4 Questions to Ask Yourself While Writing a Speech

July 6, 2020 5 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

So, you're about to take a stage soon. Whether it be for a work presentation, a book tour or as the keynote speaker for a conference in your industry, an engaging talk should hit on all the right components. It should be educational, honest, surprising, vulnerable and witty. Whew! That's a lot to pack in.

Albert Einstein famously said, "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask … for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes." Writing a speech is somewhat the same. If you know what it is you're asking of yourself — or that which the audience is asking of you — the speech will roll off your tongue easily. So, here are four questions to ask yourself as you write your speech to help you uncover what you most need to say.

1. What do I want the audience to walk away with?

The first question is likely the most important, but it's also loaded. Are you getting up on that stage to teach, to motivate or to persuade? Perhaps a bit of all three? A good trick here is to imagine what you want an audience member to say after your talk when they're calling a friend. What do

they share that they just learned or got from it?

The best way to begin this consideration is through the "What's in it for me?" principle. William B. Cole, a speaker, trainer and consultant, wrote that, "People are really only interested in material that affects them. After writing any piece of material, no matter how brilliant, apply the WIIFM principle and judge if your audience will care about it and use it."

In other words, they need to walk away with something that they will put into practice as soon as possible. What do you want this to be?

2. What detail has stuck with me most in my exploring this topic?

Now, you've chosen the topic you have chosen because it's something that's of personal interest to you. You must convey this interest, or else the audience can sense boredom and reciprocate it. Think back through the stories and research conclusions you've stumbled across in your own journey with the topic. If you're speaking to motivate the audience to quit their 9-5 to pursue their passions, what was a story of someone who did just that and motivated you? If you're giving a talk on the importance of evaluating mental health in all medical appointments, what statistic shocked you the most in your research?

Go for shock value. This lends itself to why the audience should care, or "what's in it for them," because you'll show them what had been in it for *you.*

Related: How to Effectively Use Storytelling to Attract a Larger Brand Following

3. How does my own experience relate to this?

Stories matter. The sooner you can get vulnerable on that stage, the more your audience will trust you. Storytelling expert Craig Harrison dispelled a common myth about these stories when he wrote for Toastmasters that, “Many speakers believe that they don’t have great stories since they haven’t beaten cancer, founded a Fortune 500 company or won a Nobel Prize, but you don’t have to have survived a bullet to the head or turned around to have stories to tell.”

Sometimes the greatest stories unfold from your own struggles, even if you think they’re only personal to you. Lewis Raymond Taylor, an international speaker and the CEO of Coaching Masters, told me, “I found a lot of power in sharing my story. I had gone through a lot in my life, such as attempting suicide at age 18, being diagnosed with drug and alcohol induced epilepsy at at 23 and even going to prison for 18 months when I was 24. But I learned that by overcoming all of those obstacles and sharing the nitty-gritty details, others felt like they weren’t so far behind, and that they could turn their lives around, too, and turn their adversities into assets.”

What stories from your own life and career shaped who you are today and led you to this moment getting onstage? Don’t be afraid to be vulnerable. In fact, be vulnerable even if you’re afraid.

4. What are the three main bullet points I want in everyone’s notebooks?

When you’re listening to someone speak and you’re doing so

diligently, you’re taking notes. Notes can range from quotes that they’ve said to ideas that have been sparked in your head by listening to them. What are the three main takeaways you want each audience member to write down in their notebooks?

It’s important to have three — no more, no less. Less doesn’t fully embrace a subject or a topic, and more is hard to track. These three bullet points should reflect the answers to the prior three questions and help you shape your talk. Sandwich these bullet points in between stories, and support the bullet points with facts and statistics.

Related: If You Want to Be a Successful Entrepreneur, Get Comfortable With Your Vulnerability

Once you’ve nailed down the answers to these questions, get started practicing out loud and see what else comes. As long as you’re thoughtful, honest and based in real research and your own stories, the audience will take something from your talk.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/352427