

**Alumni: (Past student)****Name: Jessica Cunniffe****Age: 34 (born 1986)****Year graduated from Ousedale: 2004****Photo of you in your workplace****What qualifications did you gain at Ousedale?**

Eleven GCSEs in English literature, English language, maths, statistics, double science, history, German, music, art, textiles (A\*-B)

Four A-levels in history, English language, English literature and music (all As)

**Did you pursue any Further or Higher education?**

BA Hons in English (First Class) from the University of Exeter

National Certificate Examination in newspaper journalism from the National Council for the Training of Journalists

**What did you enjoy most about your school life at Ousedale?**

The size of the school. Ousedale is enormous – and that can be daunting when you arrive. But it means there are so many opportunities for you to meet like-minded friends, to discover teachers who inspire you and, above all, to “find your thing” – what you love doing most. After kicking balls around the all-weather pitch, jamming in the practice rooms, haunting the library and making concoctions in science block, I realised that music and books were definitely for me and sports and science were definitely not.

**Current job title and description of your role?**

My job title is Speechwriter, but I write more than just speeches. Currently I’m on maternity leave but before that I was working for David Cameron.

**How did you achieve this role?**

In my final few weeks at university my dad sent me a job advert from the *Luton on Sunday*, who were looking for a reporter. After driving up for an interview, I was offered the job. It all happened very quickly. I was at my graduation ceremony on the Friday and in the newsroom by the Monday, covering everything from court cases to sports matches – very much learning on the job. During three years there (and later at its sister paper, *MK News*), I completed the National Council for the Training of Journalists certificates in law, public affairs, news reporting and shorthand via distance learning (saving the bother – and the cost – of spending an extra year at university to gain these qualifications).

It was when I was covering politicians' visits to my patch that I realised that I didn't want to write *about* their speeches, I wanted to write the speeches themselves. Once again, I had found my thing. So I approached one of my contacts, Milton Keynes North's local MP, about working for him. It was a career sidestep, but also a foot in the door to the Houses of Parliament, and soon I was writing the speeches he would deliver from the famous green benches.

A year later I saw on the w4mp.org website that the Conservative Party's headquarters were looking for a speechwriter. After a series of interviews, and a gruelling three-hour test alongside five other applicants, I got the job. There I wrote speeches, articles and campaign messages for MPs, peers, ministers, the then Mayor of London – and even the Prime Minister himself.

I then spent a couple of years as a Special Adviser to Baroness Warsi in the Foreign Office and the Department for Communities. Each minister in Cabinet tends to have one, two or even three SpAds (and even more if they're PM), alongside hundreds of civil servants. SpAds tend to specialise in media or policy, whereas I did a bit of both, and managed to do a lot of speechwriting as well.

After applying for a speechwriting job at 10 Downing Street and not getting it, I tried again a year later and succeeded. I was finally working behind the big black door. I sat in a room with the Prime Minister's two other speechwriters and we shared the upcoming speeches evenly between us. Some of our drafted speeches we would send to the PM via the red box of work he took to his flat each evening, and they would be returned to us the next day covered in his scribbles (rather like a teacher handing you back your work). Other times we would discuss with him during "speech prep" sessions what he wanted to say, go away and write a draft, and then come back to him with it for his comments. We wouldn't always be confined to No10, though. A PM does lots of travelling – and makes lots of speeches when they do. I accompanied David Cameron on one trip to South East Asia, where we went to five cities in four countries over just three nights – and during that time I had to write 13 speeches.

There were highs and lows during my three years on the job, which included one election win, one referendum win and one referendum loss. Then, on New Year's Day 2017, I had a text from David Cameron asking if I would come and help him to write his autobiography. It was a huge challenge: I'd gone from working on 300-word articles to 3,000-word speeches to a 300,000-word book. But I loved every moment I spent researching, writing and editing, and *For the Record* became a bestseller when it was publishing in September 2019.

**What advice would you give our current students about the World of Work?**

Don't get too fixated on getting a career for life. You don't have to pick one thing and stick with it. I've flitted around from job to job. I've done career swerves and taken backward steps and it's always paid off (eventually – it doesn't always feel like you've made the right move at the time).

There seems to be an inverse correlation (maybe I *do* remember something from GCSE maths) between how interesting a job is and how much you get paid. Your friends may be earning shedloads in banking, but they're probably really bored and stressed. At the same time, though, you have to weigh up whether being a blogger on £10,000 a year is sustainable.

Remember the basic skills matter. When I started in journalism I was grateful to myself for getting my driving licence while I was at school (apparently when it came down to the final two, my ability to drive was what swung it). I am frequently thankful I learnt how to touch type – it has saved me hours over the years – and being able to write shorthand proved invaluable not just covering court cases but trying to get down at speed what various politicians are saying.

Also, sometimes you have to start from the bottom. Lots of people want to go from 0 to 60 in their careers. I frequently got asked how I became the PM's speechwriter and when I said I started at the bottom twice – in local news then an MP's office – they seem disappointed. There might be shortcuts for some, but there wasn't for me. And I'm glad there weren't. I know people who went straight from university to work on national papers, but they were just rewriting other people's stories, whereas I was out there, finding the stories. There was less prestige, an less pay, but I feel like I learnt far more on the ground than in an office.

**If there was a student interested in your career sector what advice would you give them and where could they find out further information?**

If you want to write well, read lots. Read (and watch/listen to) as many speeches as you can. I used to print off Blair and Cameron speeches and annotate them (identifying the tools of rhetoric I'd learnt studying English language A-level). Read books about the craft, too. *Speechwriting: the Expert Guide* by Simon Lancaster, will teach you the tools of the trade. *On Speaking Well* by Peggy Noonan will add to that, and give you a great insight into the job. *You Talkin' to Me?* by Sam Leith will give you an academic overview of the lost art of rhetoric.

Getting into speechwriting is shrouded in mystery, partly because speechwriters themselves are, by the nature of their job, shrouded in mystery. But there are many routes into the role. In politics, there are two clear paths: through party politics (which I did), or via the civil service. In terms of business, most big companies and charities employ in-house speechwriters. Then

there are all those other jobs – copywriters, private secretaries, special advisers – for whom speechwriting is part of their job. And there are agencies and freelancers too. In the case of all these things, try to get some work experience – or at the very least a coffee – with someone who already does this job. You can help them research, help proofread their work and even help write ideas. Follow speechwriting gurus Brian Jenner and Simon Lancaster, and their respective organisations, the European Speechwriter Network and Bespoke Speeches, on Twitter for the latest news and jobs in the world of speechwriting.



*The (Word) Smiths: For much of 2015 and 2016, Tim Kiddell and I were David Cameron's only speechwriters. Some days the PM would make five or six speeches. Tim and I were busy – but never bored! Our office was right by the black door, which we'd go in and out of every day.*



*Speaking about speaking: I've had a few opportunities to make speeches of my own – including at the university that I failed to get into when I was at Ousedale. (I was disappointed at the time, but as is so often the case with these things, it all worked out in the end.)*



*Chillaxing: The schedules on overseas visits are gruelling, but David Cameron and his police protection team never fail to squeeze in some exercise. In the last few years we've cycled in Singapore and Florida, swum in Calcutta and Bahrain and run around Central Park, Sydney Harbour and across the Golden Gate Bridge!*