

Book Review

Kjeldsen, J. E., Kiewe, A., Lund, M., & Barnholdt Hansen, J. (2019). *Speech Writing in Theory and Practice*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. (212 pp., eBook \$19.88).

Jeannine Lane
Grand Valley State University

Dominic Cassisi
Grand Valley State University

Vivian Niestrom
Grand Valley State University

Each day in 2019, the American political climate seems to take a new turn toward the inconceivable. Between official presidential addresses and controversial presidential tweets, Americans are seeing now, more than ever, what communication scholars and practitioners have known all along—words matter. Communicating effectively can be difficult in practice for anyone, whether they are a college student or the leader of the free world. Luckily, many people, such as speechwriters, have dedicated their careers to helping others communicate as effectively as possible. While the work of speechwriters is in the spotlight each day, the craft of speechwriting is a backstage activity. Barack Obama, for example, is considered by many to be one of the best speakers of all time, but few Americans recognize that his many great speeches may not have been the same without a great professional speechwriter.

The goal of *Speechwriting in Theory and Practice* by Jens E. Kjeldswen, Amos Kiewe, Marie Lund, and Jette Barnholdt Hansen is to, “present the case for speechwriting as a practice and a profession that is based on long standing theoretical grounding” (p. 1). While this purpose may seem broad, the authors focus on professional speechwriters, specifically those in the political world. They make a case for speechwriting as more than just a necessity in the academy, but rather, a profession that affords its experts the power

to change the world. This book explores the historic and modern value of speechwriting in society, and describes, in detail, the nuanced process of speechwriting. Members of the communication center community may find this suitable if they are seeking a career in speechwriting, are hoping to publish scholarship on the history of speechwriting, or are interested in the use of rhetorical devices in speechwriting.

Speechwriting in Theory and Practice begins by laying the groundwork that is necessary for readers to understand the contribution speechwriting has made to our society by walking through significant points in history wherein speechwriting was prevalent. Kjeldsen, Kiewe, Lund, and Barnholdt Hansen remind readers that speechwriting is a craft that has existed since the time of the sophists in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. While philosophers such as Socrates and Plato were challenging the study of rhetoric for being a loose approach, Aristotle found common ground between the philosophers and the sophists, eventually developing speechwriting practices that are still used to this day. Additionally, the text highlights the value of speechwriting in the life of the modern communicator beyond overused historical examples. Instead, they approach speaking as something more than just text being read off paper; it is an event in the presence of an audience and viewing it as such will inherently attach value to it. While some

may presume the craft of speechwriting is dying with each stride that technology takes, the authors affirm that “New media is not a threat to speechmaking, but an opportunity. Internet and video are potential vehicles for the speechwriter’s words, creating a renaissance of speechwriting” (p. 9). Technology affords speakers new chances to transform their means of communication in nearly all aspects of their lives. While the internet is certainly useful for someone who needs to Google the rhetorical triangle or develop a visual aid, media is now a tool that inspires and enables discourse by reminding us to think twice about the words we publish for the world to see. It is clear that technology may be what communication center professionals need to take their both their speaking skills, and their social competencies, to new heights.

After making a case for the value of speechwriting, the authors delve into the process of speechwriting. The authors’ critical themes for the professional speechwriter are: gaining a solid understanding of their client, using knowledge of the audience to the speaker’s advantage, and responding to audience feedback. These themes match those that communication center consultants apply to clients and their work, but also apply to the ways in which we prepare clients to interact with their specific audiences. They explain how taking time to focus on each step in the speechwriting process will enrich the speech itself and that, ultimately, the recipe for an effective speech has many ingredients. While much of the text provides somewhat of an abstract, theoretical basis for speechwriting as a craft, Kjeldsen, Kiewe, Lund, and Barnholdt Hansen take time in the final chapter to provide a step-by-step strategy for effective speechwriting. Their strategy includes a guide for establishing a message, identifying an audience, and determining proper delivery for a speech.

This section is a useful reference for readers looking to sharpen their speechwriting skills or communication center consultants looking to improve their consulting style. Above all, this theme of the text makes clear that no one is born a great speechwriter. Instead, speechwriting is a skill that must be developed over time.

The greatest strength of *The Art of Speech Writing in Theory and Practice* is that it is written by authors who are clearly passionate about speaking. It is evident with every new page that Kjeldsen, Kiewe, Lund, and Barnholdt Hansen truly believe in speechwriting as an important pillar of our society, which may provide members of the professional and academic speaking sectors with feelings of hope, validation, and inspiration in a world that can often feel dismissive of the value of the carefully-selected word. According to the authors, “If you want to move the audience, you must first move the speaker,” (p. 149) and it would follow that a moved reader is a direct result of devoted writers. Moreover, this book is clear and concise, providing thorough previews and reviews of each chapter’s most important content to ensure that readers were provided with an effective roadmap.

While this book has its strengths, it is not without weaknesses. One small, yet glaring, issue with this text was the sprinkling of small editing errors and typos throughout. For example, on the final sentence of the first paragraph on page 55, the text reads, “...contemporary speechwriters are mostly engaged in the *three first* of these canons...” when the authors likely intended to say first three. In other parts of the text, periods were forgotten, words meant to be pluralized were not, and at one point on page 43, the word “composted” was used instead of “composed” in the context of developing a speech. While this critique may seem

nitpicky, it felt necessary to point these small errors out considering that this text is intended to be informative and some readers may feel that editing errors throughout harms the authors' credibility.

Additionally, this text did not exhaustively examine informative speaking. Instead, it paid a great deal of attention to persuasive and ceremonial speeches. Informative speaking is a style used in both day-to-day interaction and formal speaking occasions alike, and covering it in this book may have satisfied the needs of a more diverse audience. The authors did cover one topic in near excess: the idea that the profession of speechwriting is valuable and deserving of respect. While it is likely that readers of this book appreciate the craft of speechwriting, the authors dedicated what felt like excessive space stressing the importance of speechwriting to the audience when they had already made their point clear within the first few chapters. Reducing this could have allowed more space to bookend the text with content from the final chapter pertaining to the process of speechwriting. While the final chapter was useful, it seems that this information could have best served as a larger scaffolding for the entire text, rather than a portion of only the final chapter.

Members of the communication center community who are seeking a career in, writing scholarship on, or looking to broaden their knowledge of speechwriting may find this book useful. The synopsis provided on the back of the book states that the book is, "recommended reading for professional speechwriters wishing to expand their knowledge of the rhetorical and theoretical underpinnings of speechwriting," and notes that it, "enables students and aspiring speechwriters to gain an understanding of speechwriting as a profession." Ultimately, this text is a good reference for those who hope to polish their

speechwriting skills. However, since this book is targeted largely towards the professional speechwriter, many of its themes do not necessarily cater to the average student, business person, or everyday communicator. While some students may be inspired and educated by this text, the vast majority of introductory public speaking students (and even many communication center consultants) are likely to find the book overwhelming and of limited use for their skill levels or applications. Though its contribution to the world of speechwriting is undoubtedly valuable, *Speech Writing in Theory and Practice* is not a must-read book for the entire communication center community.

Many Americans are developing a keen ear, presenting more criticisms of what people say and how they say it. Thanks to modern technologies, we are aware of nearly everything that comes out of our leaders' mouths. Whether it is a tweet or a televised debate, our words have the potential to reach millions of people and cause a nearly instant wave of impact on the world around us. In order to keep up with this rapidly-evolving paradigm, we must carefully craft each message we share. With the help of communication center consultants and professional speechwriters, we should see a decrease in miscommunication and an increase in the clear transmission of messages. Through their explorations of speechwriting in history and the process of speech-craft, Kjeldsen, Kiewe, Lund, and Barnholdt Hansen's *Speech Writing in Theory and Practice* reminds readers that speechwriting is more than just a dreaded college course or a political formality; it is a valuable discipline responsible for great social change throughout history. So, with every new day and every new turn for the inconceivable, it is imperative that we remember one thing—words matter.