

Tips From A Speechwriter

By Art Brown

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR TIME IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE

For many years, I earned my living in Washington mostly as a speechwriter.

I must have been born timid, for it never appealed to me to stand up before a crowd and make a speech. But it always seemed easy and natural for me to provide ammunition for anyone I happened to know who wanted to make a speech to get elected to office or something.

After I got to writing speeches professionally, I read and studied great speeches—speeches that have lived—speeches, for example, by Abraham Lincoln, Patrick Henry, Daniel Webster, and Winston Churchill.

In time, I learned something about the feel of an effective speech.

And by working with experienced speakers, by talking with them, by learning from them what makes a speech go across, and by watching them in action, I learned something about how to deliver a speech.

Those are my qualifications for offering you a few tips on "How to Make the Most of Your Time Before an Audience".

ONLY ONE WAY TO JUDGE A SPEECH

You would like to produce a speech that will get a standing ovation from the audience, that will make headlines in the press, that will be printed in *Vital Speeches*, and that can be put out in booklet form. If it wins a Freedoms Foundation award, so much the better.

But, when you come right down to it, there is only one way for you to judge whether a speech you make is a good speech: It's a good speech when it accomplishes its purpose.

Just what is its purpose? Why are you giving the speech?

What message do you want to present to your listeners? What do you want them to do about it?

What resistances are you going to be up against? How can you overcome those resistances?

What questions are you likely to be asked? How can you answer those questions briefly and convincingly?

The next thing for you to do is to learn as much as you possibly can about your audience, their organization, their interests, their problems, their needs.

When you address them you want to feel right at home with them; you want to see things from their point of view.

LOOK FOR GRIST FOR YOUR SPEECH

Now, the thing you have to do is to be on the continual lookout for grist for your speech. You not only need pertinent facts and figures, but you also need items that you can use to brighten up your talk, to support the points you make, and to give your speech added interest and a change of pace from time to time: illustrations, anecdotes, jokes, humorous lines, and suitable quotations.

When I was a student at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, an editorial writer on *The Chicago Tribune*, who was lecturing in class one day, told the students how he was always looking for items for possible use in his editorials. He told us his method for keeping those items together in one place where he could put his hand on a particular one when he needed it.

Instead of filing the items by subject, he kept them in a folder, with the most recent item on top. Whenever he added a new one, he took a moment to leaf through those

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that were already there-and that refreshed his memory, so that he was able to find a particular item in a hurry when he wanted it.

That's a simple little technique which I have found to be practical, and I pass it on to you.

THINK HARD, DEEP, AND LONG

The really important thing, however, in preparing a speech is to think the subject through hard enough, deep enough, and long enough to make the whole thing jell in your mind and hold together.

Herbert Corey, who had been an overseas correspondent and who, when I knew him, was back in Washington writing magazine articles and working on a book told me that his secret of writing something was to gather the material on the subject, and then to put it in his mind and "cook it".

"Unless you've got a deadline to meet," he said, "don't start writing anything until it's ready to write itself".

Peter Cooper, the inventor, had somewhat the same idea. Among other things, he improved the process of steelmaking, built one of the earliest locomotives in this country, played an important part in the laying of the Atlantic cable, and founded The Cooper Union in New York City.

'EVENTUALLY THE ANSWER COMES'

Peter Cooper's working slogan was, "Eventually the answer comes."

I have that line typed out and pasted on the front of the typewriter.

It's comforting to know that when you are writing a speech or anything else, and when you use your head and think about the job at hand hard enough and long enough. "Eventually the answer comes."

Montaigne knew the truth of that. In his Essays, he says:

"I hear some making excuses for being unable to express themselves, and pretending to have their heads full of many fine things but, for want of eloquence, being unable to produce them; that is a sham....For my part, I hold, and Socrates makes it a rule, that whoever has in his mind a vivid and clear idea will express it. "The matter seen, the words freely follow."

HOW TO PREPARE A GOOD SPEECH

These, then, are tips on how to prepare a good speech:

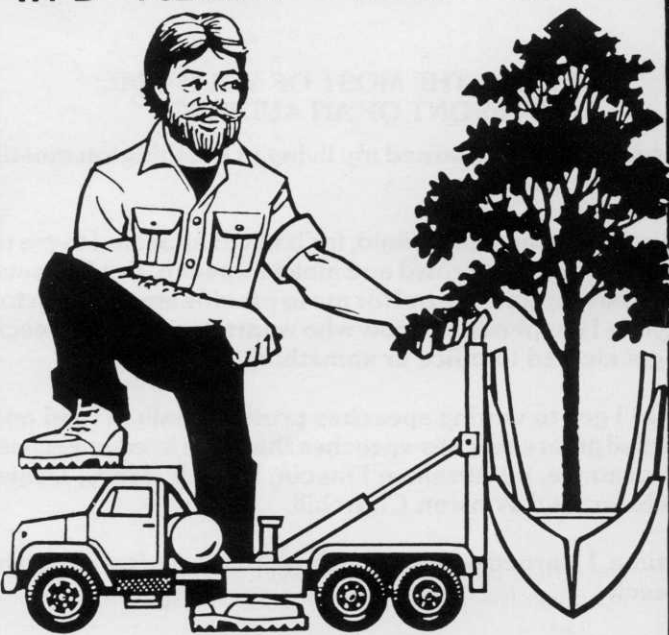
1. Know exactly what you want your speech to accomplish.
2. Learn as much as you can about your audience, so that you will be able to see things from the viewpoint of your listeners.
3. Know the questions your listeners are likely to ask, and know how to answer these questions convincingly.

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4. Be continually on the lookout for grist for your speech.

5. Think the subject through hard, deep, and long, so that it organizes itself and holds together—a most important step.

TAKE PLENTY OF TIME TO REHEARSE

Now, after you have written your speech, and after you have edited it and polished it, take plenty of time to rehearse it.

Tape record your speech and play it back to yourself. Listen to how you emphasize certain words—verbs and nouns in particular—or how you fail to emphasize certain words that you should.

If there are any stumbling blocks for you in your speech, get rid of them.

Rehearse your speech until you almost know it by heart.

LOOK AT YOURSELF IN A MIRROR

Winston Churchill worked for 40 years to master the art of writing a speech — and to learn how to write a sentence that would have each phrase in its proper place so that the sentence would move directly ahead and not backtrack, and so that the sentence would say what it was meant to say and have the proper cadence and flavor.

Here is an example of a Churchill sentence—from his Dunkirk speech:

“Behind this armored and mechanized onslaught came a number of German divisions in lorries, and behind them again, there plodded — comparatively slowly — the dull brute mass of the ordinary German Army and German people, always so ready to be led to trampling down in other lands of liberties and comforts which they have never known in their own.”

But Churchill did not depend entirely on his ability as a thinker and a writer. He depended also on his ability to speak before an audience. And throughout his whole career, he would never deliver a speech without first rehearsing it before a mirror. He wanted to see himself in action

WHAT THOSE WHO SUCCEED SUGGEST

Here are some suggestions from successful speakers. You doubtless know all of these things already, but it doesn't do any harm to be reminded of them.

1. When you deliver a speech, be relaxed; the world is not coming to an end. Be yourself.

2. Strive for audience contact. That's what you're there for. Look right at individuals in the audience as you talk to them. Watch for their reaction.

3. Don't read your speech in a humdrum fashion. That's the worst thing in the world to do; it kills the speech. You are thoroughly familiar with the script. Use it only as a guide. Ad lib when you feel like it.

4. In your opening remarks, it's a good idea to start off by talking about yourself. Put your listeners in the picture right away by talking about them.

Instead of saying, “It's a great pleasure for me to be here on this occasion...”, say something like this: “You people who are in this room here today perhaps know more about the subject that we will be discussing than any other group in America.” Or, say whatever is appropriate and true, so long as you are talking about them and not about yourself.

5. As you go along, however, address your listeners as “we,” rather than as “you.” The reason for doing so is to avoid sounding preachy, to avoid giving them the impression that you are trying to tell them what they should or should not do.

You are not trying to force your ideas on them. You are simply letting them know that, after weighing all the facts in the case, you have come to certain conclusions about the situation — conclusions which you believe to be sound. Your job is to win your listeners over to your way of thinking—or to give them information that will be helpful to them in their thinking.

It is more effective for you to say, “It seems to me,” or, “As I see it,” than it is to give your listeners the impression that you think you know all the answers.

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6. A good way to launch the question-and-answer session is to say something like this:

"What one single question do you have in mind that you would like to have answered here today-what one question, if you could get the answer, would make you glad you came to this meeting?"

7. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say, "I don't know- but if you will see me after this meeting, I will get your address and then, after I get back home, I will try to get the answer for you and send it to you."

LET THEM KNOW YOU ARE GLAD

More than one successful speaker has told me that the best way to give a speech is to be fully prepared, and then when you are before the audience, to let them know by your whole manner and your whole being that it gives you a lift to be there.

When they know that you are really glad to be there, they are really glad to be there.

They listen with interest to what you have to say.

They get something out of it.

They remember what you tell them.

They are influenced by it.

And once more, you have made the most of your time before an audience. ■



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