



The Lost Art of the Great Speech

How to Write One — How to Deliver It

by Richard Dawis
AMACOM © 2000
272 pages

Focus

Leadership
Strategy
Sales & Marketing
Corporate Finance
Human Resources
Technology
Production & Logistics
Small Business
Economics & Politics
Industries & Regions
► **Career Development**
Personal Finance
Self Improvement
Ideas & Trends

Take-Aways

- A speech may serve to entertain, inform, inspire, motivate, advocate or persuade.
- Develop an orderly statement of purpose before writing your speech.
- Write down what you want the audience to think, feel or do as a result of your speech.
- Develop a one-paragraph statement of the speech's unifying idea.
- Break the speech into thought modules consisting of an idea and supporting material.
- Try the device of repetition at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses or sentences.
- Try placing two sharply contrasting ideas next to each other.
- Go for an opening that sets the tone and establishes your credibility.
- Edit for content, organization, style, grammar and language.
- If you are using statistics, try to present them in a dramatic, humorous or otherwise memorable way.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	9	7	10

Review

The Lost Art of the Great Speech

Before you open your mouth again, open this book. Author Richard Dowis issues a call to oratory greatness in the form of a personal memoir and a professional manual. Citing great contemporary and historical speeches, the book exemplifies some of Dowis' best advice and is more comprehensive than the title indicates. It is a communications guide, ranging from workaday necessities, such as correct word usage, to the "secrets of the pros," incorporating ideas from acknowledged masters. Writing and delivering outstanding speeches is still a pathway to advancement, because good speechwriters and speakers are always in short supply, but this advice reaches beyond speeches and applies to every form of written and oral communication. *getAbstract.com* recommends that you give a close read to this useful book so that you'll be fully prepared the next time someone asks you to "say a few words."

Abstract

Public Speaking Is (Gulp!) Worth the Trouble

Mastering speechwriting and delivery provides many benefits. Learning to write a good speech will help you write better in general. Delivering speeches will make you more aware of your appearance, posture and voice. Public speaking can be a powerful marketing and public-relations tool, since organizations are always looking for speakers to spark their programs.

Preparation

Consider a number of things before accepting an invitation to speak. For example, should you accept an invitation to be one of several speakers on a program? If you have something to say on the subject that other speakers cannot or will not say, then it is probably a good idea. Even then, avoid being last on the program. Always know the format before accepting.

Control the topic, that is, never agree to speak on a subject that you feel you don't know enough about. If invited to do so, you might suggest an alternative topic. Just be sure that your subject is important to you and to your audience, that you can cover the subject in the allotted time or — as is sometimes the case — that you're not given more time than you can fill with interesting material. Learn some details about the nature of the organization and the nature of the audience. Ask if there will be any distinguished guests? How many people will be in the audience? Will there be questions? Will there be a lectern? A sound system?

Purpose is the most important consideration in selecting a topic and writing your speech. Formulate your purpose carefully into an orderly statement. A speech can be given for one or more of these reasons: to entertain, to inform, to inspire, to advocate, to motivate, and to convince or persuade. Before drafting an outline, take care of several other elements of preparation:

- Research the subject thoroughly.
- Write down exactly what you want the audience to think, feel or do.

"Never underestimate the power and grace of a simple, declarative sentence."

"There's something mystical about the number three. It's as if two are not enough and four are too many. Writers, especially speechwriters, have long recognized this phenomenon and often use a rhetorical device called a triad. Or, as some prefer to express it, "the rule of three."

“The key to a good speech is for the verbal and non-verbal language to say the same thing.”

“Simplicity has a certain eloquence all its own.”

“If you become an accomplished speaker, you will be a more interesting person. As your self-confidence as a speaker grows, so will your self-confidence in other aspects of your business and personal life.”

“Sincerity is perhaps the most essential ingredient in a speech. You must believe, really believe, in what you are saying. If so, you will be more relaxed, less nervous, more confident.”

- Based on your research, list all the points you might want to make.
- Pare the list down to three, four or possibly five truly important points, discarding the remaining ones or converting them into supporting points.
- Identify the thesis or unifying theme that emerges from this process.
- Arrange the points and supporting points in the proper order.

If it is suitable and possible, brainstorm your speech. Have several people — preferably of varied skills and backgrounds — discuss the topic in a relaxed, informal, uninhibited way.

As you work to prepare your speech, settle on an appropriate organizing principle, such as chronological order or a problem-solution pattern. To keep related material together in a logical order, break the speech down into manageable units. Each thought module should consist of a single idea and all necessary supporting material.

Enhancing the Body (of your Speech)

Quotations are commonly used to enliven a speech. Using a well-selected quotation puts authority on your side and gives credibility to your words. Give credit where it’s due, but remember that quoting an unknown person does nothing to reinforce your message. Make any quote lead smoothly, briefly and logically into your point.

A short, factual, interesting or amusing narrative is also useful for enlivening a speech. However, a good anecdote is hard to find. Each story you use should:

- Be true or at least be perceived as true;
- Give insight into the nature of the subject, the speaker or the event;
- Be interesting or amusing;
- Be simple enough for the audience to grasp easily;
- Illustrate, support or lead to a point that the speaker has made or wants to make.

Humor can relax an audience at the beginning of a speech and can be used throughout to make the speaker’s points more memorable. If you use humor:

- Never repeat a punch line.
- When you use a laugh line, don’t pause and wait for the audience to start laughing.
- Don’t get flustered if your humor bombs.
- Never ad-lib a joke.
- Don’t make your joke too complex.
- If you tell a joke, make sure it ties in with your topic.
- Humor can be slightly irreverent, but it should never be vicious.
- Never use ethnic humor.

Statistics can make a point more memorable — or they can make the listeners’ eyes glaze over. Make sure any numbers you cite are understandable, which isn’t likely if they involve too many raw figures, especially close together. Try to select a statistic that is dramatic or humorous, but if that isn’t possible, at least try to present it in a memorable way.

“Self-confidence is essential. Never doubt for a moment that you have it within yourself to make a great speech. You can move your audience.”

“I’ve known speakers who insisted on visuals, usually slides, for almost every speech. I suspect that in most instances, these speakers were looking for a crutch. Using slides would keep them from having to really say anything.”

“In his most famous speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. began eight sentences with ‘I have a dream.’ Not only did the phrase echo and re-echo throughout the speech, it continues to echo throughout American society today.”

The “rule of three,” sometimes known as a “triad,” refers to the expression of related thoughts or ideas in a group of three, often with the initial words or sounds the same for all three and in the same grammatical form. Famous examples include:

- “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” [Franklin D. Roosevelt]
- “...government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” [Abraham Lincoln]

If you play with these examples or add new elements, you will see immediately that tinking only weakens the dramatic impact.

Tools of the Trade

Anaphora refers to repetition of successive phrases, clauses or sentences at the beginning of a speech. For example, The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in his most famous speech, began eight sentences with “I have a dream.” You can also use antithesis, the device of placing two sharply contrasting ideas next to each other.

A simile is a figurative comparison that uses the word “like.” President Reagan said, “Education is like a diamond with many facets: It includes the basic mastery of numbers... it includes technical and vocational training.” The bank executive who characterizes the financial markets as the “economy’s life support system” is using a metaphor. An analogy, which is an extended metaphor, can dramatize a similarity by likening two things in several ways.

Speeches often require special touches that aren’t needed in other kinds of writing. Transitions, for example, must be handled differently, since subheads or other typographical devices can’t be used. Repeating words or suddenly asking the audience a question can help you move gracefully from one section to the next.

The Five Areas of Editing

Edit your speech as you would any significant piece of writing. Check for these elements:

- Content — Question everything for accuracy and suitability. Most important, look at the overall content of the speech and ask yourself once more whether it fulfills the basic purpose you stated in your pre-writing phase.
- Organization — Is it a unified presentation or just a collection of ideas and information? Does each point build on the previous one and show a smooth transition?
- Style — Shorter sentences are usually preferable; never underestimate the power and grace of a simple, declarative sentence. Beware of unintentional rhyme, alliteration or hard-to-say word combinations.
- Grammar — Bad grammar leaves the audience with a bad impression of the speaker and might diminish the credibility of the message.
- Language — Keep several considerations in mind: Be sure to use words that you can pronounce clearly. Don’t overuse jargon, avoid too many long words, keep the use of contractions and personal pronouns to a minimum and try not to use too many general, “concept words.” Reach for bold, concrete specific images.

“If circumstances permit, visit the site (of your speech) a day or two ahead and even consider visiting it more than once to become familiar with your surroundings.”

Openings

Your opening should set the tone for your speech. The opening ought to arouse interest in the subject and lay the groundwork for the discussion. Your opening should take advantage of the speaker’s “grace period.” Be sure it’s strong, since this is when the audience is the most attentive. The opening should segue smoothly into the topic. Be sure it’s relevant. You have several options:

- Starting with a humorous anecdote gets their attention, and might even be a way to begin a more serious speech.
- You can use a novelty opening. For example, you could quote a newspaper mentioning several distressing situations that sound current; after a few quotes, you can reveal that the material came from an 1857 newspaper.
- An opening might need to establish the speaker’s credibility. Making a personal reference is a possibility, but use something biographical that doesn’t sound boastful.
- An opening might be dramatic. For instance, one speaker told his audience of executives, “Most executives, as we now know them, will be obsolete.”
- You can ask a question — either rhetorical or actual — and then give an answer.

Closings

The ending of a speech is similarly crucial. End your speech in a way that makes people feel satisfied with you as a speaker and with what you’ve said. You may want members of the audience to do something or to feel something. Finally, be sure that your closing relates directly to the purpose and thesis of your speech. Several types of closings are worth considering:

- Summary — Touch on the high points of the speech.
- Wrap-up — The speaker brings everything together.
- Direct appeal — A request for some specific action.
- Reference closing — Refer to the date, the location, an event, the weather, the speech subject, or something else that you can tie to the subject for a memorable conclusion.
- Inspirational closing — Offer a moving poem or quotation.
- Humorous or anecdotal closing — A story that makes a strong final point.

About The Author

Richard Dowis, a former journalist and retired senior vice president of Manning, Selvage & Lee Public Relations, is the author of several books on writing. He is a consultant on business communications and is president of the Society for the Preservation of English Language and Literature.

Buzz-Words

Anaphora / Antithesis / Concept words / Thought modules / Triad