

The Basics of Speechwriting

Researching the Audience and Speaker

If you are given a speechwriting assignment, the first step is to find out everything possible about the audience. Who? Where? When? How many people? What time of day? Purpose of meeting? Length of speech? Purpose of talk? Other speakers on the program? To find answers to these questions, you should talk with the organizers of the event or meeting. Don't accept vague answers; keep asking follow-up questions until you have a complete picture.

A good example of defining the audience is when an EDS corporate executive was asked to give the keynote address for a meeting of the Association of American Chambers of Commerce of Latin America in Lima, Peru. Beth Pedison, executive speechwriter of EDS, analyzed the intended audience the following way:

Intended Audience: 400 top Latin American and Caribbean business executives, government leaders, and Chamber representatives. Because the audience came from diverse industries, countries, and company sizes, their familiarity with information technology varied widely. We didn't want to talk down to those who were technologically savvy, or talk over the heads of those who were not technologically proficient. English was the business language for the conference and the speech, although almost everyone in the audience spoke English as a second language. Therefore, we needed to keep sentence structures simple, and avoid the use of colloquialisms, contractions, or U.S.-centric language.

You also need to learn everything you can about the speaker. Listen to the speaker talk—to other groups, to subordinates, to you. See how his or her mind works, what word phrases are favored, and what kinds of opinions are expressed. In addition to listening, it is also a good idea to go over material that the client has written or, if written by others, that the client admires in terms of style and method of presentation.

Brenda Jones, 2010 Theodore C. Sorensen Speechwriting Award winner, described her work with Congressman John Lewis when he was asked to deliver the keynote for the 60th anniversary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation:

My job was to craft an address set in Nashville, which is almost a second home to my boss. His experiences there are the foundation for all that he accomplished as a participant and leader in the civil rights movement and as a member of Congress. Because my boss is a trained minister, he likes to discuss philosophy... to prick an individual's conscience and inspire them to do what is right.

Laying the Groundwork

Ideally, a writer should have lengthy conversations with the speaker before beginning to write a rough draft of the talk. In a conversational setting, you and the speaker should discuss the speech in terms of objective, approach, strategy, points

to emphasize, scope, and facts or anecdotes the speaker would like to include. Admittedly, this isn't always easy. Pete Weissman, a speechwriter in the White House and at Coca-Cola, told *The Strategist*, "The executives I write for are busy. They speak often, they're traveling and running a business—making sure that we have time to sit down with them and understand their point of view and what they'd like to accomplish is always a challenge."

This is how Marie L. Lerch, director of public relations and communication for Booz Allen & Hamilton, described her work with the company's chairman for a diversity awards speech to company employees:

The central message, "Do the Right Thing," has been Mr. Stasior's core theme throughout his tenure as chairman. I worked with him to adapt that theme to the issue of diversity; researched quotes and other materials that would add color and emphasis to the message; and interviewed him to flesh out his ideas and words on the subject. With notes and research in hand, I developed a first draft of the speech, which Mr. Stasior and I revised together into its final form....

Indeed, before you start writing a speech, you should have a thorough understanding of three aspects of the speech—the objective, the key message, and the strategy/approach. This approach is highlighted in the PR Casebook on page 396 about a speech by the CEO of the Grocery Manufacturers of America.

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speechwriter, in *The Strategist*

the objective to inform, persuade, activate, or commemorate? This is a start, but objectives are usually stated in more specific terms.

When the CEO of Novelis, the world's largest rolled aluminum company, gave a major presentation at an industry conference about a new manufacturing process, the speech had three objectives: (1) position Novelis as a technology leader and innovator in the industry; (2) create a demand in the automotive, construction, and electronics industries for the new technology and product; and (3) generate coverage in the trade and mainstream media.

Key Messages — Objectives provide the framework of a speech, but they must be supported by key messages that are given emphasis throughout the speech. A speech can have only one key message, but it may also have two or three. The major point is that people hear a speech and can remember only two or three points. Consequently, as a speechwriter, you want to ensure that they remember what you believe is most important in terms of organizational objectives. When asked for his advice on crafting a compelling speech, Reverend Jesse Jackson reportedly told a speechwriter, "Go to the point and to the passion."

Strategy — This can be described as the example, decided to have the CEO make a in a major presentation at the 11th World setting was ideal, because the entire alum ence was being covered by the trade and in the speech, the new product announcement low-level product news release would.

The tone of a speech depends on the audience may appreciate a one-sided talk, with issue. For example, a politician at a fundraiser to give the opposition's views.

Many speaking engagements, however (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, and any number of where the audience may have mixed views. In such a case, it is wise to take a more of the various viewpoints. The speech can audience will appreciate the fact that you the standpoint of persuasion, you also have view is expressed if you say it instead of wa up. By including an opposing viewpoint and tralize audience opposition to your perspect

Hostile or unfriendly audiences present and they reinforce their opinions. Remember the old saying, "My mind is already made up." The best approach is to speak with the audience. This technique lets the audience at least understand some of their concerns.

Writing the Speech

Writing the speech is a multistep process in several drafts. Weissman says the four key elements are audience, message, media, and speaker.

Outline — After gathering the material you outline for a speech has three main parts: the opening, the body, and the conclusion. The opening is the part of the speech that establishes empathy, and signpost to the conclusion audience what the topic is, why it is important to take in addressing it.

The body of the speech presents the evidence. The outline should list all the key points. In this part, the speaker lists facts and figures, and exam

The conclusion summarizes the evidence and audience.

The outline should be submitted to the speaker, and you can go on to the next step.

Strategy — This can be described as the setting and tone of the speech. Novelis, for example, decided to have the CEO make the announcement of the new technology in a major presentation at the 11th World Aluminum Conference in Montreal. The setting was ideal, because the entire aluminum industry was there, and the conference was being covered by the trade and mainstream media. By having the CEO give the speech, the new product announcement received much more attention than a low-level product news release would.

The tone of a speech depends on the audience being addressed. A friendly audience may appreciate a one-sided talk, with no attempt to present another side of an issue. For example, a politician at a fundraising dinner of supporters does not bother to give the opposition's views.

Many speaking engagements, however, take place before neutral audiences (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, and any number of other civic or professional organizations) where the audience may have mixed views or even a lack of knowledge about the topic.

In such a case, it is wise to take a more objective approach and give an overview of the various viewpoints. The speech can still advocate a particular position, but the audience will appreciate the fact that you have included other points of view. From the standpoint of persuasion, you also have more control over how the opposition view is expressed if you say it instead of waiting for an audience member to bring it up. By including an opposing viewpoint and acknowledging its validity, you can neutralize audience opposition to your perspective.

Hostile or unfriendly audiences present the greatest challenge. They are already predisposed against what you say, and they tend to reject anything that does not reinforce their opinions. Remember the old saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts—my mind is already made up." The best approach is to find some common ground with the audience. This technique lets the audience know that the speaker shares or at least understands some of their concerns.

Writing the Speech

Writing the speech is a multistep process involving a finely honed outline and several drafts. Weissman says the four key elements of any public speaking equation are audience, message, media, and speaker.

Outline — After gathering the material you need, you must prepare an outline. The outline for a speech has three main parts: the opening, the body, and the closing.

The opening is the part of the speech that must get the audience's attention, establish empathy, and signpost to the conclusion. In the opening, it is wise to tell the audience what the topic is, why it is important to them, and the direction you plan to take in addressing it.

The body of the speech presents the evidence that leads to the conclusion. The outline should list all the key points. In this section, you will use quotes from experts in the field, facts and figures, and examples that drive home your point.

The conclusion summarizes the evidence, pointing out what it means to the audience.

The outline should be submitted to the speaker, and, once it has been approved, you can go on to the next step.

- » **Avoid jargon.** Every occupation and industry has its own vocabulary of specialized words. Don't use words and acronyms that are unfamiliar to your audience. You may know what "ROI" means, but many in the audience may not.
- » **Use simple words.** Don't say "print media" when you mean "newspapers." Don't say "possess" when "have" means the same thing.
- » **Use round numbers.** Don't say, "253,629,384 Americans"; say "more than 250 million Americans."
- » **Use contractions.** Instead of "do not," say "don't." Say "won't" instead of "would not." It makes your speech more conversational.
- » **Avoid empty phrases.** Don't say "in spite of the fact" when "since" or "because" works just as well. Another common one is saying "In spite of the fact that" when "though" or "although" is better.
- » **Use bold verbs.** Instead of saying "profits went up," use a more descriptive verb such as "exploded" or "skyrocketed."
- » **Don't dilute expressions of opinion.** It blunts the crispness of your talk if you start sentences with "Of course, it's only my opinion" or "It seems to me..."
- » **Avoid modifiers.** Words such as "very" or "most" should be deleted.
- » **Use direct quotes.** You can say, "My colleague, Allen Knight, says ..."
- » **Vary sentence length.** In general, short sentences are best. However, occasionally break up a series of short sentences with some longer ones.
- » **Use questions.** Questions often get the audience more involved. "Does anyone know the average family income in the United States?"
- » **Make comparisons and contrasts.** "An extra 3 cents in gasoline taxes would provide enough money to build another 400 miles of four-lane highway next year."
- » **Create patterns of thought.** It's all right to restate a phrase to create a pattern of emphasis. Hillary Clinton once used this phrase in one of her speeches: "if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work... their families will flourish." Repetition in triplets, as Clinton did, reinforces a theme and helps the audience retain the information.

ifts — The next step is to write a rough draft for the speaker. Keep in mind the constraints on the speech. If the speech is supposed to be about 20 minutes, your draft should be about 2,500 words—or 10 pages, double-spaced. It takes about 10 minutes to read a page to an audience, so a 10-minute talk would only be about 10 double-spaced pages.

The speaker should use this draft to add new thoughts, cross out copy that doesn't fit, and rewrite sentences to reflect his or her vocabulary and speaking style. Don't feel rejected if the first, second, or even third draft comes back in tatters. Only through this process that the speech becomes a natural expression of the speaker's personality. This is the ideal process. The most successful speakers take the time to work with their speechwriters. Unfortunately, too many executives fail to understand this concept.

A report prepared by Burson-Marsteller public relations gives several reasons why businesspeople have trouble explaining themselves to the public. The report noted:

All too often the chief executive expects a speech to appear magically on his desk without any contribution on his part. He feels too busy to give the speech the attention it deserves. In the end, he becomes the victim of his own neglect. He stumbles through a speech that, from start to finish, sounds contrived. And then he wonders why nobody listened to what he said.

Coaching — In addition to writing the speech to reflect the speaker's thoughts and personality, there may be a need for coaching. Whether the speech is memorized, partially read, or read entirely, it should be rehearsed enough times for the speaker to become familiar with it and to permit improvements in its delivery. Tone of voice, emphasis given to certain words or phrases, pauses, gestures, speed—all are important.

Some speakers prefer to have certain phrases underlined and to have detailed cues in the script, such as "pause," "look at audience," and "pound on lectern." Others don't want such cues. It is purely a matter of individual preference.

Format is also a matter of personal preference. Some people prefer double-spacing; others want triple-spacing. A few like to have the speech typed entirely in capital letters, but most prefer the normal upper- and lowercase format that is used to present most material that is to be read. Some speakers like to have capital letters used in the words that are to be stressed. All of these formats are acceptable.

The speaker should be sufficiently familiar with the note cards or prepared text to permit abridgment on short notice. Such advance thinking is particularly important for a speaker at a luncheon meeting. All too often, the meal is served late or the group takes an excessive amount of time discussing internal matters or making general announcements, leaving the speaker far less time than originally planned.

The same thing can happen at an evening banquet. The awards ceremony takes longer than expected, and the speaker is introduced at 9:15 p.m., 3 hours after everyone has sat down to dinner. In this instance, the greatest applause is for the person who realizes the hour and makes a five-minute speech.

The Basics of Giving a Speech

Writing a speech focuses almost exclusively on content. Giving a speech is all about delivery. You can have a wonderful script, but the words are enriched and become more powerful in the hands of an excellent speaker. Consequently, it is important to know the components of how to give an effective speech. In addition, see the Tips for Success on page 399 for guidelines on how to introduce a speaker.

Know Your Objective

Knowing your objective, as previously noted, is the most important requirement of all. There is no point in making a speech unless it accomplishes something. In preparing a speech, the first step is to determine what you want the audience to know or do. What attitude or opinion do you want the audience to have after listening to the speech?

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An informative speech is one that tells the audience something it does not know or does not understand. An informative speech might tell the audience about how the new local sewage system works, the results of the latest United Way campaign, the expansion plans of a major local corporation, or budget problems facing the state's system of higher education.

An activating speech is designed to get the listener to do something. Direct and specific action is suggested and urged. A basic principle of persuasion is that a speaker should provide an audience with a specific course of action to take: write to a congressional representative, vote for a candidate, purchase a product, or take steps to conserve energy.

A celebratory speech is designed to honor some person or event. Such speeches are often trite and boring, but they don't have to be. If a person is being honored for

Tips for Success

How to Introduce a Speaker

On occasion, you will be asked to be an emcee or to introduce a speaker at a meeting or gathering. This is also a speech, which requires thought and preparation in order to be as brief as possible. A good introduction, for example, should be between 30 seconds and 2 minutes. Introducing a speaker serves two primary purposes, according to Mitchell Friedman, a San Francisco public relations counselor and speech trainer. "First," he says, "it functions as a transition from one part of the program to another. Second, your introduction offers valuable cues to the audience as far as what they should expect from the speaker and the topic." In order to write an introduction, you should contact the speaker in advance and get a copy of his or her professional background. Second, you should ask the speaker about his or her objectives for the presentation, the value of the topic to the audience, and any other thoughts about the forthcoming talk.

Like any speech, the introduction should have an opening, a body, and a conclusion. Friedman says, "The opening should grab the attention of the audience by establishing the importance of the subject...." The body needs to emphasize the importance of the topic, the relevance of the topic to the audience, and establish the credentials of the speaker to address the topic. The conclusion is a brief comment to make the speaker feel welcome and to lead the applause as the speaker steps up to the podium.

Friedman cautions that a good speech introduction does not summarize the speech and, even more important, it doesn't include every detail of the person's background. Indeed, the biggest mistake made in speech introductions is giving the speaker's background in agonizing detail. A final note from Friedman: "It is not typically an occasion to make a joke at the expense of the speaker or to embarrass him or her."

Again, for emphasis: Keep your introduction short—30 seconds to 2 minutes—and everyone, including the speaker, will be grateful.