

PRO TIPS

for media advisers

Comments from Jack Kennedy

What I learned about writing from reading Greta Thunberg's speech to the U.N.

Roy Peter Clark has been one of the nation's preeminent writing coaches for decades, and he still writes occasional posts for Poynter, as well as writing books on writing that help shape the thinking of professionals. His ideas are equally important for high school journalists (or any high school or college writer?).

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One way to learn writing strategies is to study the texts of successful speeches. Over the years, I have X-rayed the Gettysburg Address, "I Have a Dream," and the oratory of both Barack and Michelle Obama. I note, for example, that the former First Lady once reminded her audience that "I live in a house that was built by slaves." In describing the White House in this manner, she placed the emphatic word — "slaves" — at the end, where it had its best effect.

If a speechwriter had written for her: "Slaves built the house I live in," Michelle Obama would have been within her rights to hire another.

Oral expression of language precedes the written word by, oh, a gazillion years. And let's remember that the word "rhetoric," which can apply to many forms of expression, once emphasized the spoken word — the use of public language by, say, Roman Senators, for the purpose of persuasion.

In fact, the technique of emphatic word order used by Michelle Obama — and Lincoln and MLK Jr. — is encouraged by the Roman educator and rhetorician Quintilian more than 2,000 years ago.

Which brings us to 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental activist who recently delivered a short speech — about 500 words — to the U.N. Climate Action Summit in New York City.

I am in no position to judge her scientific evidence. I assume the fact-checkers have been on her trail, with no major corrections in sight. Critics on the right have argued she is a pawn of the left and could not have written such a speech. At least one has gone so far as to disqualify her because she has Asperger's Syndrome.

Before we get to the speech itself, I would like to debunk the notion that no teenager could have written such a text. It must be, the theory

goes, the work of, dare I say it, AN ADULT. She is nothing more than a ventriloquist's dummy, speaking English in a foreign accent. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that someone else wrote the speech, or helped her write it. If this is a disqualification, then every politician who has mouthed the words of a clever speechwriter deserves to be un-tongued.

I have taught writers at all levels, including elementary, middle and high school students. The work of the best of these has been superb, worthy of publication. In Haslam's Book Store here in St. Petersburg, Florida, I stumbled upon a used anthology called "The Best Teen Writing of 2015." Inside I found the work of winners of the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. The work covers several common genres. Here is some of the best nonfiction:

Catherine Gao, 16, San Jose, California:

"A week ago, I sat on a BART car in uncomfortable silence for forty-five minutes. Thirty other strangers sat around me, each diligently doing the exact same thing: nothing. Half stared vacantly at the walls of the car, stopping every few minutes to glance down at their phones. The other half snored gently with their faces smushed against the windows. I closed my eyes and tried to disappear into my seat."

Maya Lew, 16, New Haven, Connecticut:

"The tornado left everything broken but the toolshed. The townspeople plucked slugs off the side-panels for days afterward, old wood peeling like rotten bananas. River water ripped past the edies of the stream, they fixed torn seams with mud and rocks (double knots, triple knots), pipes from broken undersinks. The sunflowers floated, facedown, river trout half-way to belly-up."

Jack Tien-Dana, 16, Bronx, New York:

"The next day, the hospital transferred my mom to a New York hospital. My father rode with her in the ambulance, while my aunt, a semi-famous fashion editor and full-fledged diva, drove me home with my uncle and cousin. We were on the Westside Highway when she rear-ended a cab. I was holding a full canister

This graf functions as a summation of concessions that move the writer beyond arguments about facts and allow him to simply focus on rhetoric.

But the material that follows provides nice support for the view that a 16-year-old can write with some sophistication, and RPC goes beyond merely claiming that, with quoted examples.

of cheese puffs, which jounced in the air and landed all over me. She flew out of the car to excoriate the cabbie (note: she rear-ended him) and, during a lull in the ensuing fracas, she stuck her head in my window and hissed at a cheese-dusted me, ‘Don’t tell your mother this happened.’”

I have chosen three teen writers who were 16 years old, the same age as Greta Thunberg. I don’t know their back story, but my guess is that they have had adults in their lives who encouraged them, from an early age, to perform the three main behaviors that mark a literate person: to read critically, write purposefully and speak about how meaning is created through reading and writing.

Greta Thunberg clearly has the same gifts, magnified by her ability as a young person to speak to large groups of adults when the stakes are very high. Let’s stipulate that a speech at the United Nations is a step up from nailing that college admissions essay.

So let’s see how she did, and what she did. (My commentary appears in parenthesis.)

Transcript: Climate activist Greta Thunberg, 16, addressed the U.N.’s Climate Action Summit in New York City on Monday.

My message is that we’ll be watching you.

(In syntax we talk about the “number” and “person” of pronouns. Each designation contributes to the voice of the speaker. In eight words, we get three of them. “My” indicates first person singular, showing that the author seizes ownership of these ideas. “We” is first-person plural, used collectively as in the language of labor union messages, but also “We the people.” She is not alone. Her last word is the second-person plural “you.” In most cases, this creates the illusion of discourse, the “I” and the “Thou.” But as the object of the verb “watching” it feels more ominous here. It’s not Big Brother who is watching. But Little Sister.)

This is all wrong. I shouldn’t be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

(Short sentences have the feeling of gospel truth. Here we get a series of them. She will not let her audience off the hook with a long flowing sentence. Each period is like a hammer pounded on the podium. The audience cannot see the exclamation mark at the end of this paragraph, but they can hear it. I found “How dare you!” uncomfortable to read and hear. I identified, guiltily, with the failed grownups in the audience. Her language is that of an angry parent or a stern school teacher scolding a child. That inversion of expectation defines her voice.)

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

(Repetition — as opposed to redundancy — is purposeful, and among the most common rhetorical tools available for speakers. “That a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we’re free at last.” Greta Thunberg stabs us with another “How dare you.” Notice another strategy: Quintilian warned speakers not to let their best words and phrases get lost in the middle of sentences and paragraphs. When you can, put them at the end. Notice: empty words, lucky ones, suffering, dying, collapsing, fairy tales of eternal economic growth.)

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you’re doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

(Notice an ancient rhetorical technique at work here. I don’t have a name for it. But we all use it

Many ELA teachers call what RPC is doing here “interrupted reading,” which allows a class or seminar to stop and discuss separate pieces of the writing, rather than getting swept up in conclusions (or disagreements) prematurely.

When we study rhetoric, our goal is to better understand HOW a writer’s choices work, WHY choices were made (or not made), and whether those rhetorical choices are effective with particular audiences.

I could imagine some audiences strongly objecting to being lectured by a 16-year-old, no matter how valid that student’s points might be. That sort of thing does need to be considered by writers, since creating barriers to clear understanding of a position is NOT a vary effective way to persuade.

But other audiences might have cheered to pugnacity and passion of this young speaker, forgiving some of the harangues as a rhetorical choice to force strong reactions to strong claims.

What we want our opinion writers to NOT do is try to please everyone, to the point that no clear point ends up being made. When EVERYONE loves your editorial, consider whether the argument was worth making. “Puppies are so dang cute!”

in our personal and professional lives. I might call it “saying it by saying you are not saying it.” As in, “Now I am not saying that professional athletes don’t deserve the money they make.” Well, yes I am. Remember Antony in Julius Caesar: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. I’ve come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” Yeah, right! Here the author says, “... then you would be evil.” Then she takes it back, “And that I refuse to believe.” She delivers the sting, and takes it back, because who is inclined to agree with a person who calls them evil?)

It’s hard to criticize well researched facts, but there is some danger in shoveling so many at readers that they start losing the thread.

It’s a tough balance, to be sure. We want to avoid persuasive writing that only makes claims without support. Repeat after me: No claims without support! No claims without support!

One “trick” for writers is to use short and simple sentences for the most complex, weighty ideas. When Ms. Thunberg reaches her conclusion, she chooses lots of short sentences and the power is clear.

Full stops, or periods, act as stop signs for readers, giving them a chance to think, to consider. There is also a place for those longer, compound-complex sentences that seem to pick up speed the longer they go, taking readers on a fast ride.

Our best writers need to learn to use both short and long (and in between) to create rhythms in their writing and speech that are almost musical.

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees (Celsius), and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control.

Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist.

So a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us — we who have to live with the consequences.

To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise — the best odds given by the (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) — the world had 420 gigatons of CO2 left to emit back on January 1st, 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons.

How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just “business as usual” and some technical solutions? With today’s emissions levels, that remained CO2 budget will be entirely gone within less than 8 ½ years.

(Some people with Asperger’s are known to have advanced spatial reasoning skills, making them good at things like math, architecture and music. This played out in the novel and theater play “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime.” So it would not surprise me if the

technical evidence here is accurate, something that could be mastered by a teen. I believe it, not because of any knowledge I bring to the reading, but because it has the ring of truth, and I assume it would have been vetted by experts. Let me stipulate, though, that while numbers can be used effectively in a speech [“Four score and seven years ago ...”] they are best used sparingly. I remember that the Good Samaritan, in the parable of Jesus, gave the innkeeper “two denarii” — silver coins, a day’s wage — to take care of the fallen man.)

There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.

(Wow. We are back to being scolded by a child, using the inversion that we are not mature enough. I hope she doesn’t ground me.)

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

(As with other effective speeches, it opens strong, takes care of business in the middle, and closes with the greatest hope, or here, the strongest indictment. Look at the language: failing us, betrayal, never forgive you.)

We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

(Notice the sentence length in the last two paragraphs: 4 words, 10, 9, 9, 5, 9, 10, 5, 10. All those periods are stop signs, slowing down the pace for dramatic effect.)

Thank you.

(Never has a thank you and its courtesy sounded in such friction with the message delivered.)

Roy Peter Clark is senior faculty emeritus at Poynter. He can be reached at roypc@poynter.org.