



*The Weekly What* delivers 52 weeks of writing exercises and analysis right to your in-box. Here's a sample of the kind of analysis you would have received if I'd been doing *The Weekly What* last year.

## **Great speech for "The Greatest": Louisville Mayor Greg Fisher's tribute to Muhammad Ali**

By Elaine Bennett

Who watches ESPN for the speeches? But when I turned on my TV this morning, I lucked into hearing a great one: the mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, Greg Fisher, paid tribute to the life of one of his hometown's greatest gifts to the world: pacifist, activist, interfaith pioneer, and—yes—sports legend Muhammad Ali. In the spirit of sports, here's my play-by-play analysis of [the speech](#).

Ali may have been born in Louisville, but he grew into a citizen of the world. The Mayor acknowledged that in his opening:

*Muhammad Ali lived a life so big and bold, it's hard to believe that any one man could do everything he did, could be all the things that he became in the course of just one lifetime.*

*This man, this champion, ended his 74 years yesterday as A United Nations Messenger of Peace; a Humanitarian and champion athlete who earned Amnesty International's Lifetime Achievement Award; the Presidential Medal of Freedom; and Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Century.*

Next, Mayor Fisher articulated the many highlights of Ali's life. Pay attention to the care with which he sets the stage for each event. This could so easily have become a list; instead, he weaves the facts into a compelling story.

*He was co-founder, with his beloved wife Lonnie, of the Muhammad Ali Center, which promotes respect, hope, and understanding here in his hometown of Louisville, and around the world.*

*A man of action and principle, he was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, and willingly paid the price, taking a stand that forced him out of the ring for over three years during the prime of his career.*

*A devout Muslim and interfaith pioneer, he took the name Muhammad Ali in 1964 and advocated for understanding and peace among people of different faiths.*

*He was, of course, three-time heavyweight champion of the world -- a young, handsome fighter with swagger like the world had never seen. He intimidated opponents outside the ring and dominated them inside it.*

*Like when he predicted he would beat Sonny Liston in 1964, made it happen, and shouted, "I shook up the world."*

Then the mayor turns to the biographical facts. But, again, he surprises us. He plays with the chronology, starting with Ali's Olympic triumph and looking backward at his youth, all the way to his birth—and then zooming forward again to all that we know this little baby will grow up to accomplish.

*He was winner of the Olympic Gold Medal in Rome, 1960.*

*A graduate of Louisville's Central High School, class of 1960.*

*He was a 12-year-old boy whose red bicycle was stolen in front of a gym on Fourth Street, who told police officer Joe Martin that he wanted to "whup" whoever took it. And Martin said that he'd better learn to box first.*

*Muhammad Ali was a boy who grew up at 3302 Grand Avenue. He liked to eat hot dogs and play Clue with his brother in a house that's now a museum.*

*And before that, he was a newborn baby, Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr., born January 17, 1942 to Cassius Sr. and Odessa Grady Clay.*

*Imagine that day, that little boy, eyes wide open looking around the room at the old Louisville General Hospital. Not knowing the life that awaited him. The life he would make. The world he would shake up. The people he would inspire.*

*And like you, I am absolutely one of those people.*

With the exception of the "red bicycle" story, this is the stuff you'd find in a Wikipedia sidebar. Dates, places, and names. But Fisher—and, I'm assuming, his speechwriter—bring the details vividly to life.

*Muhammad Ali belongs to the world, but he only has one hometown. The Louisville Lip spoke to everyone, but we heard him in a way no one else could – as our brother, our uncle, and our inspiration.*

And he grounds the emotion in his own reality, which is always essential. Personal details create an authentic bond between speaker and listener.

*And I am so grateful I had the chance to know him and see how he leveraged his fame to share his message of love, peace and compassion.*

Here comes the call to action. Ali's life gains added purpose if we use it to inspire our own good work:

*What The Champ would want us to do right now is to spread that same message, follow his example, and live by the same six core principles that he lived by:*

- *Confidence*
- *Conviction*
- *Dedication*
- *Giving*
- *Respect, and*
- *Spirituality*

Up to this point, I think it's an absolutely perfect speech. But nobody's perfect—not even Ali, who espoused a family-centered religion while marrying four times and divorcing three. The mayor hit one of my pet peeves when he said:

*I'd like to close with Muhammad's words...*

Nothing wrong with quoting Ali—in fact, it would be odd if you didn't in a speech like this. The problem is those five words at the start of the sentence: "I'd like to close with..." Because he *didn't* close with them: the speech continues for eight more paragraphs! To me, this seems like a last-minute edit, like someone on the committee said, "Hey—we should quote something he said." And the speechwriter had to find a place to shoehorn it in. (Buddy, whoever you are, I feel you. We've all been there.)

*I'd like to close with Muhammad's words, which carried just as much grace and power as his fists ever did. This comes from his book *The Soul of a Butterfly: Reflections on Life's Journey*.*

*"It doesn't matter whether you're a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew. When you believe in God, you should believe that all people are part of one family. If you love God, you can't love only some of his children."*

*He believed passionately in the need for us all to keep our eyes, our minds and our hearts open so we can keep learning from each other. As he says,*

*“My soul has grown over the years, and some of my views have changed. As long as I'm alive, I will continue to try to understand more because the work of the heart is never done.”*

For me, this is where the real close of the speech begins.

*We all remember the incredible moment in 1996 when Muhammad held that burning torch in his trembling hand and lit the Olympic flame in Atlanta.*

*And now, he has passed his torch to us.*

Writers often overuse the “passing the torch” metaphor, but in this case I like it because it connects so beautifully with Ali lighting the Olympic cauldron. If you [saw that moment on television](#), it will stay with you for the rest of your life. Ali standing as solidly as his Parkinson’s Disease would let him, fighting to keep his right arm steady as he held the torch over his head. It was as big a victory as any he ever had in the boxing ring. It spoke to his tenacity as a human being, and to the grit and determination of every athlete who's ever competed. (And no, I’m not crying: you are.)

*While there can only be one Muhammad Ali, his journey from Grand Avenue to global icon serves as a reminder that there are young people with the potential for greatness in houses and neighborhoods all over our city, our nation and our world.*

*There is no limit to what our kids can do if we help them realize their full human potential - and there is no excuse for us to do anything less than our best to help them find that greatness in themselves.*

*That’s how we can be champions. Muhammad Ali has shown us the way.*

*Today, we, his fellow Louisvillians, join the billions whose lives he touched worldwide in mourning his passing, celebrating his legacy, and saying, “Thank you Muhammad, for everything you’ve given to your hometown, your country, and the world.”*

Great occasions don't often occur on Saturday morning television. And you don't often find memorable speeches on a cable sports channel. But every so often, something comes along that changes how you look at the world. Muhammad Ali did that in many arenas over his lifetime; Greg Fisher, the mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, did it in Ali's name this morning.

### **Exercise:**

Using the structure of Mayor Fisher's speech, write about someone you admire—living or dead. It can be a public figure or someone you know and greatly respect.