



How the professional speech writers use rhetoric – and how you can too

Presented by: Hilary Bryan
29 November 2024

Up until about the 18th century you'd have learned rhetoric. That is, if you were male and at a posh school. It had been a basic part of the curriculum from ancient times. The Ancient Greeks and Romans gorged on rhetorical devices.

And you can too. Anyone can pick up these techniques and use them in their presentations and writing.

You can study it today – mainly in the US

Numerous universities in the US, including Harvard, offer courses on rhetoric and how to use rhetorical devices. And US (and some British) politicians have speech writers who use them. Also watch old episodes of *The West Wing*. You'll see the fictional speech writing team at work.

The old days of Barack Obama and Jesse Jackson were legendary

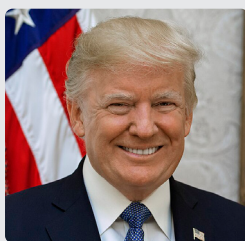
My favourite speeches in modern times were by Barack Obama and Jesse Jackson.

Check out [Jesse Jackson's speech to the 1988 Democratic National Convention](#). It's brilliant.

But we're looking at key speeches from the 2024 campaign and how they used classic rhetorical devices. Here goes.



President Joe Biden



President-elect
Donald Trump



Vice President
Kamala Harris



Vice President-elect
JD Vance



Governor of Minnesota
Tim Walz

Some real basics: ethos, pathos, logos

Credibility, emotion and logic. And you'll find plenty of the first two in the US presidential candidate speeches.

Ethos Credibility

My early memories of my parents together are joyful ones. A home filled with laughter and music: Aretha, Coltrane and Miles. At the park, my mother would tell us to stay close, but my father would just smile, and say "Run Kamala run" "Don't be afraid" "Don't let anything stop you." From my earliest years, he taught me to be fearless.

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

So there I was, a 40-something high school teacher with young kids, zero political experience, no money and running in a deep-red district. But you know what? Never underestimate a public school teacher. I represented my neighbors in Congress for 12 years and I learned an awful lot. I learned how to work across the aisle on issues like growing rural economies and taking care of veterans. And I learned how to compromise without compromising my values.

Tim Walz

Democratic National Convention, 21 August 2024

Think about how you build credibility. A personal story? Your upbringing? It needs to be authentic. You may think your listeners are focused on your every word. They're more likely to be thinking: who is this person and do I trust them?

Re-framing a key issue: abortion

Kamala Harris did this with abortion.

The refrain has long been: a woman's right to choose and the law needs to uphold this. But she reframed this to appeal to a different audience: trust women to make decisions about their own bodies and leave the government out of it.

So, think about how you can re-frame an issue you're communicating.



Themes: just repeat one word

Only easy way to do this is to repeat a key word and work it into the whole speech.

Tim Walz did this well.

Repeat one word

*I grew up in the small town of Bute, Nebraska, population 400. I had 24 kids in my high school class and not one of 'em went to Yale. Growing up in a small town like that, you learn to take care of each other. The family down the road – they may not think like you do, they may not pray like you do, they may not love like you do, but they're your **neighbors**.*

Tim Walz

Democratic National Convention, 21 August 2024

He then used **neighbor** six more times in his speech.

*While I concede this election, I do not concede the **fight** that fueled this campaign.*

Kamala Harris

Concession Speech, 7 November 2024

She repeated **fight** 13 times more.

Lists of three are everywhere

Why three? We remember three. Anthropologists argue this is an archetypal principle. You'll find it everywhere.

A parallel list of three

I grew up in Middletown, Ohio, a small town where people spoke their minds, built with their hands, and loved their God, family, community, and country with all their hearts.

JD Vance

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 2024

Posh word: Hendiatris

A list of three that expresses the same idea

Smashing windows, shattering doors, attacking the police.

This is not rhetorical, academic or hypothetical.

Joe Biden

First Campaign Speech, 5 January 2024

Posh word: Anaphora

Repeat the same word at the start of a sentence (plus a list of three)

It's about you. It's about every age and background that occupy this country.

It's about the future we're going to build together.

Joe Biden

First Campaign Speech, 5 January 2024

And so on behalf of The People, on behalf of every American, regardless of party, race, gender or the language your grandmother speaks. On behalf of my mother and everyone who ever set out on their own unlikely journey. On behalf of Americans like the people I grew up with.

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

It's an agenda that nobody asked for. It's an agenda that serves nobody but the richest people and the most extreme voices in our country.

*An agenda that does nothing for our **neighbors** in need.*

Tim Walz

Democratic National Convention, 21 August 2024

I grew up in Middletown, Ohio, a small town where people spoke their minds, built with their hands, and loved their God, family, community, and country with all their hearts.

JD Vance

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 2024



Posh word: Antithesis

A contrast

The entire nation watched in horror. The whole world watched in disbelief.

Joe Biden

First Campaign Speech, 5 January 2024

In our system of justice, a harm against one of us is a harm against all of us.

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

As always, America's ruling class wrote the checks; communities like mine paid the price.

JD Vance

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 2024

So while other states were banning books from schools, we were banishing hunger from ours.

Tim Walz

Democratic National Convention, 21 August 2024

Posh word: Antithesis

A contrast with a list of three

We won't import foreign labor, we'll fight for American citizens. We won't buy energy from countries that hate us, we'll get it right here from American workers. We won't sacrifice our supply chains to unlimited global trade, we'll stamp every product Made in the USA.

JD Vance

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 2024

Posh word: Anadiplosis

Repeat a word at the end of a sentence and the start of the next

He told the crowd to "fight like hell" and all hell was unleashed.

Joe Biden

First Campaign Speech, 5 January 2024

Posh word: Asyndeton

Take out all the conjunctions or connecting words

She was tough. Courageous.

My entire career, I have only had one client. The People.

Security, Freedom. And Self-determination.

Freedom. Opportunity. Compassion. Dignity. Fairness.

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

Posh word: Consonance

Using the same or similar sounds in words

Because they know he is easy to manipulate with flattery and favors.

He fanned the flames.

Consider not only the chaos and calamity...

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

Posh word: Aporism

A short sentence that forcibly states a general truth or sentiment

Simply put. They are out of their minds.

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

We've got a golden rule – mind your own damn business.

Tim Walz

Democratic National Convention, 21 August 2024

You can't be pro-insurrectionist and pro-American.

Joe Biden

First Campaign Speech, 5 January 2024

We need President Donald J. Trump.

JD Vance

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 2024



Posh word: Catachresis

A mixed metaphor, like I smell a rat

Just imagine Donald Trump with no guardrails.

Kamala Harris

Democratic National Convention, 23 August 2024

Then the Democrats flooded the country with illegal immigrants.

JD Vance

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech, 17 July 2024

Posh word: Metaphor

Painting a picture using language from another situation

So, let me finish with this team. It's the fourth quarter. We're down a field goal. But we're on offense. We're driving down the field. And, boy, do we have the right team to win this. Kamala Harris is tough. She's experienced. And she's ready. Our job is to get in the trenches and do the blocking and tackling. One inch at a time, one yard at a time, one phone call at a time, one door knock at a time, one \$5 donation at a time. We've only got 76 days to go. That's nothing. We'll sleep when we're dead. And we're gonna leave it all on the field.

Tim Walz

Democratic National Convention, 21 August 2024

A word about Donald Trump

Academics Nikita Savin, and Professor Daniel Triesman, have analysed Donald Trump's speeches over the last nine years.

An increase in violent rhetoric

His violent rhetoric has increased. Savin and Triesman found a striking and sharp rise in his use of violent vocabulary: 0.6% in 2016 to 1.6% in 2024.

By 2024, Trump's use of violent language had surpassed that of nearly all other democratic politicians we considered, approximating that of authoritarian figures such as Kim Jong Un and Fidel Castro.

He often refers to murderers, rapists and thugs and paints a picture of a nation under siege.

Shift towards exclusionary populism

Trump's rhetoric frequently attacks political elites, immigrants and media figures. Remember the 10 September Harris / Trump presidential debate, when Trump referred to immigrants eating dogs?

Exclusionary rhetoric defines politics as a battle between us and them. Trump casts himself as the defender of ordinary Americans against "them". He's vowed to drain the swamp of political elites.

No real use of conventional rhetorical devices

I haven't included any examples of Trump using conventional rhetorical devices as he didn't really use them. He often seemed to drift away from his prepared speeches and go off on tangents.

Not recommended.

Bibliography

Nikita Savin, and Professor Daniel Triesman. (2024). UCLA study tracks former President Donald Trump's weaponization of words. Downloaded from <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/ucla-study-tracks-former-president-donald-trumps-weaponization-of-words>

Thanks for coming!

From The Training Practice team - Hilary, Kristen, Rachel, James and Oli

Check out our website, with our latest thinking and events: trainingpractice.co.nz

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#)

Get in touch: 027 222 1498 | office@trainingpractice.co.nz

RSVP to Hilary, Kristen and Rachel's December Tea & Toast:

Get Networking!

December 13, 8:30 - 9:30am

In-person at: Ernst & Young, Level 2/40 Bowen St, Pipitea

