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5 Tips for Off-the-Cuff Speaking

How to say a few words. *by John Coleman*

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If it's true that many people fear public speaking more than death, it's equally true that businesspeople are condemned to a thousand small deaths in client pitches, in boardrooms, and on stage. And that death can turn slow and torturous when you are asked to speak unexpectedly with little or no time to prepare. One of the key demands of business is the ability to speak extemporaneously. Whether giving an unexpected “elevator pitch” to a potential investor or being asked at the last minute to offer remarks to a sales team over dinner, the demands for a business person to speak with limited preparation are diverse, endless, and — to many — terrifying.

I became more comfortable with these situations through one of my primary activities in college, competitive public speaking called “forensics” ([from the Latin “forensis,”](#) which means “in an open court, public”). In forensics, one of my favorite categories was “limited preparation” in which we were given between 1 and 30 minutes to prepare a 5–7 minute speech. The lessons learned in those limited preparation events have paid huge dividends to my work in business. They carried me through my first consulting case interviews right out of college. They’ve helped me address complex questions from bosses and board members. And they’ve helped me when I’ve been put on the spot to address college classes and new analyst training sessions.

No matter your position, they can also be useful to you. Here are a few of the tips I picked up along the way:

1. **Define a structure:** The pressure of extemporaneous remarks comes from their ambiguity. What do I say? What do I not say? The worst and most stressful business speeches are those that ramble without purpose. In forensics we’d tackle this issue by quickly drafting a structure on a notecard to support our main point — often an introduction, two or three supporting points, and a conclusion. With these on paper, it was easy to fill in the details with stories, examples, and statistics. Now, when I’m asked to offer unexpected remarks over dinner or at a board meeting, I grab a napkin, notebook, or the back of a PowerPoint deck and jot down my main argument and some key supporting points. Then I fill out the examples and data I need to make those points — usually in 20 words or less. Any ambiguity or tendency to ramble evaporates.
2. **Put the punchline first:** When I worked in consulting, one of the cardinal rules of communication was “punchline first.” Any presentation should have a clear thesis stated up front so that listeners can easily follow and interpret the comments that follow.

I can't tell you how many times I've seen business presenters ramble through a speech with the audience wondering to the very end about the point of the comments. Giving a good business speech is not like telling a good joke. Don't save the punchline for the end.

3. **Remember your audience:** All it takes is a few lines to make an audience feel acknowledged and a speech feel fresh. Tie the city in which you are speaking into your introduction. Draw parallels between the organization you're addressing and one of the stories you tell. Mention someone by name, connecting them to the comments you're offering. These are small gestures, but they make your remarks more tailored and relevant.
4. **Memorize what to say, not how to say it:** How many times have you practiced exactly how to say something in your head then frozen up or completely forgotten in the moment? In forensics speeches, we'd often have 5–10 citations to remember, 3–4 examples with names and places, and 3–4 supporting statistics. That's a lot to research and remember in 30 minutes or less. The trick was this: We'd focus on memorizing key stories and statistics, rather than practicing our delivery. If you spend your time on how to say something perfectly, you'll stumble through those phrasings, and you'll forget all the details that can make them come alive. Or worse, you'll slavishly read from a PowerPoint or document rather than hitting the high points fluidly with your audience. If you know your topic, the words will come.
5. **Keep it short:** Blaise Pascal once famously commented, "I have only made this letter rather long because I have not had time to make it shorter." While it seems like the challenge of speaking with limited preparation would be finding enough to say, the opposite is often true. When at a loss for words, many of us underestimate the time we need — cramming in so many stories and points that we run well over our

time and dilute our message. No one will appreciate your economy of words more than your listeners, so when in doubt, say less.

There's no substitute for practice in offering impromptu remarks, and there are many things to consider when preparing for a great talk. But mastering a few basics, like those above, can make these public comments less stressful to prepare and easier for audiences to hear.

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