Gopen *Litigation* Article #36

The Power of Balance: Writing Lessons to Be Learned from John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address

[Author's Note #1: I urge you to go online and listen to Kennedy's delivery of this speech – less than 14 minutes in length – before reading this article. You might wish to read and listen to it afterwards, as well.]

[Author's note #2: As readers, we always want to be forging forward. I am asking something different of you here. Once I have noted something about a passage, you will comprehend what I am saying better if you then go back and read that portion of his text again, with my points in mind.]

****

The presidential election of 1960 was hotly contested in the middle of a cold war: Out of the 68,330,000 votes cast, John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon wound up separated by only 112,000. Kennedy was the second youngest person to become President; and he had made little noise as Congressman or Senator. The world was waiting anxiously for his Inaugural Address, which

might reveal his character, might let us know whether we should be able to trust this man to represent us in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. He co-wrote and delivered one of the most memorable Inaugurals in American history, including perhaps the single most memorable sentence ever uttered in that context. This number of On the Papers will try to explain what trial lawyers can learn from a close investigation of how the language of that speech – and especially its prose rhythms and its use of recognizable rhetorical figures of speech – was able to produce such memorability.

Why should it be worthy of study by trial lawyers? Rhythms exist in your prose, whether you recognize them or not. You cannot avoid them. As long as they are there, why not take steps to ensure that they work *for* you, and not *against* your readers? Can you imagine being a famous maker of movies and having the Studio haphazardly set just any old music score to your latest masterpiece? The music would constantly be at odds with the movie's substance. Your prose rhythms are your musical score. Kennedy (with the aid of his talented speech writer, Ted Sorensen) made good use of a series of techniques for producing and regulating that music.

When Rhetoric is really well employed, listeners and readers are usually not conscious of its presence, but

yet are affected by its powers. By becoming conscious of all these devices, we can come to understand them well enough for us to use them. Our listeners and readers will, in turn, be affected by our powers, probably without noticing.

We will look here at a number of these devices: (1) rhythmic prose balancing; (2) sound repetitions; (3) a rhetorical figure of speech known as *anaphora*; and (4) another figure of speech known as *chiasmus*. We will be cherry-picking examples of each of these from Kennedy's Inaugural; and then we shall also explore the structure of the speech as a whole.

If you have been reading my *Litigation* articles on Lincoln for the past year, you know about my invention of "Colometrics," by which I separate a prose speech into poetic length lines and then separate each line horizontally into a number of separate units, each of which contains one prose accent or "beat."

Four score and seven years ago

has five beats – and you can see them, since the line has been spaced into five horizontal units.

Because there are no videotapes of Lincoln giving that speech, all decisions about how many beats existed in

any unit were of my own making. But with Kennedy's speech, we indeed have a videotape. So all the claims I make here about unit lengths and number of beats are all those that were clearly made by him, not me.

I approached the speech expecting to find 4-beat lines, the default value expectation I thought he might be he establishing for us.

Ask not what your country can do for you

But, it turns out, he is more partial in this speech to 3-beat lines. 3 beats are easy to establish a common rhythm when speaking slowly and with emphasis. A 4-beat line can then expand the weight of the next unit. 2-beat lines do well either for a single special emphasis or, when repeated several times, for the building of a rhetorical crescendo. 5-beat lines are reserved in great speeches for moments of extreme importance – recalling the iambic *pent*ameter of Shakespeare. Any line with a different number of beats from that of its several predecessors can act well as grammatical closure.

We can see from statistics how Kennedy favors line lengths in this speech: Out of the 262 rhythmic units in his speech, 42% contain 3 beats; 27% contain 4 beats;

27% contain 2 beats; 4% contain 5 beats; and there is one unit that was performed as 6 beats, even though the text would seem to call for 5.

To start with, let us look at a simple example, his opening paragraph. It is a moment in which he wishes to establish an orderly tone, in order to portray an orderly mind. By taking quite noticeable pauses, Kennedy divides the paragraph into 12 rhythmic units, which I separate into what I am calling "lines." 9 of these 12 contain 3 beats. The others are used for (quiet) special effects.

We observe today
not a victory of party
but a cel- ebration of freedom--
sym- bolizing an end
as well as a beginning--
sig- nifying renewal
as well as change.

For I have sworn before you
and Almighty God
the same solemn oath
our fore- bears prescribed
nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

In his performance, the first six units are all 3s, establishing that as his default value rhythmic unit. He uses a 2, "as well // as change," to bring the grammatical sentence to closure. In the second sentence, he again begins with a 3 and then inserts a dramatic 2 for "Almighty // God." He returns to 3s, but ends the paragraph by expanding to a 4, whose extra syllable produces a nice rhythm for closure. Try reading the paragraph aloud to hear these choices functioning.

He will begin 11 of his 27 paragraphs with a 3-beat line; but he will begin another 11 with a 4.

To give a sense of moving ahead from his formal opening paragraph, he begins the second paragraph with a 4, letting 4-beat units dominate the first half of the paragraph and then reverting to 3s at the end:

The world is very different now.
For man holds in his mortal hands
the power to abolish
all forms of human poverty
and all forms of human life.

And yet the same revolutionary beliefs
for which our forebears fought

are still at issue around the globe --
the belief that the rights of man
come not from the generosity of the state
but from the hand of God.

The first sentence: 4-4-2-4-4. The second: 4-3-4-3-3-3.

It is as if the 4-beat line is musically telling us he is now getting down to business. But an unremitting string of 4s might weigh down the listener's ability to attend; and so he never gives us three 4s in a row in the same sentence. And his return to a trio of 3s in a row at the end musically makes us feel like we are coming back home to where his first paragraph began.

His 4th paragraph gives us a example of how a string of 2-beat lines can create a dramatic crescendo, known as an *auxesis*.

Let every nation know,
whether it wishes us well or ill,
that we shall pay any price,
bear any burden,
meet any hardship,
support any friend,
oppose any foe

to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

Each of those five pairs of 2, starting with the second half of the second line, have the verb in the third vertical column and a noun modified by "any" in the fourth. As a listener, you can hear it and keep track of where he is – and therefore where you are.

But he goes beyond the rhythms and strengthens the whole sentence-paragraph by an onslaught of sound repetitions. In the first two lines, note the 3 "w" sounds, as well as the "l" sounds that begin and end that portion. Then the pairs in the third and fourth columns feature the "p" sounds in line 3, the "b" sounds in line 4, and the "o" sounds in the line 7, with the word "any" repeated in five straight twosomes. And the word "foe" just about rhymes with the word "know."

Can you use these techniques in a closing statement? Of course you can. The jury will be hanging on your words and your music.

In the second half of the speech, beginning with his 14th paragraph, he spends 6 paragraphs urging the United States and the Soviet Union to collaborate on positive efforts to improve the world. He brings this stirring call to an end by building his 19th paragraph out of the

same techniques we have just observed. Watch them function:

And if a beachhead of coop- eration
may push back the jungle of suspicion,
let both sides join in creating
a new endeavor,
not a new balance of power,
but a new world of law,
where the strong are just
and the weak secure
and the peace preserved.

Can you see how after the initial three 4-beat lines, he dramatically shifts to 2 beats for the "new // endeavor"? Then he creates a pair of 3s, in which he balances the alliterative"not" world with the"new world." And to characterize that new world, he produces another battering-ram progression of 2s, with several sound repetitions – the "s" sounds in "strong" and "secure," the "p" sounds in "peace" and "preserved," and the long "e" sounds in "weak," "secure," and "peace." In seeking after a world without a "new balance of power," his rhetoric leans heavily on the musical power of balance.

All twelve of his 5-beat units in the speech come at moments when he wants the greatest weight possible

for a single unit. Here are some of them:

> Paragraph 3: “We dare not forget today” (each word stressed)
>
> Paragraph 8: “”struggling to break the bonds of mass misery”
>
> Paragraph 13: “that stays the hand of mankind’s final war”
>
> Paragraph 22: “tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself”
>
> Paragraph 27 (the last paragraph in the speech): “Let us go forth to lead the land we love” – combining all those “l” sounds.

These are all important, “hot” moments, in a cold war.

One 5-beat line deserves a closer look, because of the way it caps off a crescendo (*auxesis*) in which the music supports the meaning. When he finishes the long passage of collaborations we might undertake with the Soviet Union, he tells us this effort will take a long time to achieve. You can see from the colometric (figure #X) that he begins with a standard 4-beat line and then

retreats to a trio of 3-beat lines, from where he grows to a 4-beat line, then capping off this expansion of time with the ultimate expansion to a 5-beat line. Then, highly dramatically, he ends the paragraph with a starkly contrasting 2-beat line, which seems to expand in its length and weight to balance of the much longer 5-beat line that has just capped off the *auxesis*.

All this will not be finished
in the first one hundred days.
Nor will it be finished
in the first one thousand days,
nor in the life of this Administration,
nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet.
But let us begin.

In one of your briefs, do you have a need to indicate a significant expansion in the size or duration of something? Let your music do the talking.

I must not pass over my favorite non-5 5-beat line. It shows up in his 24th paragraph, which concludes the main body of the speech, leaving only a three-paragraph coda to give us the famous "Ask not what your country can do for you" point of it all. He tells us that only a few generations in the history of a country are faced with defending freedom from extinction. As the high point of the main body of the speech, and as if

he is answering, in one sentence, all the criticism that he is too young, too green, too inexperienced to lead us safely through the Cold War, he raises his voice to its highest volume so far and proclaims, "I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it." Those first seven words look to me, on the page, to be a clear 5-beat line: "I **do** not **shrink** from **this** re**sponsa**b**il**ity." But Kennedy goes out of his way to accentuate the "I" as well; and with two fingers, he pounds the podium for each of those 6 beats. He has out-fived his 5. You rarely encounter a 6-beat line in a well-written speech. Every rhythmic expectation can be violated to good effect.

In the speech as a whole, he makes great use of the ancient rhetorical figure of speech *anaphora*. It is used to create structure. *Anaphora* is the beginning of several consecutive units of discourse (sentences, sometimes clauses, but here paragraphs) with the same word or phrase. Perhaps the most famous one was written by Shakespeare, commanding the central portion of John of Gaunt"s "deathbed speech" in *Richard II*. The passage begins with "This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle, this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars," and continues for several lines to a seeming climax in the line "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England." The word "this" is the anaphoric signpost that tells you that yet one more way

of describing England is starting.

Kennedy makes use of *anaphora* in the first half of the speech. His 5th, one-sentence paragraph looks back at the previous four paragraphs and tells us, "All this we pledge – and more." And then he starts the next paragraph with, "To those old allies . . ., we pledge ...." The next paragraph begins with "To those new states ..., we pledge." And so it goes for six paragraphs. Every one of them is a pledge, with the anaphoric word "pledge" telling us that we will now hear about one more pledge.

I noted this with interest, being interested in these kinds of things. Then, in the second half of the speech, it happened again. After that first 6-paragraph *anaphora*, there were two paragraphs (#12 and #13) that did the job of turning away from the first half of the speech and turning our attention to the second half. And if you count the words, those two paragraphs are at the exact mid-point of the speech. Then the next paragraph, the 14th, begins with beginning again: "So let us begin anew – remembering on both sides that . . . ." And the next paragraph begins, "Let both sides explore . . . ." And the next begins, ""Let both sides, for the first time ...." There follows another parade of anaphoric paragraphs, with the anaphoric milepost now

being "let both sides." Want to guess how many paragraphs are in this *anaphora*? You are right – six of them, again.

As one addicted to beautiful structures, I was hoping this was no accident. It was not an accident. I had stumbled on the marvelously symmetric structure of this famous speech. Here it is:

> The opening 5 paragraphs: Introduction and the noting of the present occasion;
>
> Then, the 6 anaphoric "pledge" paragraphs, pledging to 6 different audiences how we will try to work on their behalf;
>
> Then, at the center of the speech, a paragraph to rattle our shield ("We dare not tempt them with weakness"), and another to insist that we must all proceed peacefully;
>
> Then, another string of 6 anaphoric paragraphs, this time mapping out how "both sides" can collaborate with our adversaries;
>
> And then – wonderful! – another 5-paragraph passage, balancing out the opening 5-paragraph passage, in which he turns to us and proclaims,

> "Now the trumpet summons us again," and asks us, "Will you join in this historic effort?" And he tells us that "The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it – and the glow from that fire can truly light the world."

There is the structure: 5 paragraphs intro, 6 paragraphs anaphoric structure, 2 centralized paragraphs, another 6-paragraph anaphora, and another unified 5-paragraph portion, all of which leads us up to the famous 3-paragraph *coda* or epilogue. Completely symmetrical, all controlled by a musical deployment of prose rhythms, plus lots of sound repetition, magical sets of combining three things at a time (which I haven't been able to talk about), and the use of rhetorical figures of speech.

All this is not beyond your ability to imitate. Make sure the *size* of each portion of your narration of the facts reflect the varying importance of each section. Make sure the jury can hear a beginning, middle, and end of your impassioned plea.

I am not just playing with numbers here. When you look at the text, you can see Kennedy beginning and ending each of these structural segments by giving the audience verbal signals, clues to its structure, as he

proceeds. Here are those signals:

He ends paragraph #5, his introduction, with "This much we pledge – and more." Thus he wraps up the introduction and sets up the anaphora of "we pledge," that will control the next 6-paragraph unit.

He begins the last of those 6 anaphoric paragraphs with "Finally, ..." He might as well have said, "Hey folks, this unit is now ending." We will be on to something else.

Then, for the middle two paragraphs of this structure, he warns us that the Cold War (without naming it) can indeed be seen as a struggle for the world's continued existence. Everyone in the country was worried deeply about this. We needed to hear from him that he was up to the job.

From there he launches into the second 6-paragraph anaphora. He begins its first paragraph with, "So let us begin a new." It is almost a play on words, referring both to the structure of his speech and to our international political effort. The final words of the last of those six paragraphs are "the peace preserved" – the end of all for which he is asking.

In the paragraph that begins the final 5-paragraph unit of the main speech (everything minus the 3-paragraph coda), he tells us that "All this will not be finished" in the first 100 or 1,000 days, or in the life of his Administration, or perhaps our lifetimes; and he ends that paragraph with "But let us begin."

For five ringing paragraphs of high rhetoric, meant to uplift, he firmly assumes the mantel of leadership and urges us to join him. The last paragraph of this five-paragraph unit could easily have been a ringing conclusion to the speech as a whole. It's last sentence: "The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it – and the glow from that fire can truly light the world." That easily could have been a ringing conclusion.

This strong but hidden structure of the speech as a whole cannot be perceived by his audience during the delivery of the speech; but it still organizes this 13 minutes and 43 seconds of our life experience, a moment of high ceremony and high symbolic value. We can sense that he is in total control of that 13:43. We come to believe that he knows where he is at any given moment. As the time passes, we feel more and more cared for by him as his listeners. We feel increasingly confident that no single paragraph will wander on endlessly; and we come to expect that each paragraph

will deal with one, well-rounded thought.

In other words, by his elegant and sure-handed guidance of us through this experience, he is demonstrating for us his power of leadership.

Wouldn't you like every judge who reads one of your briefs to feel secure in your power of intellectual leadership? Wouldn't you like every jury to believe, throughout every moment of your closing argument, that they are in good and capable hands? If so, attend to your prose. Attend to its structure, to its sounds, and to the many rhetorical techniques of organization we are observing here in this memorable speech.

We must now look for a moment at the famous *coda*. Paragraph 25 (of the 27) is perhaps better remembered than almost any other moment of American historical rhetoric. "And so, my fellow Americans,: Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." This is perhaps our most famous use of the rhetorical device known as *chiasmus*.

> And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what **your country** can do for **you** – ask what **you** can do for **your country**.

Chiasmus is a reversal figure (XYYX) that can work in different ways. It can show that something is the same whether you look at it forwards or backwards: "Whether the stone hits the pitcher, or the pitcher hits the stone, it's going to be bad for the pitcher." Or it can show that the first half has it all wrong: "We are not the party of family values; we are the party that values families." How does this most famous one work? Like this:

> Ask not what your **country** (the pork barrel) can do for **you** (you greedy, self-concerned, narcissistic worm); ask what **you** (you patriotic, good citizen) can do for your **country** (that transcendent concept that can lift us together far above who we otherwise would be).

The country is lifted from pork barrel to transcendent virtue because you are willing to transform yourself from greedy worm to patriotic citizen. He has saved his best for the last section of the speech.

His 26th paragraph has the feel of a chiasmus:

> My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what **America** will do for **you**, but what together **we** can do for the **freedom of man**.

It gives us another reversal; but the Y elements do not match up well. Perhaps that is why no one seems to be able to recall this sentence.

In the final paragraph, the 27th, how can he bring this epilogue to a close? Of course, he reaches for a third time for *chiasmus*. (There are 9 chiasmi in this speech. I wish we had time to visit them all. Three of them are in the final three paragraphs.) Here is the final one – not as obvious as the others, but still encapsulating a sense of reversal, this time with three elements – XYZ ZYX:

> Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, **ask** of **us** here the same high standards of **strength** and **sacrifice** which **we** ask of **you**.

So just as *anaphora* organizes two 6-paragraph units that are centrally located in each half of the speech, so does *chiasmus* make a unit of its final three paragraphs.

So how can you make use of everything I have extracted for you from this memorable speech? You can use it in writing briefs or letters – any written document that is called upon to get a positive response from your readers. You do not have to fashion each

document as a perfect symmetry; but you should take care to note how long you spend on any given item and ask if its length is in proportion to its weight. You do not have to make every paragraph sing in colometric grace; but you should pay special rhythmic attention to the paragraphs that are meant to bear the greatest weight in your argument. Print them out in a large font; divide the paragraph into the sub-units in which they might be read aloud – with no sub-unit going on for more than 5 beats, and most of them containing either 3 or 4 beats, keeping a handful of 2s for the spicier moments. Use 5 beats only for moments of the greatest emphasis. Keep the rhythms parallel to each other until there is a need to change the rhythm to increase the moment's intensity.

Use 5 beats only for moments of the greatest emphasis
Keep the rhythms parallel to each other
until there is a need to change the rhythm
to increase the moment's intensity.

And all of this can also be used orally, to keep your listeners following your organization of your thoughts, and offering you techniques for heightening dramatic intensity when needed.

Every once in a while, sound repetition might well support words you want to be heard together. Parallel structure suits a two-part thought that is logically

parallel. You might even find an occasion for a chiasmus, if you are writing about a reversal in thought or fact. As Starkist once told Charlie the Tuna, when he had taken up painting to make himself more attractive to the company, "Sorry Charlie, Starkist doesn't want tunas with good taste; they want tunas that taste good."

At the end of his Inaugural Address, Kennedy turned to his left and shook hands with Vice-President Johnson. Former Vice-President Nixon was sitting next to Johnson. But Kennedy then turned 180 degrees and shook hands with former president Eisenhower, the Chief Justice, and others. Nixon moved up to the podium and reached his hand across to Kennedy. Eventually, Kennedy turned around and shook hands with Nixon. In my next essay, we too will turn to President Nixon.