



# How to Deliver an Effective State of the City Address

## How to Deliver an Effective State of the Cities Address

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### About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the nation's leading advocacy organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. Through its membership and partnerships with state municipal leagues, NLC serves as a resource and advocate for more than 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans. NLC's Center for City Solutions and Applied Research provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities and creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities.

### About the Author

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### Acknowledgements

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## How to Deliver an Effective State of the Cities Address

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**E**ach year, mayors, council presidents, and city managers deliver State of the City speeches. These speeches can increase transparency and help local leaders connect with constituents, network with local business, and tout their accomplishments to the region. For these reasons, an effective speech can be a powerful governing tool to add to your repertoire, if it is not already.

Annually, the National League of Cities (NLC) conducts an analysis of a large sample of State of the City speeches. The *State of the Cities* report aggregates the content of these speeches by policy area to give a snapshot of the issues important to mayors and their cities. Based on the expertise NLC has developed by reading these speeches, we offer the following advice to local officials interested in delivering a State of the City address or in improving their presentation techniques. This how-to will provide a structure for a State of the City address, give real examples from 2016 State of the City speeches, and help develop content for speeches.

Nashville, TN  
Mayor Megan Berry

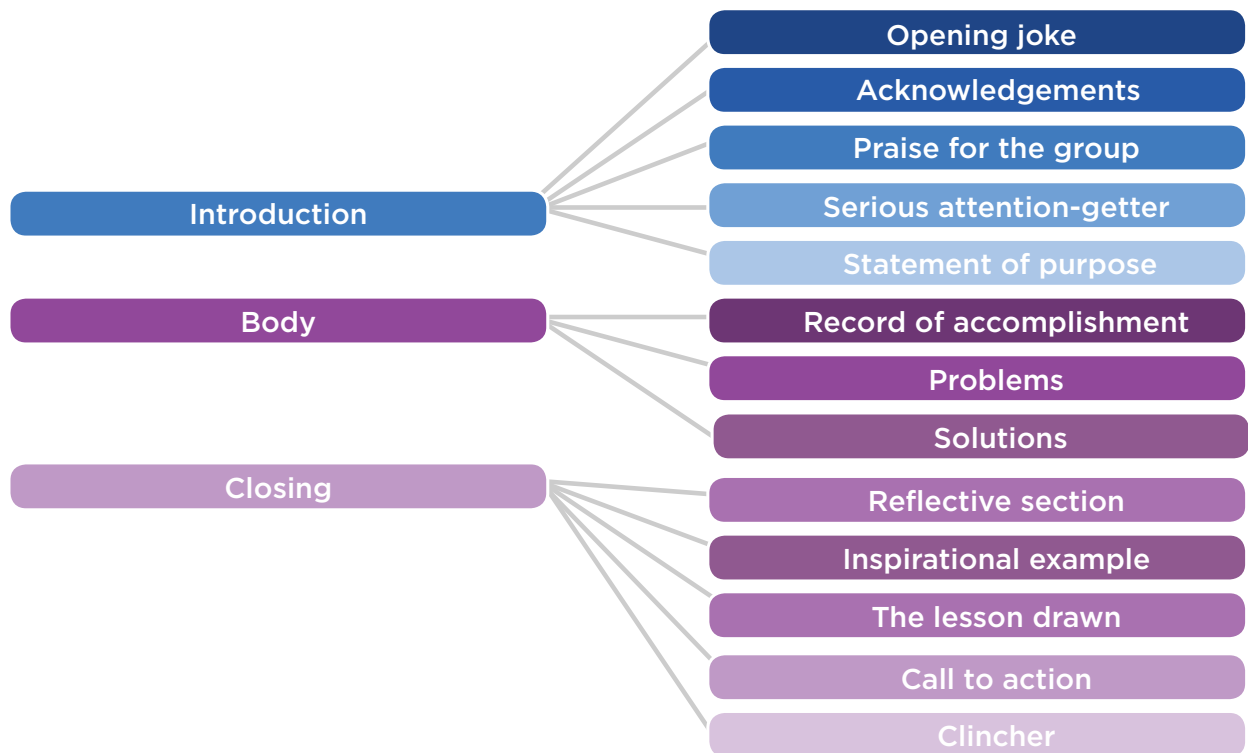


Much like the president’s State of the Union address, State of the City speeches celebrate the community, recognize areas for improvement, and set the policy agenda for the year ahead. Mayors frequently discuss in their speeches local economic conditions, the progress of capital projects, and city finances. Speeches vary widely in length, specificity, and tone.

A State of the City speech is essentially an issue-driven keynote address. Any good political speech has five sequential parts: attention grabber, problems, solutions, visualization, and call to action. The following is a loose structure for this type of speech, adapted from Robert Lehrman’s *The Political Speechwriter’s Companion* (2010).

## Structure of a State of the City Address

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# Address Introduction

1

## OPENING JOKE

The easiest way to energize an audience is to tell a quick joke. Most mayors do not do this, but an appropriate joke can help to set a positive tone for the speech you are about to deliver. A successfully delivered joke will put you and the crowd at ease.

*Kansas City, Mo., Mayor Sly James:*

*“Take a moment and think back to 2011, when I took office. I was less gray, more rested, and I had inherited a city that was stagnant.”*

2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Also known as shout-outs, acknowledgements are a standard part of a politician's speech. It is important to recognize all of the influential people in the room (i.e., Congress members, state representatives, city councilors). When mayors deliver their speeches at big events, the room is typically packed with people worth recognizing.

*Jersey City, N.J., Mayor Steven Fulop:*

*“But first, I want to thank the public officials from the state and the county who have joined us tonight; members of the clergy; members of the court; the Jersey City Council who have been partners in everything we do; fellow members of my administration; and, most importantly, the residents of this great city.”*

3

## PRAISE FOR THE GROUP

Mayors consistently use their State of the City speech to celebrate the community. Start first with the group or association hosting the speech and then move to exemplary residents and civic organizations. Mayor's often thank and praise city staff, allies on city council, and their families.

*St. Paul, Minn., Mayor Chris Coleman:*

*“I'd also like to extend a special thanks to retiring Councilmember Dave Thune for whom this will be his last official State of the City. I would like to extend a welcome to Chief Finney who has sat through a number of State of the City addresses, but this is his first as a councilmember.*

*And, of course, thanks to the partners who provided our space tonight, including the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Schubert Club, Minnesota Opera and Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.”*

4

### **SERIOUS ATTENTION-GETTER**

Transitioning from introductory formalities, move next to this issue at hand: the state of your city. Many mayors deliver the usual *The state of our city is strong!* line. For mayors facing troubling times, a statement with a lot of gravity can help to set up the speech.

*Providence, R.I., Mayor Jorge Elorza:*

*“Over the past year, we’ve come a long way in achieving that vision, and while there are still many challenges, I’m proud of what we have accomplished together to position Providence for a better future. And make no mistake, Providence is beginning a resurgence.”*

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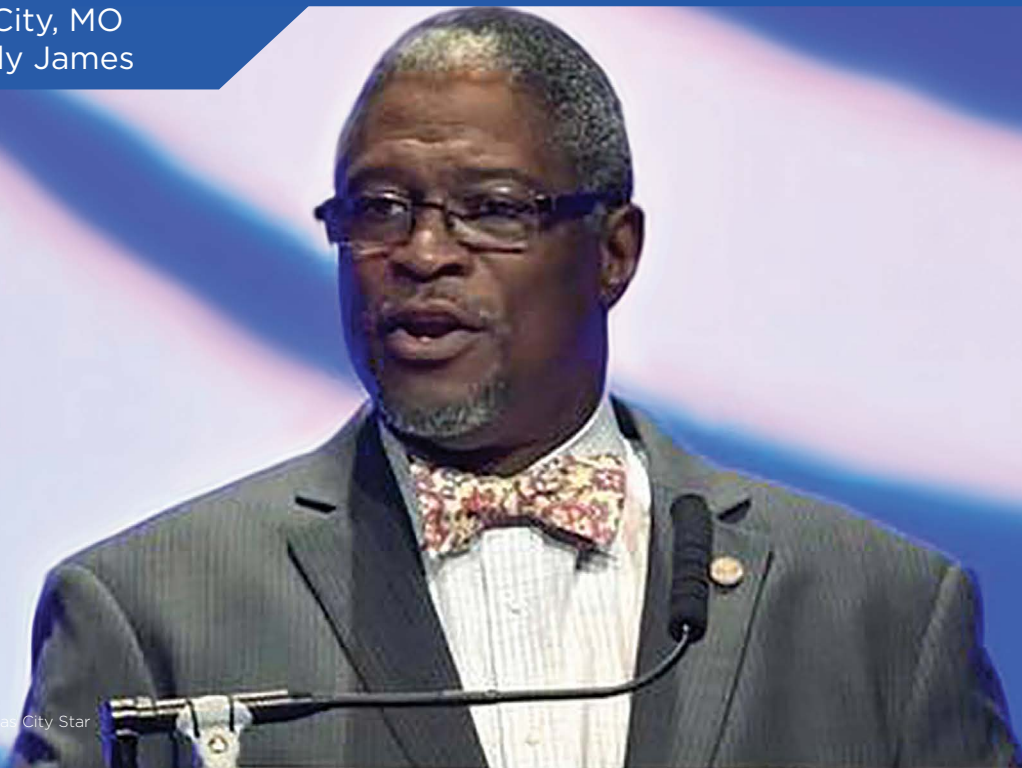
### **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

Even when the State of the City is strong, there is always more work to do. People need a reason to listen to your speech. The statement of purpose sets up the importance of the issues that will be discussed.

*Chattanooga, Tenn., Mayor Andy Berke:*

*“Sometimes, a State of the City address is an opportunity for celebration. Tonight, we work. Because our city’s future will be set by those coming together to build community and create opportunity, not by those who are out to destroy it.”*

Kansas City, MO  
Mayor Sly James



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# Address Body

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## RECORD OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

State of the City speeches reflect on the past year and set the agenda moving forward. Before you discuss new policy, establish your credibility as an effective leader by noting accomplishments.

*Virginia, Beach, Va., Mayor William Sessoms:*

*“This bio accelerator builds on the strength of the assets already in the Princess Anne Commons corridor. It will be located at TCC’s Regional Health Professions Center and will include office space, meeting rooms and wet labs. We hope this support structure enables bioscience start-ups to reach critical milestones more rapidly, so they can graduate from the bio accelerator and open their own facilities in Virginia Beach. Our accomplishments over the last year bode well for the future, and we look forward to the next phase of bioscience in Virginia Beach.”*

2

## PROBLEMS

Audiences will only care about policies that meet their needs. Problems can be presented in a litany of statements like How can we be satisfied, when...? Or, mayors can use anecdotes from their history or personal experiences.

*Milwaukie, Ore., Mayor Mark Gamba:*

*“Working people, who are losing their homes because the jobs they have – often multiple jobs – don’t pay well enough to cover the mortgage or the rent and after struggling for months or even years, they find themselves homeless. For me, this is the issue of equity, it is something not often considered by those who make the rules because they themselves are not experiencing that level of difficulty and don’t truly understand.”*

3

## SOLUTIONS

As State of the City addresses set the policy agenda for the year ahead, the solutions to the problems raised will be a substantive portion of the speech. A good structure for each policy is to clearly state the proposal, provide a persuasive statistic or anecdote, and close with how the policy will achieve a desired goal.

*Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser on closing a homeless shelter:*

*“Closing DC General is the right thing to do. I believe it, and you do too. We heard from 12,000 people across the District who support our plan. DC’s families deserve better than DC General. Five year old Dwayne deserves better. Two year old Crystal deserves better. And little Relisha deserved better. Ladies and gentlemen, you and I believe that hope should conquer fear, so I ask: will you stand with me and together close DC General once and for all?”*



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# Address Closing

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## REFLECTIVE SECTION

A common theme in many State of the City speeches is progress. As the speech begins to end, mayors can reflect back over the course of their tenure or the recent history of the city to demonstrate that the policy goals laid out in the speech are achievable.

*Troy, N.Y., Mayor Patrick Madden:*

*“Troy was a great 19th century city. At the forefront of the industrial revolution we became the gateway to the west. Our history tells a story of great entrepreneurship and vision. Our buildings and institutions tell a story of great wealth and investment. Like so many other cities in the northeast, we did not adapt so well to the 20th century suffering though decades of downsizing and disinvestment. Today the winds of change are in our favor.”*

Washington, DC  
Mayor Muriel Bowser

Credit: National League of Cities, 2016



2

### INSPIRATIONAL EXAMPLE

You want your audience to leave the speech feeling motivated to help you implement the policies and projects you have discussed in your speech. Briefly recall an example from your community of an inspirational person or moment.

*Tucson, Ariz., Mayor Jonathan Rothschild:*

*“Tucsonans have been generous with their time—volunteering to help children learn to read, to bring dropouts back to graduate, to plant trees, to do a thousand things that could not get done without the help of volunteers—a thousand things that make this community better and stronger.”*

3

### THE LESSON DRAWN

Having moved the audience, draw a lesson that makes the example relevant for today.

*Tucson, Ariz., Mayor Jonathan Rothschild:*

*“I based my initiatives as mayor on help from volunteers because I knew it was a resource I could count on, and I’m extremely grateful for their investment of time and the caring and concern it represents.”*

4

### CALL TO ACTION

Always end a speech with a specific action—a way to turn the energy and excitement you just built into a measurable outcome.

*Tucson, Ariz., Mayor Jonathan Rothschild:*

*“Soon, we’ll be asking for financial investment. And when we do, we’ll have a detailed plan—like we did with the streets bond—spelling out what core services the funds will be used for.”*

5

### CLINCHER

This is the end of the crescendo of your speech. Some mayors close with The state of our city is strong! Others give a hopeful remark about the future. When practicing your delivery, always make sure you nail the clincher.

*San Diego, Calif., Mayor Kevin Faulconer:*

*“San Diego, this is how we build our better future. Let’s keep moving. Thank you.”*

# Tips for an Effective Address

## Know Your Audience

The most important thing before writing and delivering a speech is to know who the audience is. Consider where the speech is taking place. The tone and substance of a speech should be catered to who is in the room. Also consider if your audience extends outside of the room you are speaking in. With this knowledge, take stock of the needs of your particular audience. An event at the local chamber of commerce is more likely to focus on economic development than a speech at a community center, where the focus may be on public safety. If possible, be sure to select a location that reflects the importance of the main ideas from the speech.

A good example of this concept comes from Milwaukee, Wisc., Mayor Tom Barrett's speech, which he delivered in at the Hmong American Peace Academy, a K-8 charter school. Mayor Barrett

spoke about education issues, including closing the achievement gap between minority and white students.

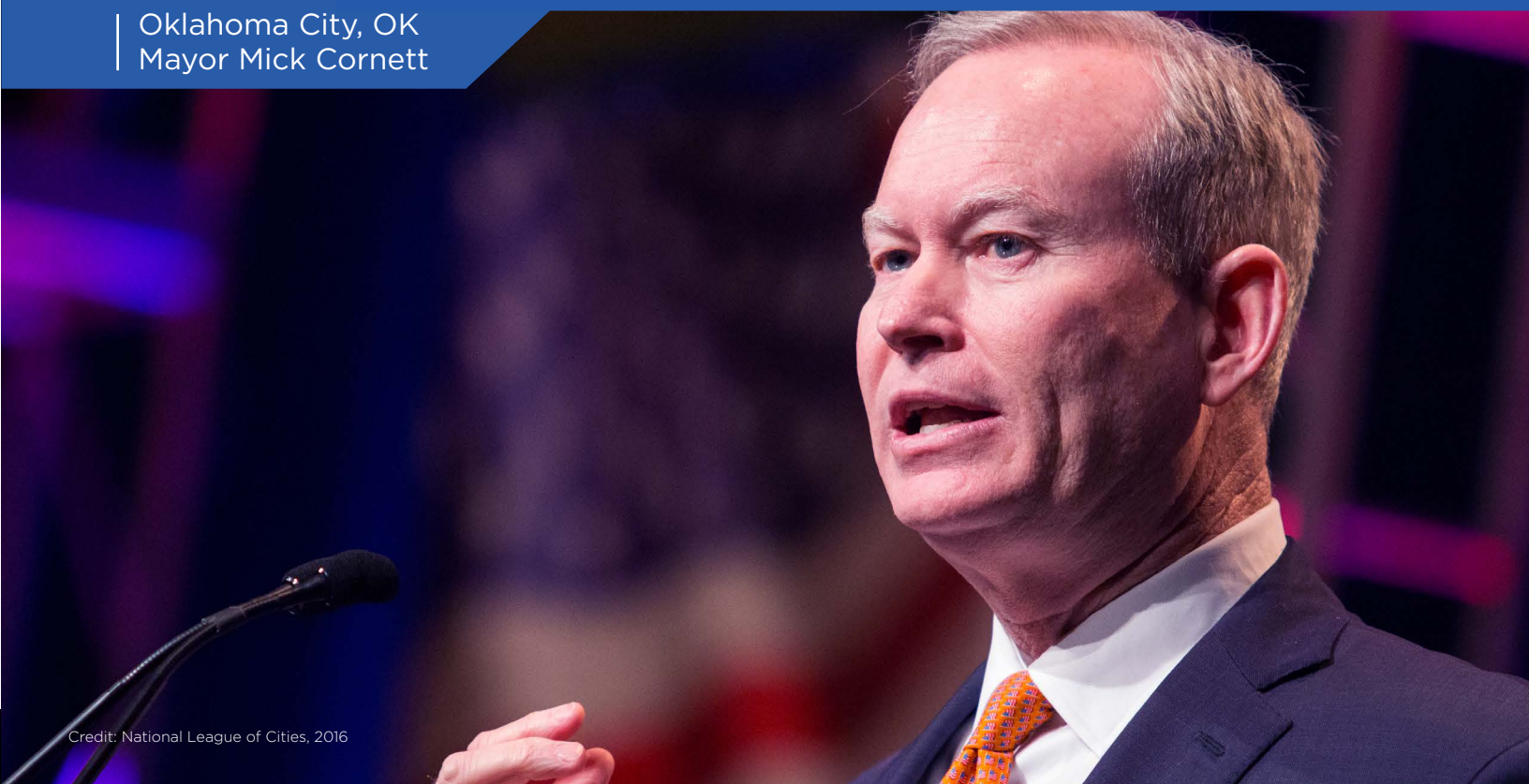
*"We need kids to be picking up books and learning during the summer. That's why I've been so committed to the library's summer reading program. We need to address the achievement gap and summer school is one way to do it.*

*I want to thank State Superintendent Tony Evers for convening a group of school and community leaders to start planning an expanded summer school enrichment program.*

*The first meeting included representatives from public, choice and charter schools and individuals from community organizations like the Boys and Girls Club and the Y.*

*And the focus was on kids."*

Oklahoma City, OK  
Mayor Mick Cornett



Know Your Audience

Maintain a Theme

Show, Don't Tell

## Maintain a Clear, Coherent Theme

An audience will appreciate a short speech more than one that is too long. Even more, a speech that is well-organized and easy to follow will be better received. Some of the most memorable speeches have a common theme throughout. Too many speeches try to cover too much. An audience would rather not sit through a laundry list of accomplishments or proposed policies.

Following the problem-solution formula helps to maintain the logical flow. Austin, Texas, Mayor Steve Adler connected the idea of making his city more affordable for residents throughout his speech. In this passage, he discusses the problem of affordability:

*"I believe our goal is to do big things, to do that which would not occur if we did not do them. And if you ask Austinites, I believe they'd say the same thing.*

*What good does it do to create all these jobs if you can't get to the one you have because you're stuck in traffic?*

*How does Austin's prosperity benefit us all if our real estate prices are attractive to out-of-town investors but increasingly unaffordable to the people who already live here?*

*The ETC Institute just released a survey about how Austinites perceive the job we're doing at City Hall. The results should not shock you in the slightest.*

*People like Austin as a place to live, work, and raise their*

*children. No surprise there.*

*On the other side of the ledger, fewer than one in four Austinites thinks we're doing a good job of planning for growth, and frankly I don't know why that number is so high.*

*We have an affordability crisis. The Brookings Institute says we have the 2nd- fastest growing suburban poverty rate in the country. We live in the most economically segregated metropolitan area in the country. A family making the median income can now no longer qualify for a loan to buy a median-priced home here."*

## Show, Don't Tell

Too many policy speeches give a lot of numbers, which can overload the audience with statistics. An effective speech uses personal examples to make policy points. In addition to percentages, talk about problems and solutions in human terms. How many people will be affected by your proposed policy? This requires good research, but any effective speech requires persuasive evidence.

Los Angeles, Calif., Mayor Eric Garcetti demonstrated the effect of a new program for returned felons by talking about the number of people affected and a specific example:

*"And over the next two years, we will be hiring 5,000 new city employees—targeting recruitment in communities with the most need, including ex-offenders.*

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*For thousands of individuals, these are transformative opportunities ... a chance for people to redefine themselves through integrity and hard work.*

*That's happening for people like a young man I know — a lifelong Angeleno who grew up on the Eastside. Like too many people, he got mixed up with a gang. He committed a crime for which he spent almost a decade in prison.*

*When he got out, he resolved to turn his life around. He was 28, had never held a job, and kept being turned away from the ones he sought. Some might say he needed a second chance ... Others might say he never really had a first.*

*Until he found Homeboy Industries. He took anger management classes and is getting his gang tattoos lasered off. Homeboy gave him a job cleaning toilets and washing floors. He gave them 100%, and never missed a day of work.*

*Today, just three years later, he is running a program that trains formerly incarcerated Angelenos to install solar panels and put clean energy on our grid.”*

Kansas City, Mo., Mayor Sly James conveyed the severity of a change to the local income tax:

*“The entire Kansas City area loses without the earnings tax. What would it take to fully replace the earnings tax?”*

*We would need a combination of massive tax increases—or a massive increase in a single tax source, like a doubling of sales taxes or tripling property taxes—to fully replace the \$230 million that the earnings tax generates today.*

*To cut our way to \$230 million, we'd need to lay off more than 200 employees a year over the next 10 years, more than half of which would be police officers and firefighters.”*

## Conclusion

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**S**tate of the City speeches are a great way to connect with the community and increase the transparency of your local government. We offer this format and tips as a suggestion for speechwriters, either city leaders themselves or their staff, who want to improve the impact of their speeches. All of these suggestions, of course, must be adapted in a way that works best for your presentation style. And always remember to practice your speech aloud.

# State of the City Worksheet

## Research

- Themes
- Policies
- Statistics
- Personal Anecdotes

## Writing

- Introduction
- Body
- Closing

## Introduction

- Opening joke
- Acknowledgements
- Praise for the group
- Serious attention-getter
- Statement of purpose

## Body

- Record of accomplishment
- Problems
- Solutions

## Conclusion

- Reflective section
- Inspirational example
- The lesson drawn
- Call to action
- Clincher

## NOTES

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