

10 Keys to Writing a Speech

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July 16, 2013

“This is my time.”

That attitude will kill a speech every time.

You’ve probably sat through some lousy speeches. Despite the speakers’ renown, you eventually tuned them out over their self-indulgent tangents and pointless details. You understood something these speakers apparently didn’t: This was *your* time. They were just guests. And your attention was strictly voluntary.

Of course, you’ll probably deliver that speech someday. And you’ll believe your speech will be different. You’ll think, “I have so many important points to make.” And you’ll presume that your presence and ingenuity will dazzle the audience. Let me give you a reality check: Your audience will remember more about who sat with them than anything you say. Even if your best lines would’ve made Churchill envious, some listeners will still fiddle with their smart phones.

In writing a speech, you have two objectives: Making a good impression and leaving your audience with two or three takeaways. The rest is just entertainment. How can you make those crucial points? Consider these strategies:

1) Be Memorable: Sounds easy in theory. Of course, it takes discipline and imagination to pull it off. Many times, an audience may only remember a single line. For example, John F. Kennedy is best known for this declaration in his 1961 inaugural address: “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what can do for your country.” Technically, the line itself uses contrast to grab attention. More important, it encapsulated the main point of Kennedy’s speech: We must sublimate ourselves and serve to achieve the greater good. So follow Kennedy’s example: Condense your theme into a 15-20 word epigram and build everything around it top-to-bottom.

There are other rhetorical devices that leave an impression. For example, Ronald Reagan referred to America as “a shining city on the hill” in speeches. The image evoked religious heritage, freedom, and promise. And listeners associated those sentiments with Reagan’s message. Conversely, speakers can defy their audience’s

expectations to get notice. In the movie *Say Anything*, the valedictorian undercut the canned optimism of high school graduation speeches with two words: “Go back.” In doing so, she left her audience speechless...for a moment, at least.

Metaphors...Analogies...Surprise...Axioms. They all work. You just need to build up to them...and place them in the best spot (preferably near the end).

2) Have a Structure: Think back on a terrible speech. What caused you to lose interest? Chances are, the speaker veered off a logical path. Years ago, our CEO spoke at our national meeting. He started, promisingly enough, by outlining the roots of the 2008 financial collapse. Halfway through those bullet points, he jumped to emerging markets in Vietnam and Brazil. Then, he drifted off to 19th century economic theory. By the time he closed, our CEO had made two points: He needed ADD medication – and a professional speechwriter!

Audiences expect two things from a speaker: A path and a destination. They want to know where you’re going and why. So set the expectation near your opening on what you’ll be covering. As you write and revise, focus on structuring and simplifying. Remove anything that’s extraneous, contradictory, or confusing. Remember: If it doesn’t help you get your core message across, drop it.

3) Don’t Waste the Opening: Too often, speakers squander the time when their audience is most receptive: The opening. Sure, speakers have people to thank. Some probably need time to get comfortable on stage. In the meantime, the audience silently suffers.

When you write, come out swinging. Share a shocking fact or statistic. Tell a humorous anecdote related to your big idea. Open with a question – and have your audience raise their hands. Get your listeners engaged early. And keep the preliminaries short. You’re already losing audience members every minute you talk. Capitalize on the goodwill and momentum you’ll enjoy in your earliest moments on stage.

4) Strike the Right Tone: Who is my audience? Why are they here? And what do they want? Those are questions you must answer before you even touch the keyboard. Writing a speech involves meeting the expectations of others, whether it’s to inform, motivate, entertain, or even challenge. To do this, you must adopt the right tone.

Look at your message. Does it fit with the spirit of the event? ***Will it draw out the best in people?*** Here's a bit of advice: If you're speaking in a professional setting, focus on being upbeat and uplifting. There's less risk. Poet Maya Angelou once noted, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Even if your audience forgets everything you said, consider your speech a success if they leave with a smile and a greater sense of hope and purpose. That's a message in itself. And it's one they'll share.

5) Humanize Yourself: You and your message are one-and-the-same. If your audience doesn't buy into you, they'll resist your message too. It's that simple. No doubt, your body language and delivery will leave the biggest impression. Still, there are ways you can use words to connect.

Crack a one liner about your butterflies; everyone can relate to being nervous about public speaking. Share a story about yourself, provided it relates to (or transitions to) your points. Throw in references to your family, to reflect you're trustworthy. And write like you're having a casual conversation with a friend. You're not preaching or selling. You're just being you. On stage, you can be you *at your best*.

6) Repeat Yourself: We've all been there. When someone is speaking, we'll drift off to a Caribbean beach or the Autobahn. Or, we'll find ourselves lost and flustered when we can't grasp a concept. Once you've fallen behind, it's nearly impossible to pay attention. What's the point?

In writing a speech, repetition is the key to leaving an impression. Hammer home key words, phrases, and themes. Always be looking for places to tie back and reinforce earlier points. And repeat critical points as if they were a musical refrain.

As a teenager, my coach continuously reminded us that "nothing good happens after midnight." He'd lecture us on the dangers of partying, fighting, peer pressure, and quitting. After a while, my teammates and I just rolled our eyes. Eventually, we encountered those temptations. When I'd consider giving in, coach would growl "*Schmitty*" disapprovingly in my head. Despite my resistance, coach had found a way to get me to college unscathed. He simply repeated his message over-and-over until it stuck.

Some audience members may get annoyed when you repeat yourself. But don't worry how they feel today. Concern yourself with this question: What will they remember six months from now?

7) Use Transitions: Sometimes, audiences won't recognize what's important. That's why you use transitional phrases to signal intent. For example, take a rhetorical question like "What does this mean" – and follow it with a pause. Silence gets attention – and this tactic creates anticipation (along with awakening those who've drifted off). Similarly, a phrase like "So here's the lesson" also captures an audience's interest. It alerts them that something important is about to be shared. Even if they weren't paying attention before, they can tune in now and catch up.

8) Include Theatrics: During his workshops, Dr. Stephen Covey would fill a glass bowl nearly full with sand. From there, he'd ask a volunteer to place rocks into the bowl. In the exercise, rocks represented essentials like family, job, worship, and exercise, while the bowl signified the volunteer's time and energy. It never failed: The volunteer couldn't fit every rock in the bowl. The sand – which embodied day-to-day activities like transporting children, shopping, or reading – took up too much space. Something had to be cut. Usually, it was something essential.

Covey would then encourage his volunteer to consider another option: Start with placing a rock in the bowl, adding some sand, and then alternating rocks and sand until the bowl was full. Like magic, there was suddenly enough space for both, as the sand gradually filled any gaps between the rocks. The message: Maintain balance. Never lose sight of the essentials as you tend to the day-to-day (and vice versa).

Of course, Covey could've made his point verbally and moved on. Instead, he illustrated it with household items in a way his audience wouldn't soon forget. If you have a smaller audience (or a video screen), consider incorporating visuals. Keep the props, storyline, and lesson simple. When you're done, leave everything out to symbolize your point to your audience. Whatever you do, don't play it safe. If you do, your speech will be forgotten in no time.

9) End Strong: In 2004, I attended a Direct Marketing Association (DMA) conference. I don't recall much about our keynote speaker, except that he was tall and southern. I can't even remember what his address was about. But I'll never forget the story he used to close his speech.

The speaker was a friend of Jerry Richardson, owner of the NFL's Carolina Panthers. A few years earlier, the Panthers had drafted a fiery wide receiver named Steve Smith. While Smith excelled on the field, he was a nightmare in the locker room. Eventually, Smith was arrested for assaulting a teammate during film study.

Already reeling from bad publicity from other player incidents, Richardson was pressured to cut Smith. But he chose a different path. Richardson vowed to spend more time with Smith. He decided that Smith would be better served with guidance and caring than further punishment. Eventually, Richardson's patience paid off. Smith became the Panthers' all-time leading receiver – and scored a touchdown in their only Super Bowl appearance. In fact, Smith still plays for the Panthers to this day.

If the speaker intended to remind me how powerful that personal attention and forgiveness could be, he succeeded in spades. Fact is, your close is what your audience will remember. So recap your biggest takeaway. Tie everything together. Share a success story. Make a call to action. Don't hold anything back. Your ending is what audience will ultimately talk about when they head out the door.

10) Keep it Short: What is the worst sin of public speaking? It's trying to do too much! Your audience's attention will naturally wane after a few minutes. They have other places to be – and don't want to be held hostage. And the longer you stay on stage, the more likely you are to stray and make mistakes. So make your points and sit down. Never forget: This is their time, not yours.