

"America isn't the Greatest Country in the World"

Speech transcript from Season 1, Episode 1 of *The Newsroom* by Aaron Sorkin (HBO)

Speech transcript from "How to Write an Aaron Sorkin Script" by Aaron Sorkin (GQ.com)



A song in a musical works best when a character has to sing—when words won't do the trick anymore. The same idea applies to a long speech in a play or a movie or on television. You want to force the character out of a conversational pattern. In the pilot of *The Newsroom*, a new series for HBO, TV news anchor Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels) emotionally checked out years ago, and now he's sitting on a college panel, hearing the same shouting match between right and left he's been hearing forever, and the arguments have become noise. A student asks what makes America the world's greatest country, and Will dodges the question with glib answers. But the moderator keeps needling him until...snap.

Will - It's not the greatest country in the world, professor, that's my answer.

Moderator [pause] - You're saying—

Will - Yes.

Moderator - Let's talk about—

Start off easy. First get rid of the two noisemakers.

Will - Fine. [to the liberal panelist] Sharon, the NEA is a loser. Yeah, it accounts for a penny out of our paychecks, but he [gesturing to the conservative panelist] gets to hit you with it anytime he wants. It doesn't cost money, it costs votes. It costs airtime and column inches. You know why people don't like liberals? Because they lose. If liberals are so friggin' smart, how come they lose so GODDAM ALWAYS!

The use of inappropriate language has a purpose—the filter's off.

And [to the conservative panelist] with a straight face, you're going to tell students that America's so starspangled awesome that we're the only ones in the world who have freedom? Canada has freedom, Japan has freedom, the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia, Belgium has freedom. Two hundred seven sovereign states in the world, like 180 of them have freedom.

The fact-dump that's coming now serves several purposes. It backs up his argument, it reveals him to be exceptional (what normal person has these stats at their fingertips?), but mostly it's musical. This is the allegro.

And you—sorority girl—yeah—just in case you accidentally wander into a voting booth one day, there are some things you should know, and one of them is that there is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world. We're seventh in literacy, twenty-seventh in math, twenty-second in science, forty-ninth in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, third in median household income, number four in labor force, and number four in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined, twenty-five of whom are allies. None of this is the fault of a 20-year-old college student, but you, nonetheless, are without a doubt, a member of the WORST-period-GENERATION-period-EVER-period, so when you ask what makes us the greatest country in the world, *I don't know what the hell you're talking about?! Yosemite?!!!*

Now we slow down and get a glimpse into his pain. The oratorical technique is called "floating opposites"—we did, we didn't, we did, we didn't... But rhythmically you don't want this to be too on the money. You're not just testing the human ear anymore; you want people to hear what he's saying.

We sure used to be. We stood up for what was right! We fought for moral reasons, we passed and struck down laws for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chest. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, and we acted like men. We aspired to intelligence; we didn't belittle it; it didn't make us feel inferior. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election, and we didn't scare so easy. And we were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men, men who were revered. The first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one—America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.

To resolve a melody, you have to end on either the tonic or the dominant. (Try humming "Mary Had a Little Lamb" right now, but leave off "snow." You'll feel like you need to sneeze.) So Will ends where he started. Then, just to acknowledge that he just sang an aria—which is unusual in the course of a normal conversation—he turns to the moderator who'd been needling him and casually asks...

Will - *[to moderator]* Enough?