

How to write a helluva speech, yourself

 By [Tiffany Markman](#)

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Fears and phobias notwithstanding, here are the last three of five easy ways to plan, structure and write a helluva speech. Delivery? Good luck with that.

Step 3: Flesh out the speech using research, facts or stories

So, you have your message, your main theme, a basic structure and some core points to cover. Now what? How do you turn a couple of skimpy guidelines into a rhythmic, coherent, logical and hypnotic presentation that *actually says something*?

You put meat on the bones. And luckily, you're not alone here. There are resources.

Make notes

Make some rough notes off the cuff, with the intention of plugging some of the gaps between your skeleton points. Use a pen and blank paper (an old copywriter's trick for flushing out good stuff hidden in the cobwebby recesses of your tired brain). You may have stuff lurking in your head that you can use. Once you've done this...

Ask around

Start with the people who are relevant to the subject/person: colleagues, clients, contacts, friends, family. Gather information and insights from them. Then...

Use a checklist

Draw up a list of things, aside from the main message, that your speech absolutely must include: welcome guests from afar, hint at recent success, thank the gals who arranged the dinner, raise a toast, introduce the retiree... It's a good idea to do this *before* you surf the web, because once you've included all this critical stuff, you may have quite a long speech, with minimal space for extras. Now's a good time to...

Use the theme

Take a piece of paper and write your main theme on it: GROWTH. Then, scribble down words that pop into your mind: seedlings, water, sunshine, development, green, soil, roots. Write down everything you think of, even if it looks stupid at

first.

Use these words to come up with analogies (comparisons) for some of the points in the body (Step 2). For example, if we work with point 6: *'Refer to potential of grandson as carrier of grandfather's legacy'*, you could use something like this:

'Joe's enormous potential as Mr Jones's successor reminds me of the startling fact that every oak tree was once an acorn. Now, Joe, I'm aware that you're already six feet tall - a big, strong acorn - but we still look forward to seeing what you can do.'

Use the web

As a last pad-out-the-speech resort, Google speeches on subjects and themes similar to yours - not to plagiarise, but to borrow ideas. Perhaps the writer has included something you forgot, or used an analogy you like. Perhaps when you look up 'growth', you find a fantastic quote. Perhaps someone somewhere has structured a retirement speech in an unusual way. Do a little bit of respectful, healthy browsing.

A starter kit:

- Speechmaking tips and funny speech topics: www.fun-at-work.org/Speechmaking-Tips-for-Making-Fun-Speeches.html
- Sayings about speeches and public speaking: www.quotegarden.com/speeches.html and www.speech-guru.com/quotes.php
- True funny stories about famous people: www.anecdote.com
- Illustrations and analogies for motivation, inspiration, learning and training: www.businessballs.com/stories.htm
- Material on any topic related to communication and leadership: www.toastmasters.org/MainMenuCategories/FreeResources.aspx

Establish links

You should be 85% of the way there. Go through the speech with a critical eye, to ensure that each section, paragraph and sentence moves smoothly into the next. You may need to use transitional phrases (*on that note, on the other hand, because of this, as a result, you know, it's true what they say about, in my experience...* or inject short linking paragraphs, between existing text, to improve flow and drama.

Step 4: Tie it all together by making it personal.

Remember the 'good, strong story' I requested under Step 2? Here's an example:

'When I was a child, my grandparents in Port Elizabeth had a massive lucky bean tree in their garden. I thought it was magical and spent hours collecting the little red beans, playing in the shade, trying to summit the branches. As I grew older, the tree was a constant: large, powerful, comforting. It never seemed to change, even while everything around it evolved. My hope for this company is that Mr Jones has left us something larger than himself - something strong and abiding - that we can look to for shade and nurture into the future, under the steady hand of his grandson, Joe.'

This sort of thing is called an anecdote and it works really well in any speech, regardless of purpose, tone or occasion. Why? Well, after listening to a speech, you may walk away with a few stats, some interesting buzzwords or an obscure fact. But you'll definitely remember the moving stories you heard. That's how the brain works.

So when you speak in public, use the skill of storytelling to illustrate key points and to make a lasting impression on your audience. A brilliant book on this, if you're interested, is [Justin Cohen's](#) *The Astonishing Power of Story*. Here are some tips:

1. **Only integrate stories that relate.** Avoid random stories designed to make the speech interesting. The audience will remember the anecdote, not your address.
2. **Consider placement.** Determine where your stories will have the most impact/memorability. Use them as transitions, introductions or conclusions.
3. **Beg, borrow, steal. Borrow a story if you don't have one that illustrates the point. Draw from the experiences of family and friends or reference a moment in a movie, book or famous speech. Give credit to the story's source before you tell it.**

Step 5: If you're really funny (actually, *hilarious*), use humour.

Humour is something to be approached with caution in speeches, because there is a big difference between being witty and telling jokes. Joke-telling is a bit naff and there's little more toe-curlingly awful than a) having no-one laugh, b) losing your credibility with an irrelevant joke or c) stuffing up the punchline after a long lead-in.

Ask yourself: Will it work here? Will it loosen up my audience? Can I deliver it well?

What's the big deal about delivery? Well, if you're not a naturally funny person you won't suddenly become one because you're standing in front of a group of people. If anything, that could make you less, not more, funny. So don't be persuaded to tell a few jokes or use humour if that's something you wouldn't do at a social gathering.

What you *can* do, however, is take the hub or kernel of a joke and build up the story in line with your subject matter, theme or specific point. Here's an example:

Original

My son and my wife were walking past West Park cemetery one afternoon, with the dogs, and the little boy stopped to look at the epitaph on a nearby headstone. It said, 'Here lies a good lawyer and an honest man.' Mike read it carefully, then turned to his mother and said, 'Mommy, why did they bury two people in the same grave?'

Adaptation

Replace 'good lawyer' with the relevant adjective and occupation, e.g. 'successful car salesman', 'clever accountant', 'advertising guru', 'financial director', etc.

Another way you can adapt existing jokes for use in in-company speeches is to make them about your colleagues. Very few organisations' workforces won't get a laugh out of a light-hearted speech that pokes fun at their bosses and, given at the right time and place, such a speech works wonders for in-company relationships.

If you're looking for public speaking humour or jokes to adapt, you can find them online on the usual big sites - just search for **+JOKES+(YOUR SUBJECT)**.

Just remember the rules for using humour: a) make sure it's the kind of humour you (and your audience) feel comfortable with and b) be sure that it's appropriate, given your style, the occasion and the content, message and theme of the speech.

Conclusion

So this is it: the last three of five steps to writing better speeches. I've said what I came to say and now I'm done. So I'm going to follow the valuable advice of American opera singer, Dorothy Sarnoff, who said, 'Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening.' Thank you and goodbye.

For more:

- **Bizcommunity:** [How to write a helluva speech, yourself \[Part I\]](#)

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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