

# Five Ways to Speak Like Obama

By Sims Wyeth

published on BNET.com 4/20/2009

Now that we've got your attention, you should realize, of course, that you don't want to speak like Barack Obama. You want to speak like you. Nevertheless, as a student of the art of public speaking, you can — and should — observe Obama's oratorical skills. The greats all learn from other greats, so don't hesitate. Study Obama's repertoire, take what you like, and use what you can to improve your own public speaking.

Obama is a master at grabbing and keeping his audience's attention, which is the number one goal of any public speaker. How does he do it? Here are five key lessons from Obama's rhetorical playbook.

## 1. Talk About the Audience's Concerns

---

Notice that when **Obama addressed a joint session of Congress for the first time**, he told *our* story before he told his own. He talked about our sleepless nights, for example, and the college admission that might have to be turned down because of a lack of financing.

This was brilliant, and you can do it, too. Start your talk by broadly defining the situation that your listeners face. Then, once you've got them nodding their heads in agreement, move on to describe the problems or challenges that are on *their* minds. Start where the audience is, not where you are. Once you have their attention, you can lead your listeners wherever you want to take them.

---

## 2. Keep It Simple

---

Throughout the presidential campaign, Obama kept his main message — “change you can believe in” — simple and easy to remember. Sure, some pundits mocked its simplicity, but it served its purpose perfectly as the banner at the front of his parade. You, too, can keep it simple, even if you have mountains of research to report.

First, **fine-tune your core message**. Fierce debate within Obama's campaign no doubt accompanied the birth of the slogan “change you can believe in,” and similar prolonged discussion may accompany the discovery of your own core message. But once the decision has been made, don't let that debate show. Chisel away at your topic until you can reduce your presentation to a core message. Once you achieve this, all your complex ideas can march behind it.

This is as true for business presentations as it is for political campaigns. Granted, your content may be nuanced and detailed, but so were Obama's policy positions. He used his simple slogan to make

us believe he was the politician for change — something so many Americans longed for — and he appealed to us to have faith (to *believe*) in the change he was offering us. Obama won people through a simple slogan, which then allowed him to more easily serve up his ideas about meaty topics such as health care, terrorism, and the crumbling economy.

We make a serious error if we mistake a complete argument for a persuasive one. All audiences, no matter how sophisticated, have limited attention spans and a limited ability to retain detailed spoken information. Don't fear that you're leaving details out; you must be selective. After all, what good is a thorough and detailed argument if it is inaccessible?

---

### 3. Anticipate What Your Audience Is Thinking

---

Obama and his speechwriters are certainly aware of the great line by Goethe, “Every word that is uttered evokes the idea of its opposite.” What this means is that when you express one view, the odds are high that people will reflexively think about other, unmentioned aspects of the topic.

A presentation that does not deal with this “evoking of opposites” loses the audience's attention because it fails to address the questions and concerns that come up in people's minds. So anticipate it. Show your audience that you understand the contrary view better than they do, and explain why your proposal or argument is still superior.

Obama did this effectively in his [speech on race](#), in which he attempted to distance himself from the inflammatory Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Obama pointed out, for example, that he won primaries in former Confederate states and that he had built a “powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans.” But he also acknowledged what was undoubtedly on people's minds when he said, “This is not to say that race has not been an issue in the campaign.” He went on to say that, yes, Reverend Wright's sermons were controversial, but, no, that's not why he must be rebuked. He said that, yes, [the clips of Reverend Wright on YouTube make him look terrible](#), but, no, that's not the full measure of the man.

His speech was powerful and widely praised. It was effective in part because Obama let everyone know that he had thought a lot about race, and in particular about both sides of the controversy surrounding his former pastor.

Attack your topics this way, too, and you will be in charge of the conversation. This approach will not only grab and hold the attention of your listeners, but it will also help you win people into your camp, which is what you need to do if, say, your goal is to persuade your board of directors of the wisdom of a seemingly risky partnership.

---

## 4. Learn to Pause

---

Obama has mastered the art of pausing. Just [check out his presidential acceptance speech in Chicago](#) to see this skill at work. He pauses to let us catch up with him. He pauses to let his words resonate. He pauses, in a sense, to let us rest. Pauses also give the impression of composure and thoughtfulness.

Here's an exercise to help you learn to pause.

- Mark up your paragraphs / in this manner / into the shortest possible phrases. / First, / whisper it, / breathing / at all the breath marks. / Then, / speak it / in the same way. / Do this / with a different paragraph / every day.

Here's what the opening paragraph of Obama's remarks would look like:

- "If there is anyone out there / who still doubts / that America is a place / where all things are possible, / who still wonders / if the dream of our founders / is alive in our time, / who still questions / the power of our democracy, / tonight / is your answer."

Where you pause is up to you; there are no hard and fast rules. But try it. Slowly inhale to the count of three at each breath mark. Speak as though you had plenty of time. The goal / of this exercise / is to teach your body / to slow down.

---

## 5. Master the Body Language of Leadership

---

Obama's body language is relaxed and fluid. It does not display tension or fear. He's calm and assertive — which is exactly what you need to be to get people to comply with your requests. For the ultimate in Obama smoothness, [watch his entrance on The Ellen DeGeneres Show](#).

To achieve the body language that's effective for you, focus on a single attribute — for example, *calm* — and practice implementing it in the basic motions of your day, from getting dressed in the morning, to leaving your home for work, to greeting your friends and colleagues. Research in the *Scientific American* suggests that focusing on one word is the most effective way to learn a new behavior. It will probably feel forced at first, but don't worry. It will soon become natural, and eventually your body language will communicate the right mix of calm and assertiveness.

Finally, you'll need to rehearse. Practice calmly walking up to the lectern or the front of the room. Arrange your papers calmly. Look out to the audience with a sense of command, with assertiveness. Let the silence hang for a moment, and only then deliver your opening remarks.

Calmness begets a sense of authority. Behave as if you are in control, and you will in fact gain control and command attention.

---

## About the Author

---

*Sims Wyeth is a trainer and consultant in speeches, presentations, and high stakes conversations.*

---

Copyright © 2009 CBS Interactive, Inc. All Rights Reserved.