

SPEAKING UP & MOVING FORWARD: A REVIEW OF SPEAKING ON CLIMATE

Morgan Dinh

“We have all heard too many ineffective speeches about climate. Let us start writing ones that work.”

That challenge lies at the heart of *Speaking on Climate* by Rune Kier Nielsen, an insightful book that rejects empty rhetoric in favor of honest, strategic, and emotionally rich storytelling. In an era when the science on climate change is clear but the action still lags behind, Nielsen’s message is clear: the problem isn’t what we know — it’s how we speak.

As a former speechwriter for the Danish Minister for Climate, Energy, and Buildings, and later working for the UN Environment Programme, Nielsen brings a wealth of experience to the page. But it was one award-winning speech he worked on in 2013 — carefully written, nicely delivered, yet ultimately forgotten — that changed the way he viewed speechwriting. *Speaking on Climate* is the result of that turning point. Drawing from historical speeches that have driven change and lessons from his own career, Nielsen shares clear, practical guidance on how to craft and deliver words that inspire action. He calls on readers to speak up, to “be true to the way you see the world and fight for what you believe,” because that’s how real change begins.

One of the first and most powerful insights Nielsen offers is also one of the most counterintuitive: emotion is not a flaw in climate speech, it is the very thing that makes it work. After laying out his story of the forgotten “good on paper” speech and what he learned from its failure, Nielsen opens the book with a compelling argument: we have spent too long pretending that data alone can persuade.



“Your emotions are your superpower,” he writes, and this belief pulses through some of the book’s most impactful pages.

He shows how emotion creates identification, urgency, and connection, things sterile facts alone cannot do. Nielsen’s critique of overly technical climate terms felt especially sharp, as he warns that excessive scientific jargon can alienate audiences and make listeners tune out. Instead, he urges speakers to embrace vulnerability and emotions through tones, providing examples of Greta Thunberg’s piercing emotional delivery and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s calming 1933 speech to show how tone can amplify connection by setting a specific mood for the audience. My favorite example was his speech about climate change affecting the lives of emperor penguins, whose eggs fall into the ocean as the ice sheet breaks. When reading that speech, it was obvious that there was no need for a climate model for audiences to feel grief and sadness. That, Nielsen reminds us, is what makes a speech memorable. Drawing from Aristotle’s balance of ethos, pathos, and logos, and from the “3 parts” of the brain itself, he explains in Chapter 8 how emotional delivery affects how a speaker is perceived. The instinctive brain responds first to tone and body language, not content.

A rushed voice may signal fear. A pause may convey confidence. I found this eye-opening. I had never thought of nervousness as something that brings the audience closer, or tone as a way to show belief. Yet Nielsen presents emotion as something extremely strategic in speech delivery. And in doing so, he empowers those of us who feel deeply about climate justice to finally speak like it.

If emotion is what makes a speech land, then framing is what makes it last. Another key message in *Speaking on Climate*, is that before you can persuade others, you have to be honest about your own perspective. Nielsen writes, “You have to be true to the way you see the world and fight for what you believe” — a seemingly simple statement that carries weight throughout the book. In his chapters on worldview, bridge-building, and personal storytelling, Nielsen explores the art of framing to showcase how aligning your truth with the audience’s values allows for better connection. He urges readers to ground their message in their lived experience, and present it in a way that resonates across ideological divides. Moreover, Nielsen encourages open mindedness and empathy instead of judgment when talking to those who disagree. Through an effort to understand rather than shame others, we can better connect with others and communicate our ideas in a way that will be better received. In this section of the book, one of his most compelling arguments is that it is better to have admitted change than to say we’ve always known the truth. People respond far better to a speaker who admits doubt, describes change, and models what it means to evolve, what it means to be human. This insight was powerful to me, as I

SPEAKING UP & MOVING FORWARD: A REVIEW OF SPEAKING ON CLIMATE

Morgan Dinh

previously thought that someone who had always known the truth would perhaps sound more credible to audiences. In chapters 2, 4, and 5, Nielsen emphasizes that vulnerability is a persuasive tool that can be used for connection. When you tell the story of how you became convinced, you invite the audience to change too. You show them that change is possible. Furthermore, Nielsen's discussion of climate denier tactics: deflection, conspiracy theories, and diversions, reveals how powerful framing can be, both for harm and for hope. To counter these tactics, Nielsen shows how to build what he calls "golden bridges" in Chapter 4, which are ways of linking climate action to the existing values of skeptical audiences, whether that's public health, economic security, or the love they have for certain places.

He argues that, "we do not need to change or overcome most people's values and emotions—we only need to connect their values to climate action. We need to argue why the values people already have should lead them to climate action".

Overall, these chapters are a masterclass in meeting people where they are without compromising your message. Nielsen reminds readers that changing minds rarely begins with argument. It begins with understanding.

Another important message that sticks out to me in this book comes from Chapter 3, where Nielsen connects the climate crisis to historic fights for justice.

In doing so, he reframes despair as continuity and shows us that change has always been possible. To me, one of the most impactful strategies *Speaking on Climate* offers is not rhetorical or emotional, but historical. Nielsen understands that hopelessness works against the climate movement. We are often told that the current crisis is unlike anything we've ever faced, and while that may be true, Nielsen argues that the human capacity to respond, to resist, to adapt, to transform, has been proven across generations. In Chapter 3, he draws a direct line from today's climate movement to the civil rights era, the fight for women's suffrage, and the global health campaigns of the 1980s. These examples remind us that change has never been easy, never been immediate, but they have also never been impossible. Nielsen reminds us that we are not starting from scratch, but rather, we are continuing a tradition of speaking up for what is right. Climate speeches are historical acts, and are part of a longer collection of voices that have always fought for a livable future.

After grounding his approach in emotional connection, value-based framing, and historical connection,



Nielsen turns his attention to the actual construction of a do-good climate speech. If emotion is the heart of the message and framing is its spine, then structure is its nervous system, firing signals and impressions that last far beyond the moment of delivery. In Chapters 6 and 7, Nielsen provides readers the rhetorical tools to make your message unforgettable. At the core of this section is his concept of "The One Ring," the single takeaway a speaker wants the audience to remember. Nielsen argues that no matter how many points you make or how many minutes you speak, the audience will leave holding onto only one idea, so you must choose it with intention and design everything else to support it. He walks readers through the techniques that reinforce a speech's core message: metaphor, repetition, story, rhythm, tone, and even visual props. Whether it's Greta Thunberg's "house on fire" metaphor or the way Barack Obama uses silence to emphasize key moments, Nielsen shows that great speeches are composed of design choices that anchor memory.

What makes this section especially valuable is how it balances theory with deeply practical advice.

By going in depth about these techniques, Nielsen writes an incredibly insightful section for anyone who wants to advocate for something but remains unsure of what to say or how to say it. It also demonstrates to me that anyone can craft a message that endures, as long as they are willing to speak with care and courage, using devices that will help make their speech memorable.

SPEAKING UP & MOVING FORWARD: A REVIEW OF SPEAKING ON CLIMATE

Morgan Dinh



If Nielsen's earlier chapters focused on the internal and interpersonal aspects of speech (emotions, framing, historical connection, and audience connection), his final message is about something bigger: movement.

A speech doesn't end when the mic cuts off. It doesn't end when you get off the stage either.

Instead, Nielsen urges us to think of every message as the seed of a larger conversation, one that can grow through communities and online spaces long after the original words are spoken. In his last chapter, Nielsen explores what it means to make your message "travel," especially in a digital age where speeches can be clipped, quoted, shared, and reinterpreted across platforms. He emphasizes that speakers must consider their live audience, "the particular", and their unseen audience, "the universal" — those who will read the transcript, watch the clip, or hear a secondhand retelling. In that sense, every speech exists in two dimensions. The best speakers create messages that are clear, repeatable, and emotionally resonant enough to spread from the particular to the universal.

Furthermore, Nielsen explores climate silence, a phenomenon where people don't hold regular conversations about the climate, as something that isolates those who care deeply but feel that they are alone. He notes that one-third of young people today feel as if they are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders alone. A powerful speech, he argues, is one of the ways we can ease that burden. By speaking up, we help build community. By sharing stories, we dismantle isolation. Nielsen challenges us not only to speak well, but to speak in a way that invites others to join, respond, and carry the message forward. These final insights brought me back to where the book begins, with the failure of a technically perfect speech that most people didn't remember. Nielsen's point is not that a single speech can solve the climate crisis. It is that the right speech, spoken at the right time, in the right way, can open the door to something bigger.

Overall, reading *Speaking on Climate* has reshaped the way I think about communication, not just in the context of climate, but in every space where emotion, urgency, and persuasion is needed. I used to believe that the strength of a speech lay in how much it could explain. Now I understand that its true strength lies in how much it can make someone feel. Nielsen's emphasis on emotional storytelling, clear framing, and devices to make a speech memorable challenged me to reflect on how I speak in debates, how I write, and even how I hold conversations about difficult issues. The idea that vulnerability is persuasive, or that admitting a change in your personal mindset can be more powerful than always appearing 'right'

will stay with me for a long time. What struck me most, though, was the shift in perspective: a speech isn't about convincing others to agree with you. It's about helping people see themselves in the story you're telling.

That message feels especially urgent now, at a time when the climate crisis can feel too complex to solve.

Speaking on Climate offers readers clarity, strategy, and hope.

Nielsen reminds us that while we may not all be policymakers or scientists, we all have the ability to speak — and that speaking, if done well, can be an act of service and inspiration for collective action.

"Do not tell your audience all they need to know," he writes. "Tell them the one thing they need to remember."

For me, that one thing is this: we are not alone, and when we speak with courage, clarity, and care, we create space for others to join us. This book matters because climate action begins with climate communication, and Nielsen gives us the tools to do it with both impact and integrity. Whether you are a student, an activist, or simply someone who wants to speak up, *Speaking on Climate* is a guide worth reading, sharing, and returning to. It reminds us that words, when used well, can move people — and that people, when moved, can move the world.

Bibliography:

- Nielsen, Rune. *Speaking on Climate: A Guide to Speechwriting for a Better Future*. Zest Books, 2025