

American Presidents as Writing Heroes

Julie A. Oseid

Associate Professor

University of St. Thomas School of Law

jaoseid@stthomas.edu (651) 962-4948

We lawyers need writing heroes. This presentation will focus on the stories behind the eloquence of a select group of our American Presidents. Each wrote with one quality that has been recognized as essential for effective legal writing. We can achieve clarity by adding these qualities to our writing: brevity (Abraham Lincoln), rigor (James Madison), use of metaphor (Thomas Jefferson), precision (Ulysses Grant), and passion (Theodore Roosevelt).

One critical part of each President's personal story led to his adoption of a particular persuasive writing skill. Jefferson's use of metaphor was rooted in his classical education. Madison's rigor developed in large part from his shy personality and his hesitation to speak extemporaneously. Lincoln's brevity resulted from his 25 years practicing law. Grant's precision began in his army days, and became the defining feature of his autobiography. Roosevelt's family emphasized passion.

The presentation will also offer hope to all of us as we explore the stories behind the writing habits of each particular President. These Presidents started with some natural writing talent, but their writing habits catapulted them into true eloquence. They all worked hard. They all considered audience. They all started drafting early. We, too, can increase our eloquence by emulating these habits.

Completed Articles:

1. Thomas Jefferson – METAPHOR

The Power of Metaphor: Thomas Jefferson's "Wall of Separation between Church & State," 7 J. ALWD 123 (2010).

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1584966

2. James Madison - RIGOR

The Power of Rigor: James Madison as a Persuasive Writer, 8 Legal Communication & Rhetoric: J. ALWD ____ (forthcoming 2011) (co-authored with Thomas C. Berg and Joseph A. Orrino).

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1856732

3. Abraham Lincoln – BREVITY

The Power of Brevity: Adopt Abraham Lincoln's Habits, 6 J. ALWD 28 (2009).

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1434735