, every single product is first person and persuasive.

Press releases are actually trying to persuade, too. You have to convince the press to read and use your release out of the 800 that hit their inbox today, just like reporters have to convince editors to use their story on the front page instead of buried by the obituaries.

You can tell a story in as little as 200 words. Or explain politics with a baseball diamond.

The key is writing with intention.

Structure beats quality

Beautiful words are a happy bonus. Sparkles on your chocolate donut.

Storytelling and structure are the most important. And once you get the blueprints right, it's a lot easier to focus on polishing the words and improving quality vs. wondering why the end of the speech keeps falling apart.

Start with a beautiful story. Make people laugh and cry and FEEL something.

Because that's what it takes to inspire them to act.