



# Vinca LaFleur

Forum för talare  
Oktober 2008

Ett nyhetsbrev från Talarforum

## Speeches that Soar: What We Can Learn from Barack Obama

On July 27, 2004, U.S. Senator Barack Obama gave an impassioned keynote speech at the Democratic Party Convention that catapulted him onto the political stage and captured the public's imagination.

Four years later, as Senator Obama himself accepts the Democratic nomination for president, his stirring speeches are an indispensable part of his appeal, not only in the United States but for audiences around the world as the more than 200,000 Germans who turned out to hear him in Berlin were quick to confirm.

Clearly, Barack Obama has been blessed with gifts that serve him well on the stage. He is handsome and tall, with an easy smile and a resonant baritone voice. Yet a study of Senator Obama's speeches yields a host of tips and techniques that any speaker can learn from to improve his or her presentations.

### **First, say something**

Many contemporary speeches fall flat because they substitute soundbites for substance, or rely on jargon that obscures true meaning, or oversimplify complex issues. Others are quickly forgotten because they fail to challenge listeners' expectations.

Barack Obama's speeches remind us of the power of actually saying something of having the courage to tackle topics that are tough or controversial, taking a position, laying it out clearly, and defending it with logic and care.

On March 18, 2008, for example, at the height of tensions over inflammatory statements by his former pastor, Senator Obama delivered a speech entitled "A More Perfect Union," urging Americans to move beyond racial divisions and work together to solve the problems facing the nation as a whole.

Daring to speak about race at all was bold for a U.S. politician but what made this speech extraordinary was its empathy for different points of view. By refusing to paint the difficult issue of race as simply, so to speak, black and white, Senator Obama showed respect for his audience's



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Vinca LaFleur has more than fifteen years of professional speechwriting experience, including three years as a White House speechwriter and Special Assistant to President Bill Clinton. During her time at the White House, she authored more than 100 public speeches and statements for President Clinton and his national security advisors, and accompanied the President on official travel to Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Australia.

For more information on Vinca LaFleur - [click here](#)



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intelligence and earned it in return. And by demonstrating his understanding of multiple perspectives, he enhanced his own persuasive power. As communications expert Annette Simmons writes, you cannot expect to influence those with whom you disagree unless you first “acknowledge the honorable aspects” of their position, which is a valuable lesson for any speaker attempting to make inroads with opponents.

### **Second, tell stories**

Studies show people remember stories better than bullet points of information.

But storytelling is more than a communications tool—it is also an instrument of leadership. As brothers Chip Heath and Dan Heath argue in their bestselling book *Made to Stick*, good stories provide instructive examples and inspiration, which together help drive an audience to action. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner believes the best leaders take storytelling one step further: their stories convey a message that not only resonates with the audience, but is exemplified by the speaker's own life.

Beginning with his 2004 Convention address and throughout his presidential campaign, Senator Obama has woven his life story into his larger message about the promise of American unity and renewal. A biracial boy from a fatherless home now running for U.S. president, Barack Obama's personal triumph over adversity taps into iconic notions of the American dream, even as his multicultural heritage speaks to America's idealized self-image as a melting pot of colors and creeds.

Equally important, throughout his campaign, Senator Obama has framed his quest for the presidency in the larger sweep of American history—as the latest chapter in an epic story all Americans are writing together.

By helping an audience see how a cause fits into a larger picture and greater purpose, a speaker can lift his or her remarks from simply informative to inspiring.



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### Third, be inclusive

Even though Senator Obama is running for office as an individual, he casts the arguments in his campaign speeches in terms of “we,” “you,” and “us.” This kind of inclusive language helps shrink the distance between the speaker and the audience – creating the feeling of dialogue, even when the speaker is the only one talking.

In addition, Senator Obama sometimes builds into his speeches opportunities for audience involvement, whether through catch phrases or call-and-response patterns that echo the African-American church. While such communications devices may not be appropriate for every speaker or culture, there are other ways to achieve a similar effect, such as posing rhetorical questions or making the audience part of your story. For example, instead of telling your audience, “Energy prices are too high,” why not say “Think about how much it cost the last time you filled up your car”? A practiced speaker treats the audience as participants in a conversation.

### Fourth, make it sing

Senator Obama often uses informal, colloquial language to connect with his listeners. Yet his speeches are also full of carefully crafted rhetorical devices – such as simple refrains (“Yes we can!”); alliteration (“stained by this nation's original sin of slavery”); series of paragraphs that start the same way (“This is the moment...”); repetition (“somebody somewhere stood up for me when it was risky. Stood up when it was hard. Stood up when it wasn't popular”); balance (“it matters little if you have the right to sit at the front of the bus if you can't afford the bus fare; it matters little if you have the right to sit at the lunch counter if you can't afford the lunch”); chiasmus (“My job is not to represent Washington to you, but to represent you to Washington”); and sequences of three (“A nation healed. A world repaired. An America that believes again.”).

This kind of writing takes time, effort, and talent – but the investment pays off in oratorical impact. Speeches are designed for the ear, not the eye. They are more likely to soar when they sing.



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### Finally, work with a speechwriter

While Senator Obama is himself an eloquent writer, he collaborates with a speechwriting team. Obama's lead writer Jon Favreau has explained the Senator's speechwriting process like this: "What I do is to sit with him for half an hour. He talks and I type everything he says. I reshape it, I write. He writes, he reshapes it. That's how we get a finished product."

Executives may worry that using a speechwriter will result in a speech that sounds like someone else. But professional speechwriters are trained to capture their client's voice and thinking; they work closely with clients to craft those ideas into the most compelling format possible. In addition, a speechwriter can help a client target his or her speech to the heart of the audience doing the kind of in-depth research busy executives rarely have time for, and bringing their own creativity and experience to bear on the client's behalf.

The best speakers know that a speech should do more than just say where you are going it should also help you get there. And professional speechwriters do more than prepare you for the podium; they can help you accomplish your goals.



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