

Chapter Thirteen - Writing a speech

Too many times I have sat through speeches that are read to an audience. Even if the content is excellent, the presentation often fails to engage the audience. Because I earned my living as a speaker for several decades, I know that there are many ways to share ideas with an audience that will keep them “on the edge of their seats.”

This chapter will suggest ways to prepare for a speech so you have great ideas and words to share without resorting to reading. It is about planning a speech and how to deliver it effectively.

There are many kinds of speeches and presentations, but we will focus on just two: the informative presentation and the persuasive speech. In either one, you would speak without reading.



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The Informative Presentation

What is an informative presentation? It may be a training session, a report of some kind or a workshop. In many conferences, presenters are asked to share findings from their research and study.

Rather than composing what amounts to an essay or paper, you will create twenty or more speaking points, each of which will become a presentation slide with usually no more than 5-10 words plus an image

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of some kind. Each of these slides should prompt you to share 4-5 related sentences from memory.



If you use presentation software like PowerPoint™ or Keynote™, you may take the time to write out these sentences in the Notes section that accompanies each slide, but you will commit them to memory so you can share them without looking at them once you are face to face with the audience.

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Creating the speaking points is somewhat like making an outline, as you are listing the key ideas you plan to share. The slide pictured above was part of a presentation on professional development — one of nine strategies drawn from the article, “Designing Staff Development for the Information Age.”¹

1. Must offer immersion and transformation.
2. Must inspire teachers to invent.
3. Must be experience-based, with learning resulting from doing and exploring.
4. Must hook the curiosity, wonder or passion of teachers.
5. Must respond to teachers’ appetites, concerns and interests.
6. Must consider the feelings, fears and anxieties of the learners.
7. Must engage the perspective of teachers.
8. Must appeal to learners at a variety of developmental stages.
9. Must be properly funded.

1 <http://staffdevelop.org/sd1.html>

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When creating the slides, you will simplify and abbreviate even further, as I changed “curiosity, wonder or passion” to “passion.”

You will win the most impact by including images on the slides to help you make your point. As much as possible, find photographs rather than clip art.² Many presenters load their slides with too many words and too many bullets. They also fall prey to excessive fancy transitions and special effects. For more suggestions to assist you when creating this kind of presentation, read “Scoring Powerpoints.”³

Storytelling

One of the quickest ways to lose an audience is to speak in abstract terms. If you do this, you will see the lights go out and the yawning begin.

Storytelling is one of the most effective ways to illustrate and support your speaking points while keeping your audience engaged. As with many of the techniques discussed in this book, one of the best ways to improve your own speaking is to study the moves, the content and the tactics used by excellent speakers.

Even when your content is intellectually challenging, stories can bring the main ideas to life so as to capture the interest of your audience.

The best storytellers are skilled at creating chemistry. There are at least five tactics that make them successful.

- **Eye contact** — The best speakers connect with many individual members of the audience by looking them directly in the eyes and signifying in some way, with a smile or some other signal, that they are addressing them directly. With very large groups, it is impossible to do this with every person, but the effort is worthwhile. The speaker looks at both those who are engaged and those who seem disconnected. Good eye contact rewards those who are already listening and sometimes recruits those who are on the brink. Eye contact also provides the speaker with feedback to help judge what is working and what is not. If the group seems to be drifting away, the speaker can intensify one or more of the following tactics to regain their engagement.

² Be careful to honor copyright when using photos you find on the Net.

³ <http://fno.org/sept00/powerpoints.html>

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- **Pacing** — Sometimes you will pause to let a point sink in. At other times you will build to a crescendo. Mixing up the tempo is part of keeping the group engaged.



Photo © Serge Ligtenberg - Elif Shafak at 2008 Winternachten Festival

- **Gestures** — Many speakers use their hands and their arms quite effectively. For some, this gesturing comes naturally and does not require practice, but now that smartphones make it easy to take short videos, you can film yourself speaking the words that go with your slides and ask whether your movements are effective. Some speakers stand wooden behind the podium and hardly ever move their hands or arms. Others overdo it. For examples of effective speakers, spend time watching TED Talks — “2400+ talks to stir your curiosity.”⁴ One of my favorites is by Elif Shafak, “The Politics of Fiction.” She is a very effective and moving storyteller with gestures that are near perfect.⁵

4 <https://www.ted.com/talks>

5 https://www.ted.com/talks/elif_shafak_the_politics_of_fiction#t-234661

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- **Dramatic tone** — As we learned in the chapter on songwriting, your voice is a musical instrument. It is capable of transmitting emotion in ways that will touch your listeners and involve their feelings. In her presentation, Elif Shafak uses her voice effectively to make you care about the stories she is telling. Some speakers never vary their tone and speak mostly with a flat affect. For some reason, in academic circles this lack of expressiveness can be confused with neutrality and objectivity, but it does not work well when presenting.

- **Facial expressions** — While your voice, your hands and your body are helping you to share your content, your face will be smiling, grimacing and passing through dozens of expressions that strengthen your message. Elif Shafak puts them all together to communicate a message that is stirring as well as illuminating and challenging.

The Persuasive Speech

This kind of speech has much in common with the paper discussed in Chapter Five - Building a Case. You hope to convince an audience of your idea — whether it be a government body, a group of potential customers or some parents angered by a school decision.

When making a persuasive speech, your body language and presentation count for more than your words. The words and the ideas are important, but you are trying to win over the audience. You want them to trust you and feel you are on their side. In this case, your charm may be more important than your reasoning and your evidence.

Early in the speech, you will establish as strong a personal relationship as possible. Drawing on your knowledge of the audience, whether it be a half dozen officials or several hundred citizens, you will tell some stories and mention some key values you hold in common. In the first few moments, you hope they will see you as ally, friend and partner. The relationship is paramount. If you create this bond early on, then your arguments will take hold. It is a bit like the old man setting a hook in the marlin.

Sometimes great arguments and logic fall on deaf ears.

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You will open your speech with a clear statement of your position, and then you will proceed to lay out your arguments, point by point, providing stories, examples and evidence to support that position. You will build to a crescendo, like this woman running up the steps.

This is usually a good time to put technology aside and look your group in the eye, unless there is supporting information that requires visuals. If this is the case, keep them to a minimum.

If you know your audience, you will devote attention to their wishes, dreams and fears when you decide upon the main points you will stress, and you will insert questions at key points that you would not include in an article or an editorial. “Isn’t that right? Isn’t that the truth?” You hope to get them nodding and shaking their heads in agreement.

As much as possible, you hope to engage the audience in intimate ways, appealing to their “ethos, logos, and pathos.”⁶

There are presentations on the Web explaining how speakers like Martin Luther King used “ethos, logos, and pathos” to win over their audiences.⁷ You can learn by watching the masters.

⁶ Camille A. Langston, “How to use rhetoric to get what you want.” <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-use-rhetoric-to-get-what-you-want-camille-a-langston>

⁷ Heaven Carrasco on MKL’s speech, “I have a dream.” <https://prezi.com/avxkzlnkggjc/i-have-a-dream-by-martin-luther-king-jr/>