

Obama's oratory won the day

Kevin Rudd should take a leaf out of the US President's writing and speaking skills.

IF BARACK OBAMA was, as his critics suggested, off his game last Tuesday, with a more sedate inauguration address, then legions of politicians must surely be hoping they could be so lucky.

"Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter," Obama declaimed. "And with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations."

If only we could all be that bad. The new US President will be judged as much by his soaring oratory as his governance. His most ardent fans would acknowledge that he comes to the presidency with a thin political résumé: eight years as a part-time state legislator in Illinois and four years as a senator.

And yet his extraordinary skill as a communicator – rivalling, if not bettering, a Republican



ANDREW WEST

predecessor, Ronald Reagan – pushed him past more experienced candidates to win the Democratic nomination. His public speaking clinched victory in the November election against John McCain, veteran senator and war hero.

Now a Sydney writing and speech coach has developed a course, "Write Like Obama", based on his analysis that the President's oratorical gifts have their roots in his writing, particularly his book, *Dreams From My Father*, which received critical praise. "He is an exceptionally gifted user of words

and that begins with his writing," says Tony Spencer-Smith of the Editor Group.

"The key thing is that he writes most of his own speeches and they don't come from some slick public relations machine."

Spencer-Smith, a novelist and former editor of *Reader's Digest*, has identified at least five key factors in Obama's success.

□ Clarity: the use of simple, straightforward language, short words and sentences that all readers and listeners can understand. So in the 2004 speech

to the Democratic convention that launched his career, he defined "the true genius of America" as "a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles. That we can tuck our children up at night and know that they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door."

□ Tone: Obama was able to overcome what many feared was a political negative – his race – and create in his speeches a momentum, a sense that his election was an inevitable end to a journey that began with the emancipation of the slaves. He also had an appealing self-mockery, referring to himself as the "skinny kid with the funny name".

□ Nuance: He was able to explain the subtleties of politics, particularly race, and point out that while segregation had compounded America's original sin, slavery, the nation had progressed.

□ Poetry: *Dreams From My Father* employs metaphors, describing the way his childhood stories about his African ancestry were told then "packed away".

□ Rhythm: Obama used repetition effectively and developed a simple refrain – "yes, we can".

While these may seem elusive qualities, Spencer-Smith says clarity, at least, is within the grasp of most politicians, including Kevin Rudd. The Prime Minister's speeches are likely to improve markedly, having taken on the award-winning *Age* journalist James Button as his speechwriter, but he has developed a reputation for jargon, probably because of his background as a bureaucrat.

"If Rudd were to suddenly get poetic, it would look weird," says Spencer-Smith. "But he could benefit from the clarity. He is infamous for speaking in bullet points."

Obama and Rudd do have a common inspiration, however, which has informed their best speeches: religious faith.

As political scientist Marion Maddox points out, Rudd's celebrated apology to the stolen generations had a strong prayerful cadence, especially the lines: "For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted in a proud people, and a proud culture, we say sorry."