

Making effective speeches

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Being able to present yourself confidently in front of an audience is an important skill for any PR practitioner to develop. The following tips cover all aspects of making a speech, from shaping the content to effective delivery.

The content...

Know your audience

Before you put pen to paper, conduct some **audience analysis**. This will give you an idea of what information to incorporate / omit and how long your speech should be. Questions to ask yourself should include:

- How many people will be there?
 - What are their background, gender, age, careers and interests?
 - What do they already know about your topic?
 - How much more will they want to know?
 - What's in it for them?
 - Will there be other speakers?
 - How much time have you been given for your speech, including Q&A?
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Develop an outline

Decide on a **central message**. This is the focus of your talk, the organising element for all your ideas. Criteria for helping develop a good central message include thinking about your purpose:

- Is it to inform or educate?
- To entertain?
- To convince or persuade?
- To stimulate action?

Keep it simple! If you can't state your central message in one or two sentences, you probably haven't narrowed your topic enough.

Once you have established your key message, you can build your speech around this:

- Decide on three to five key points
 - Develop supporting evidence for each key point. Include statistics, stories or examples
 - Develop a strong introduction and powerful conclusion
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Write and rewrite

- **Make an immediate connection with the audience.** The warm-up is for the speaker as much as the audience. Give yourself time to get comfortable at the podium and get the audience's attention
- **Provide a 'road map' of your remarks.** Tell the audience what you will say, how you plan to say it, and how long you will take to make your points. For example: "In the next 15 minutes, I will share with you three key steps to..."
- Use this three-point checklist to **prioritise your information** and make sure you're not giving your audience too much:
 - Need to know
 - Nice to know
 - Don't need to know
- **Use conversational language.** Speak to the audience as if you are speaking to a friend. Use contractions. Avoid acronyms and jargon. Use short words and sentences, plus active verbs. Don't be afraid of sentence fragments - people talk that way
- **Create mental bumper stickers.** Use sentences and phrases people will remember. Possible sources include the comic pages, television commercials, personal experiences and childhood events
- **Repeat your main points.** Do this throughout your speech and again at the end. Use examples, illustrations, comparisons, quotes and statistics - anything to help build a picture in the minds of your audience
- **Prepare your speech length.** For example: 18-25 minutes in length. Eighteen is preferred, including four minutes for an opening, ten minutes for the body and four minutes for the close
- **Develop an effective close.** You may want to simply restate your central message. Or use a short story, well-known quotation, poem or something related to the message. The purpose of a speech is to move the audience to action or a particular belief. Work on mastering the art of making a challenge

The delivery...

Practice - practice - practice

- **Decide on the physical format for your speech.** Do you want it written out completely? How about a few note cards filled with key points? Whichever you choose, use large letters and double or triple space. Don't staple pages together. Number pages. Don't break a thought from one page to the next
- **Rehearse your delivery.** Do this in front of a mirror, into a video camera or tape recorder. Stand up and visualise the audience in front of you
- **Make the most of visual aids.** Research shows retention of information presented with visual support is 65% after five days, compared with only 5% without. But don't allow visuals to become a crutch, taking your eyes away from the audience. And what you're showing must be bright, clear and large enough

- **Do a room analysis.** If possible, go to the room where your speech will be given in advance to help eliminate surprises:
 - How large is the room?
 - Will it be possible to use slides, videos or overheads?
 - Will there be a podium?
 - What type of microphone is available?
 - How can the sound system be adjusted?
 - Where will you be seated before you're introduced?
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On the day

- **Dress appropriately.** Wear something comfortable and conservative. Avoid bright white shirts, big jewellery and brass buttons, any of which may catch the light and produce a distracting glare
- **Provide a proper introduction.** Take along a prepared bio for the organisers. It's your responsibility to provide enough information so the audience accepts you as a credible source
- **Stand tall and take deep breaths.** Flexing your hands and expanding your ribcage are good ways to settle your nerves. Use the adrenalin to get off to a good start, but don't go too fast
- **Maintain eye contact with the audience.** Look for a friendly face near the centre of the room and deliver your opening to that person. Then continually move your gaze around the room, giving each thought to a different person
- **Vary your tone of voice and speed of delivery.** Show enthusiasm for your topic with your voice. Don't speak too quietly, too loudly, too slowly or quickly. Don't use verbal fillers such as "um," "uh" and "you know." Instead, pause silently
- **Use gestures and facial expressions effectively.** Smile at the audience. Use hand gestures when appropriate. Between gestures, rest hands at your sides or lightly on the lectern. Lean slightly forward. Move away from the podium, if possible
- **Be prepared for questions.** Think about the four questions you would most like to be asked and the four questions you fear the most. Then prepare answers to those eight questions. Keep your answers short and to the point