

Eight Important Steps to Writing an Excellent Speech

~Colin Reade, Strategic Communications Solutions

"Speech is power: speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel..."Ralph Waldo Emerson

A speech is an opportunity to influence. A speech can alter thought and behaviour. A speech well done can get you a raise, a promotion and support of the shareholders. So, don't take it lightly.

If you've been asked to write a speech then you're well ahead in the speech writing process. Why? Because the first step, is to identify the speech's purpose or objective. And if you've just been asked to write a speech, more than likely the purpose has already been stated.

Step # 1: Determine the speech's purpose, goal or objective

It is not enough just to stand up before an audience and say, "Today I'm going to talk to you about..." or "I want to share some ideas about..." You need to be much more specific. Be clear. What do you want to accomplish with your speech? What actions or behavioural changes do you want the audience to make? Do you want to inform, persuade or demonstrate? To be effective, your objective must be clearly stated. Failing to do so could be devastating.

Step # 2: Identify and know your audience

It goes without saying that a speech written to motivate the corporate sales staff and a speech written to persuade the corporation's Board of Directors to increase funding for the Public Relations Department are two vastly different speeches with two vastly different audiences. To be effective you must speak the language of your audience. It is crucial to know their "hot buttons," and what interests them. Whenever you design a speech with your audience's interests in mind you increase your chances of success.

Step # 3: Based on the first two steps, determine the learning outcomes for your speech

The clearer the directions for your speech the greater chance it has to succeed. I believe it was Rick Warren, author and motivator who said that prior to writing his speech he asks, "What do I want the audience to know? What do I want them to feel? And what do I want them to do?" A successful speech will engage the intellect and the emotions to effect a change in behaviour. Seldom are actions altered or affected without involving emotions.

Step # 4: Write a gripping introduction

Writing an introduction which demands the attention of the audience is crucial to an effective speech. A good introduction should grab the attention of its hearers, establish the speaker's credibility, state the speech's purpose and preview the body of the speech. If the introduction doesn't convince the audience why they need to listen to the speech, then don't expect them to hang around to find out. They might physically still be there but they have long since tuned you out. In addition, the introduction should conclude with a transitional sentence that smoothly moves the listener to the first main point.

Step # 5: Creatively prepare the attention getter

There are many methods that can be applied by the speech writer to get the audience's attention. One can use a quote, a story, an anecdote, a rhetorical question, suspense and of course, humour. Humour, properly used, can be extremely effective, however, it can also be risky. Melanie Novis stresses this fact when she states "It is very disheartening for a speaker to tell a funny story and then the story falls flat and no one laughs." (Pg. 63 Canadian Public Speaking.) I recall one speech in particular where I attempted to use humour to gain the audience's attention. It flopped. Recovery was tough—fact is, I'm not so sure I did recover. In short, humour can work for you and it can also work against you, so be careful. In brief, all attention getters should relate and support the subject matter you're addressing in your speech, and not be an entity unto themselves.

Step # 6: Give substance worthy of the audience's attention

It would be hugely disappointing for the audience if after building their expectations you gave them nothing of substance to challenge their minds. So, now that you got their attention and all eyes are fixed on you give them what they want or need. Give the substance that demonstrates that you are worthy of their ears. Give the stuff that reaffirms the credibility you established in your introduction. The body of the speech is your opportunity to show that you have done your research, are knowledgeable about the subject and that you are the expert. Anything short of a well-prepared body of speech will erode your credibility.

While not written in stone, the industry standard for the body of the speech is to include three to four main points. I personally prefer three. Each point should be supported by convincing evidence. They should be logically arranged and where applicable, should build on each other.

Step # 7: Don't hesitate to illustrate

Use an illustration to simplify a challenging or complex concept. It can even provide a break or light moment during an intense session whilst driving a point home. Properly used, an illustration will bring clarity and enhance the speech.

Step # 8: Write a compelling conclusion

You've come this far so don't ease up now. The conclusion should be that "final nail in the coffin," "the straw that broke the camel's back," so to speak. It should be prepared as well as any other part of the speech. Sadly though, this is not always the case. The conclusion is your chance to summarize the body of the speech, reference the introduction and to end the speech with a call to action or a statement that challenges the audience's thought. Stephen E. Lucas, author of "The Art of Public Speaking," said this about the conclusion: "Conclude with a bang and not a whimper. Be creative in devising a conclusion that hits the hearts and minds of your audience."