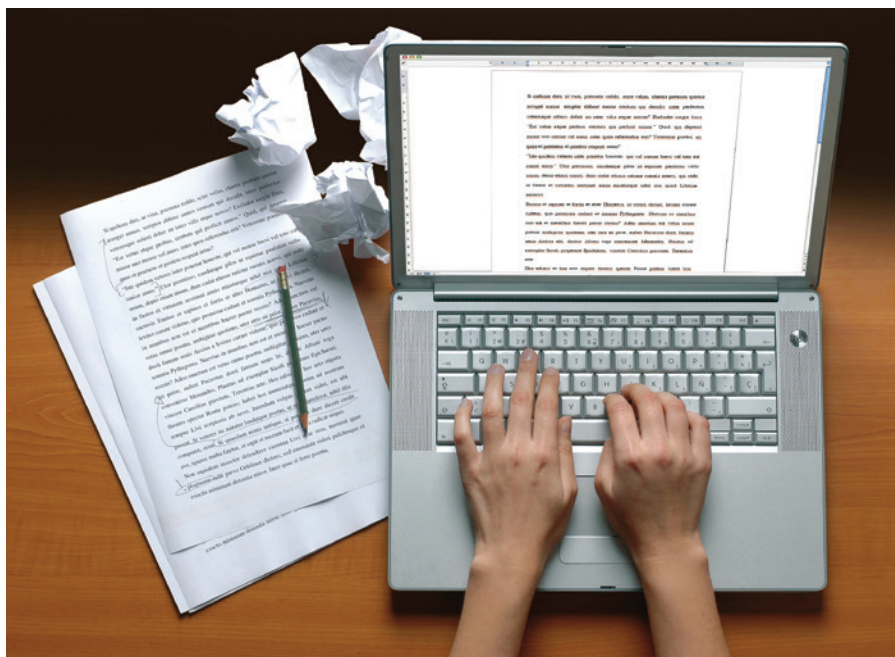


How to Become a Speechwriter

As a Toastmaster you are uniquely qualified.

BY BRENT KERRIGAN, CC



There comes a time in every Toastmaster's life, often after delivering a particularly effective speech, when he or she thinks: *Hey, I could do this for a living!*

Why not? Philosophy giants such as Aristotle, Socrates and the sages of social media inform us that to achieve true happiness, we must do what we love. So, how can we, as Toastmasters, transform our passion for public speaking into a career?

Many members become speaking coaches, only to discover that delivering a good speech and teaching others how to do it isn't the same thing. They learn that coaching a club member on a seven-minute romp about the family dog is different from coaching CEOs who deliver complicated keynotes on quarterly finances.

Read and listen to famous speeches, and then rewrite them.

Other members become professional speakers, meaning they speak for money. For some, that sounds too good to be true and, unfortunately, it often is. *Everybody* seems to be on the speaker circuit attempting to scale the slippery pole of success. It can leave one feeling more like the condemned Sisyphus, who never accomplishes his goal, than the great orator Cicero.

Few, however, think of becoming a professional speechwriter. I understand. The profession is shrouded in a veil of mystery, seemingly populated by puppet masters whose sole purpose is to amass armies of Manchurian candidates who will, in great orgies of oratory, take over the world.

Let me attempt to lift the veil.

Speechwriting is a *great* job. I've been a professional speechwriter for more than a decade, and I've written for ministers, prime ministers, heads of United Nations organizations and more than a few Toastmasters.

Competition—and salaries—are high for speechwriters; certainly higher than most writing gigs. In fact, seasoned speechwriters can earn more than \$100,000 (U.S. dollars) annually.

Speechwriters also have the advantage of access: access to top decision-makers, access to those who shape policies and ideas, and access to people who want to change the world.

But how does one *become* a speechwriter?

Unlike most occupations, there's no school that teaches speechwriting; no place to trade your life savings in for a piece of paper that will land you an unpaid stint as an intern. While many speechwriting workshops exist—and I'll get to those shortly—there's no Harvard or Yale, no Oxford or Cambridge for aspiring speechwriters.

At the risk of putting myself and my colleagues out of business, I'm going to let you in on the big secret of how to become a speechwriter. It goes like this: Find someone who needs a speech written and write it for them. Consider writing a speech for *anyone*.

There are countless cities, villages, towns and hamlets throughout the world, all with councillors, mayors and officials with multiple (often unpaid) responsibilities and demands on their time. They don't have time to write their speeches, so you can volunteer to do it for them.

Before you ask—yes, you *do* have experience in speechwriting. As a Toastmaster, you're uniquely qualified.

If you've completed your *Competent Communication* manual, you've likely discovered that successful speeches have three things in common: great style, good structure and a great storyline. That's not all you need to know, but it's a start.

Becoming an expert in anything takes practice. Just as you can't become a great musician by taping a picture of Tchaikovsky to your wall, you can't become a great speechwriter unless you actually write speeches. How many? The answer is: *As many as it takes*.

Learn from those who do it well. Read and listen to famous speeches, and then rewrite them. You'll develop a deeper understanding of words and how they work. Take note of those that sound soothing to your ears, and those that make them bleed.

Your next step is to find a mentor, preferably an experienced speechwriter, who will read your speeches and provide you with honest and fair feedback. Don't look for a mentor who will offer only praises; find one who will give you solid, constructive criticism.

When I began writing speeches (yes, I started out by volunteering), I was lucky to find such a mentor. I'd give him what I thought was a polished gem and he'd look at it, grunt, and then spill so much red ink on the page that it looked like Jack the Ripper and Dracula had gone to war. However, that was exactly what I needed. I needed to have my speech ripped apart, reorganized and rewritten. Most of all, I needed to know that my fragile ego was the biggest impediment to my success.

As you continue to hunt for clients, either paid or unpaid, don't forget nonprofit organizations. Hospitals and health clinics are great choices. Rotary and Lions clubs exist in even the smallest villages, and often have guest speakers. Reach out to those speakers and offer to help them write their speeches.

If you work in an office, volunteer to write speeches for the communications team in your spare time. Better yet, go directly to the boss and tell her you want to begin writing *her* speeches. Sure, it's a risk, but if you aren't brave enough to face her, you can't expect to write speeches for her. Will you truly be able to give her honest and fair feedback about her speeches when it counts? Being assertive is vital if you wish to become a speechwriter. Learn it early.

If you're *really* brave, take a speech your boss has already delivered, rewrite it and give it to her to show how you would have written it. Does such a move require a delicate touch? Absolutely. Could it get you kicked out of her office? Absolutely. Could it land you your first job as a paid speechwriter? Absolutely.

Once you've written a few speeches, develop a portfolio and begin calling for interviews. Some organizations openly advertise for speechwriters, some don't. Find the openings. How? Thankfully, you're a Toastmaster and Table Topics has prepared you for not only cold calls, but for networking events as well, which can alert you of new opportunities (and you thought Toastmasters was only for speeches!).

A final suggestion: Whether you're a beginner or a seasoned writer, take a specialized speechwriting course. Do your research and find one that is right for you. Just make sure the course is taught by a speechwriter who has actually written speeches. You'll be surprised by how many haven't.

Similar to juggling and quantum physics, some tend to pick up speechwriting more quickly than others. If you're stuck, keep at it. Styles are hard to develop and nobody ever said it would be easy. It is, however, achievable.

Keep these points in mind:

■ **Get to know some speechwriters, and learn about their struggles and stresses.** Ask yourself: Do I *really* want to do what they do? Attending speechwriting conferences is a good way to meet other speechwriters and learn about their craft.

■ **Read and listen to speeches.** Two per day is a good start. A simple Google search will turn up thousands. (If you don't know how to handle a search engine, you might want to rethink the speechwriting thing.)

■ **Develop a thick skin.** Remember that your speeches are for someone else. They're not yours. Even if you've written something resembling "I Have A Dream," your speaker might want something else, like a few words of thanks, for example. Write to meet your speaker's needs.

■ **Keep giving speeches.** Nothing has helped me more as a speechwriter than being a Toastmaster and regularly giving speeches. It's vital, as it gives you an understanding of how a speech is constructed. You learn what works, and what doesn't.

Enjoy your new job! ■

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