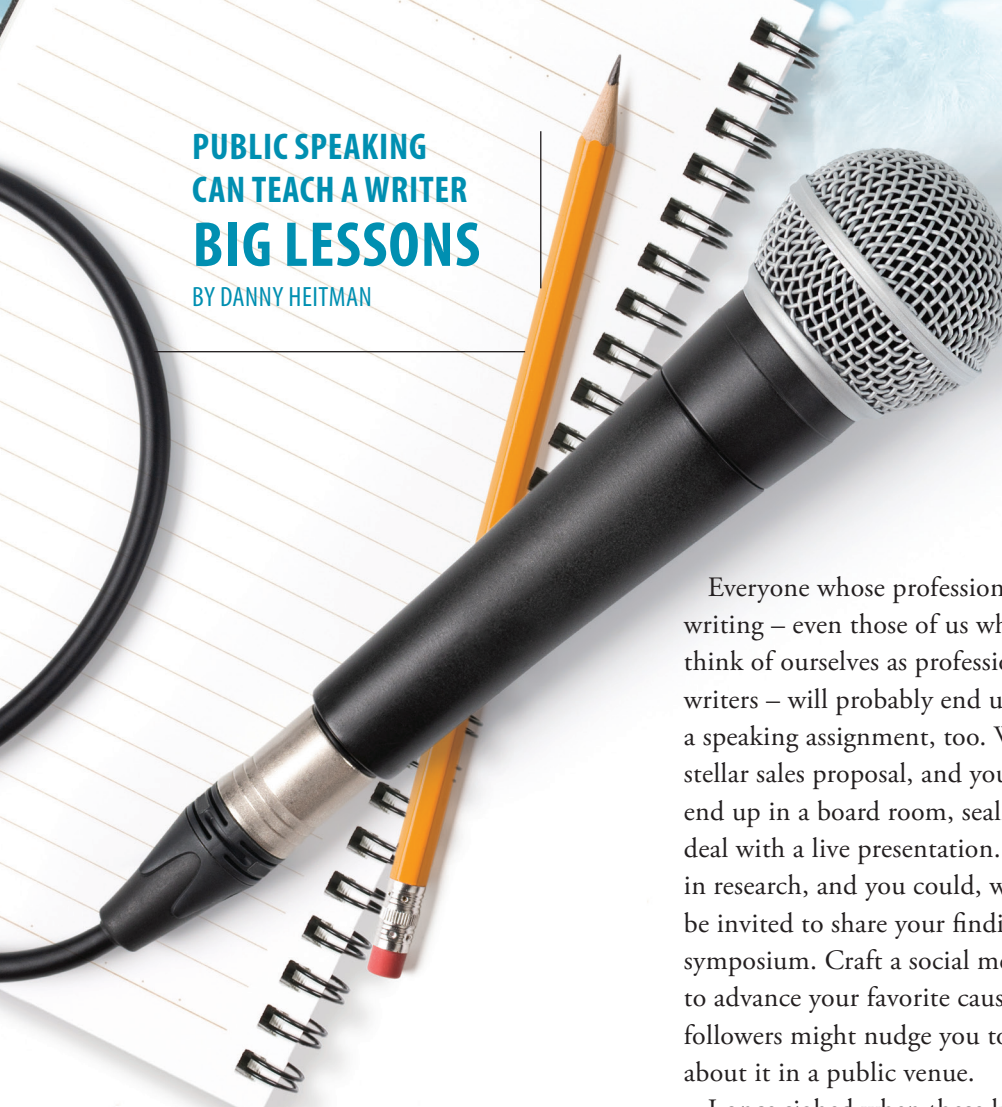


**PUBLIC SPEAKING
CAN TEACH A WRITER
BIG LESSONS**

BY DANNY HEITMAN



Because I'm shy, writing struck me early on as an ideal way to communicate. In putting words on paper, I could be heard without the pressure of standing before an audience. But I quickly learned that for a writer, public speaking is often part of the job.

Civic groups and book clubs generously asked me to discuss my work. Sometimes, to promote a book or other writing project, appearances on TV and radio entered the mix. I was occasionally invited into classrooms, and teaching students to write involved lots of time at the lectern.

Everyone whose profession requires writing – even those of us who don't think of ourselves as professional writers – will probably end up with a speaking assignment, too. Write a stellar sales proposal, and you might end up in a board room, sealing the deal with a live presentation. Engage in research, and you could, with luck, be invited to share your findings at a symposium. Craft a social media post to advance your favorite cause, and followers might nudge you to speak about it in a public venue.

I once sighed when these kinds of obligations arose, but now, I welcome them. Public speaking, properly embraced, can help a writer become better at the craft.

First and foremost, the direct feedback from a live audience is invaluable. When I was asked many years ago to be a luncheon speaker, I dug up an old humor essay from my files to recycle for my remarks. The tepid response from my listeners revealed an uncomfortable truth. My essay wasn't very funny – the gags too obvious, the material much too long. I wouldn't have gleaned those insights alone at my writing desk.

These kinds of lessons are an important reason why poets and

authors do public readings of their work. Audiences are great teachers. In their reactions, a writer is usefully reminded that writing is really a conversation, regardless of whether it rises from a podium or a page.

In rehearsing a speech or reviewing work I've been asked to read aloud, I often discover passages that sound too long, prose that's awkwardly phrased, and sentences that seem, on second thought, not pleasing to the ear. If I run out of breath in voicing a sentence, for example, there's a good chance that it's too lengthy and needs revision.

Which is why, even when writing something I don't envision as part of a speech, I've gotten into the habit of softly reading it aloud.

It's a practice I might not have learned if I hadn't spoken in public. All the more reason, I think, to engage writing and speaking as vital partners in bringing language alive.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.