

So You Want to be a Freelance Speechwriter ...

By Colin Moorhouse

I remember the day I told my professional colleagues that I was quitting my job in government communications (no jokes about oxymorons, please). They emailed me back saying how brave I was – which I took as a codeword for how stupid I was. Here I was quitting my "good-paying, fully pensioned with health care and disability plan" job to make money as a flack for hire. They were also rolling their eyes because of all the communications tasks they might have before them; they hated speech writing most of all because it was the most time-consuming of all their jobs – and was something they tended to wedge in between other duties.

I took the other view. I had read a ton of speeches on the job, and I knew I could write them just as well if not better. Also, somewhere I had seen a statistic that said that in the U.S. alone, more than 100,000 speeches were given every 24 hours. Aha, I thought. Maybe this is the niche for me. And my timing was great because in 1993-94, email was just beginning to become commonplace. That meant I could deliver speech drafts to any client anywhere rather than being restricted to my home city.

That was over 17 years ago, and despite the ups and downs of the economy over the years, there always seems to be work for freelance speechwriters. At least, that has been my experience.

But before you chuck your fully pensioned, multi-benefited, good-paying job – let me give you a checklist of the pros and cons of the freelance life.

The Rewards and Challenges of Speech Writing

On the plus side – being a freelance speechwriter can be endlessly fascinating because you never know what you are going to be asked to write about. It could be anything and everything. Social policy legislation. Health initiatives. Labor relations. Insurance. Accounting. The environment. Corporate social responsibility. And so on. I have lost count of the different types of subjects I have written speeches on. They have covered the gamut of speeches for legislative debate, health policy initiatives for a major health authority, a speech for the launching of a 100,000-ton oil tanker across the seas, and another for a wedding reception across the street.

If you think that those types of topics couldn't hold your interest, then you'd best think of another line of work. But look at it this way. Each of the speakers speaking on these varied subjects feel very strongly about the words they are going to use to talk about their particular passion. It's not hard to share that passion (in fact, that is the fun part) for the three or four days that it might take to write a keynote speech. Of course, those three or four days may be spread out over two or three weeks, but still you get the point. By the time you are sick of the topic, it's finished.

So freelance speechwriters have to be prepared to write on any topic under the sun. That's also the fun part. We are broad but shallow. We know a little about a lot. But if you are at all curious about what is going on in the world, speech writing is definitely a career to consider.

Another plus is that you sometimes get to rub shoulders with the semi-famous and important. With people who perhaps in other circumstances are out of your league. I mean no self-deprecation by that. It's just that I don't under normal circumstances get to hang out with multi-millionaires or captains of industry or senior members of government. But when they turn their attention to the words that will come out of their mouths – they want to talk to their speechwriters. And they want to talk to them now! So, you are brought into their professional circle for a short time, and that's kind of neat.

But the most satisfying part of freelancing for me is this. Speechwriters don't get to make policy, but they sure nuance it. The first time you hear "your" words on a 15-second sound bite on the evening news – and no, that doesn't happen very often – you suddenly realize that you often get to articulate the expression of a new policy or service. And if you do a really good job, you might find that articulation becomes an oft-repeated mantra within your client's organization. I like the satisfaction of knowing that I do get to influence how public or corporate policy is expressed.

What else? Your clients really like you because you are saving them the most precious of commodities – time. If they like you the first time out, you tend to have them for the long haul. You become their path of least resistance.

Oh yes, the pay is pretty good.

I don't want to kid you. There are factors that may be regarded by some as the downside I alluded to at the beginning. Freelance speech writing can be a lot of hard work, and with clients across time zones, you may get phone calls at very strange times. When you have a number of speeches on your plate, you have to be prepared to work some very long hours. Of course, because I love the art and craft of speech writing, I don't see the hard work as a burden but as a gift. I am getting paid for what I love doing.

I also love the fact that no one is standing over my shoulder to check on my progress. No one is nagging me or asking me to go to endless time-wasting meetings. My clients trust me to put the correct words and messages in their mouths and have their audiences fully engaged in what they are saying. In short, they trust me with articulating for the public stage what they feel most passionate about. And when I do that with a new client, they tend to ask me back again and again.

The sharing of their passions notwithstanding – once you have agreed to a speech assignment, you are pretty much on your own. Once you tell an in-house communications director that, yes, you will write their CEO's speech, they are on to other things. There won't be a lot of hand-holding. Like a news reporter, you will have to do a lot of independent research and interviews – and do it all with a certain finesse so you don't upset any political apple carts that might be around for the tipping.

You have to be able to absorb huge amounts of new information, all the while understanding you won't be using 98% of it, but you have to breathe in the useless stuff so you can identify what is truly useful.

You have to have very finely tuned political antenna. You may be writing a speech for the CEO, but you aren't a senior member of his staff. Heck, he might not even want to let his people know that he is using a freelancer. So you can't go blundering

around like a wounded walrus when you go digging up the required information. Being a freelance speechwriter means you have a lot of responsibility with little authority. And no one is backstopping you.

But I regard all these challenges as a good thing as well. They keep me on my toes!

Did I already say the pay is pretty good? Well, it is.

And if you are willing to do the marketing, there is a lot of work out there. And you tend to have clients for the long haul. I joke with them I will write for them as long as they are in power – and when it is all over, I will write their obituaries – metaphorically or literally.

It is never boring. But paradoxically, like anything else, it can be very tedious at times. Your brains can get fried and I sometimes wonder when burnout will come. Or if I can ever have another original thought for a ten-year client. But all in all, I can't think of a better gig than putting words in other people's mouths. Of having clients that really like and appreciate me. And helping them put their best foot forward on the public stage.

And so, if in this lifetime I couldn't figure things out in time to be able to be a famous Hollywood script writer writing dialogue, at least I get to work in the shadows writing monologues.

And you never know what the next phone call will bring.

Pretty cool, I'd say!

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I found this article extremely helpful, I have written a handful of speeches for weddings and I love it, I was a creative writing major in College, and I want to become a professional speechwriter. I just need to know where to start, I have had many people tell me that I should even be a politician myself in my abilities to get and maintain peoples attention. Do you have a

my tips for me? Thank you.

Guest (Teal) – over a year ago

I really want to try speech writing. I can easily write short monologues and I am a great researcher. Do the people who ask you to write speeches tell you which way they are going on an issue? do they send you background information or do you have to dig for everything?

Kathryn Wenzel – over a year ago

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