5 Secrets to Writing a Memorable Speech

There are some very useful guidelines that can serve any speechwriter's needs.

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A Note From The Editor

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I recently received an email from an HR leader at a global computer manufacturer, where I am coaching several executives. She'd been asked to write a speech for the CEO, and she wanted to know if I had any anecdotes to lift the speech into that exalted territory of earth-shattering and unforgettable — despite a circumstance not unique to her company, namely that the CEO was a bit of a bore.

Morale at the company was low from a recent series of layoffs, declining markets and a squeeze on cash flow. The purpose of the speech was to rally the troops. Did I have a punchy anecdote that would send the speech over the top? she asked.

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Unfortunately, I had to say no. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all anecdote that will turn a speech into a

crowd-inspiring oration, and I had to tell her honestly that good speech writing is not a magic trick that entails cherry-picking anecdotes on the order of “Let’s win one for the Gipper!” There are, however, some very useful guidelines that can serve any speechwriter’s needs, whether you’re writing a State of the Union address, a data-packed talk for an industry symposium or a eulogy for a respected colleague.

1. Strive for authenticity.

Speeches are an exercise in vulnerability. You are alone up there. As such, you can’t just wax hypothetical and hope nobody notices. You need to be honest, to speak with conviction, to be real.

One of my mentors, the late Reid Buckley (younger brother to William F. Buckley), in his text titled *Strictly Speaking: Reid Buckley’s Indefensible Handbook on Public Speaking*, described this quality of authenticity very succinctly. “Argue to the core,” he wrote. By that he meant, speak from the bottom of your heart or from the bottom of your feet, and know where you stand.

At my client’s computer firm, for example, with its layoffs and other struggles, you can bet your salary that there will be more than one cynic in the audience at the CEO’s speech. If it turns out to be a rosy-hued address that papers over the company’s troubles, it will land as inauthentic and unrealistic and as lacking in empathy. However, that doesn’t mean it has to be all gloom and doom. We look to our leaders to lead us into brighter futures, and if there is hope and the potential for a turnaround, say so. And emphatically.

2. Draft your conclusion first.

Figure out your conclusion from the get-go. What are the takeaways you want from your speech? What’s the objective you

can realistically hope to achieve? Are there any calls to action you need to convey?

Unlike an essay, a speech is not the time for a long, meandering journey of self-discovery. Know where you're headed and write with a purpose. The question to ask yourself: What do I want people to think, feel or do after I'm done? You can then work backward and figure out the best way to arrange your points. There are plenty of commonsense structures to choose from. Problem/solution is one. Opportunity/leverage is another. Pros and cons is a third. Or you can simply list your points in numerical order.

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3. Overindulge in research.

Research makes you more confident when you sit down to write and furnishes more angles from which to approach your subject. This enhances creativity. Research makes a blank page far less intimidating and gives you more facts to deploy in your argument. Incidentally, you may learn something along the way. Overdo the research and you will never be sorry.

4. Include a story or two.

My client at the computer company wasn't wholly mistaken in her request for anecdotes. As I emphasize in my book, *The Confident Speaker*, a story can be a highly effective communication tool – after all, it's a timeless tradition that dates back to the Stone Age. But while storytelling is as natural as breathing to most of us, it's picking the right story structure than can make the difference between an audience checking their iPhones and one so absorbed in your story that all eyes are fixed on you.

Your story may take the standard five-step

approach: exposition, rising drama, climax or turning point, falling drama and, finally, denouement or outcome. But this type of story is not for amateurs and takes time to prepare and tell. If you lack the time or experience for that, you might instead opt for what famed screenwriter Aaron Sorkin calls the two key ingredients for any story to work: intention and obstacle. Somebody wants something, and something is standing in their way of getting it. The inherent drama in such a narrative is something we all relate to. Or you can structure your story according to such popular themes as "David vs. Goliath," "Phoenix Rising from the Ashes" or "They Said It Couldn't Be Done." Whichever story structure you select, make sure it serves your objective and delivers the point you set out to make.

The charm of anecdotes is that they are about people. They put a human face on abstract issues. This characteristic is especially valuable when presenting data, even if no full-fledged anecdotes are being relayed. Always connect your data to people. How do the numbers affect your customers, constituents, shareholders, staff and their families? How do they affect the world at large? Answer those questions and you'll stand a chance to reach your audience where it matters – their gut.

5. Interview the speaker-to-be.

Ghost-writing, as my HR client was asked to do for her CEO, is a particularly difficult form for speeches. It calls not just for eloquence, but for eloquence consistent with the manner of someone else. What I advised this executive to do was to sit down with her CEO and delve into his thoughts and assess his goals for the company. Otherwise, personal authenticity would be lacking in the "bit of a bore" CEO's speech, and even a dull speech that is true to life is better than pumped-up rhetoric that rings hollow.

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Among the questions to ponder when interviewing a speaker-to-be: What words do they like using? How do they naturally work the room? How do they make their arguments – with outlines, with lofty abstractions? Are they pragmatic and direct, or do they wander around before making their point? Some prefer long sentences. Others love the staccato effect.

You should also write using a person's "natural cadence," says former White House speechwriter Sarah Hurwitz, who wrote penetrating addresses for the likes of Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama and Barack Obama. Her gems include the famous speech by Mrs. Obama that included the line "I wake up every morning in a house built by slaves." Now that line is exalted, earth-shattering and unforgettable speechwriting!

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