

Seven Tips on Writing a Better Speech

"Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't and the other half who have nothing to say and keep on saying it." Robert Frost's observation sums up the pitfalls of many public speakers. Some know their topics, but have trouble disseminating it. Others tell a good joke or seem at ease, but have no real expertise a listener wants to hear.

If you want to be well received, there are some simple rules to follow before speaking. Utilizing this writer's experience as a veteran political speech writer and some points made by Joan Detz in *How to Write and Give a Good Speech*, you can improve your speech making abilities.

1) Know Your Subject.

If you do not, you have no business giving a presentation. However, even if you are a recognized expert or very comfortable with a topic, do some extra research and brush up on the latest advancements in your field. When you are at the podium and your lips are moving, an audience assumes you know your stuff, so you better. A word of caution: use facts and figures sparingly. While numbers justify a point, too many confuse and bore listeners.

2) Assess Your Audience

Knowing who and how many will be listening is vitally important. Get their demographics and tailor your remarks accordingly. While small groups are more attentive, larger ones need more drama, humor and emotions to earn their interest. Understanding the size of the room, seating arrangements as well as the sound and lighting conditions is also highly advantageous.

3) Put Pen to Paper.

If you do not need a written speech, have an outline or key points you will make in your presentations. Even the most seasoned public speakers lose their train of thought. A simple notation or key phrase on an index card keeps your remarks running smoothly and avoids embarrassing and unplanned pauses.

If you do write out the speech, use a large font with both upper and lower cases. Double space, using triple space between paragraphs, and leave plenty of space in the margins for notes. Underline and bold key points to remind yourself to emphasize these sections. Use three periods (...) in places where you know you will want to pause. End each page with a complete paragraph or a complete sentence at the very least. Have copies of the speech in case you lose your original and for those who want a record of your remarks.

4) Stylize Your Remarks

A strong speech that connects with an audience requires an active voice. Vigorous language is more personal, uses fewer words and is easier to follow and remember. Remove passive phrases and verbs like has, had and are. Write in short sentences, although throw in some longer ones for variety, rhythm and timing. Phoneticize hard to pronounce names and avoid too many s and z sounds that can trip up your tongue.

Utilize pauses, as silence can be more powerful than words. Avoid jargon, euphemisms and abbreviations that are not first explained. Imagery, repetition and parallelism all add to style.

Former New York Governor Mario Cuomo's 1984 keynote address to the Democratic Convention in San Francisco epitomizes the use of style to deliver memorable remarks. Without being too flowery, Cuomo's speech painted a picture even his political critics agreed was beautifully constructed.

5) Keep It Simple.

A good speech is short and simple. A great speech is even shorter and simpler. It has been cut, edited, sharpened and simplified. Open by skipping the thank you and good morning and tell you audience what you are going to tell them. Then tell them. Conclude by telling them what you told them.

Repeat, summarize and quote. Ronald Reagan, Will Rogers, Winston Churchill, Ann Richards and Harry Truman are just some of the many quotable notables you can use, depending on your views and the occasion. Use humor, anecdotes and personal stories to keep your audience interested.

6) Use Humor with Caution

Humor is the double-edged sword of public speaking. It can make or break your presentation. Light touch humor works best, such as a personal anecdote using voice intonation or a raised eyebrow. Poking fun at yourself or your organization also works, but never belittle your own skills or competence, as it damages your credibility.

Humor is better as the day wears on. Listeners are groggy in the morning and more apt to laugh at luncheon or evening functions. Always deliver jokes as if they were not that funny, using facial expressions (never laughter), to convey your mood. Be careful when using humor. Any joke must pass all of the five following criteria:

- Will it fit into the subject of the speech?
- Will the audience be comfortable with it?
- Is the joke short and uncomplicated?
- Is it fresh?
- Can you deliver it well?

7) Involve Your Audience

Ask questions, rhetorical or real, to involve your listeners. Recognize a noteworthy person in the crowd. Use listeners as examples (many urban professionals like the gentleman in the green tie may get their news from drive time radio). Have a Question and Answer period. Bring your audience into your remarks and remember that communication is a two-way street.

Advice on how to improve your delivery skills will follow. However, prior to uttering a word, every public speaker needs to do their homework. Good luck.