



# Book The Lost Art of the Great Speech

## How to Write One - How to Deliver It

Richard Dowis  
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## Recommendation

Richard Dowis's manual on public speaking is useful and comprehensive. He covers everything from why you should learn to speak in public to "leveraging" your speech to improve your organization's visibility. No detail is too small. Dowis takes you step by step through researching, outlining, writing and practicing your speech. He discusses room set-up, commonly mispronounced words, formatting (including why he prefers sheets of paper to index cards), and what to eat or drink beforehand (eschew alcohol as a relaxant and try deep breathing or stretching instead). His appendices include an editing checklist and a list of public speaking resources. Each chapter comes with a "podium presence tip." Dowis insists that just as you can't become a good writer unless you read books, you can't become a good speaker unless you read and listen to speeches. Therefore, each chapter ends with the text of a speech by a skilled orator, including Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Jesse Jackson and Mario Cuomo. Inspiring as they are, these examples have little obvious connection to the chapters' contents, so you may be tempted to skip them instead of studying them. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to executives and managers whose jobs include representing their companies to the press and the public, and to anyone who wants to be more confident, poised and articulate.

## Take-Aways

- On a list of 14 things Americans fear, public speaking came first, outranking spiders, high places, and even sickness and death.
- The ability to speak in public is not innate. It is a skill you can learn.
- As you practice speech writing and delivery, your other communication skills will improve also.
- Accept invitations to speak only when you are knowledgeable enough about the topic to present information authoritatively and to field questions.
- Speeches must be logically organized, with clear transitions between ideas.
- Always write your speech; never be tempted to speak extemporaneously.
- Find out as much as you can about your audience before you write your speech.
- Use simple, direct language, active verbs, anecdotes and examples.
- To practice your speech, read it silently and then out loud. Tape record it and play it back at least once a day, visualizing

yourself delivering it as you listen.

- If you are nervous, breathe deeply to relax your body, mind and vocal cords.

## Summary

### Do I Have To?

A speech can change the direction of events. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's powerful speeches during WWII contributed to the Allied victory. As John F. Kennedy said, "He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." Even if you are not a world leader, you should learn to speak in public. Other people will gain from your knowledge and experience. You can promote causes you believe in or boost your business. As you prepare, you'll improve your writing and communication skills, as well as your posture, diction and voice modulation. An invitation to speak at a meeting or on a panel is an opportunity, not a calamity. In fact, if you are serious about overcoming fear and improving your skills, seek such invitations and even volunteer to make presentations.

### When You Should Not Make a Speech

Do beware of invitations that you probably should turn down. Only agree to speak about subjects on which you're really an expert. To sound knowledgeable, you must be knowledgeable - and you may need to field questions after your talk. Make sure the people who invited you understand your credentials and experience. Suggest an alternative topic if you don't like theirs. Pick something of more interest to you that is still related to the original subject, and appropriate for the audience and the event.

“Never doubt that you have...the ability to make a good speech, but you must develop that ability.”

If you are invited to join a panel, consider whether you will be able to contribute new, different ideas as one of many speakers. Do you risk simply repeating other people's points? The problem is even worse if you're scheduled late in the line-up, when the audience is tired and restless. Go first if you can. Be sure you will have enough time (and not too much).

### Why Am I Here?

Both you and the event's organizers should know the purpose of your speech. You may want to write a "statement of purpose." Most speeches have one or more of these six intentions: "to entertain," "to inform," "to inspire," "to motivate," "to advocate," and "to convince or persuade." Few speeches have entertainment as their sole purpose, although many speakers use humor and anecdotes to help promote other purposes, such as inspiration or persuasion.

### The Devilish Details

When you accept a speaking invitation, make sure the organizers give you complete, written information about the time and place. Get contact information for the person in charge, in case you have questions or need to make changes. Ask how to pronounce everyone's name. Learn who will be in your audience. Ask how many of what sorts of people you will be addressing. Are they young or old, male or female, professionals or interested laypeople? Learn the mission, history and activities of the business or organization that is hosting the event.

“You cannot separate the speech from the speaker or the delivery from the message.”

When possible, visit the venue in advance. Check the seating configuration, podium placement and acoustics. If you need electronic equipment, such as an overhead projector, determine that the machine is present and functioning. Be sure you know how it works. Bring extra batteries and supplies. When you arrive, ask for a pitcher of water and a glass.

### If You Wing It, Your Speech Won't Fly

Many people profess admiration for speakers who don't use notes. They say speakers who read from scripts sound monotonous and

boring. Making up a speech as you go along is not the cure for monotonous delivery. The cure is to practice until you know your speech well enough so that you can lift your eyes from the page as you give it and make eye contact with members of the audience. Always write out your speech word for word, for these reasons:

- "A well-written speech is a disciplined speech" - It focuses and doesn't ramble.
- "Writing makes you think" - It forces you to be specific. Often, you'll discover new insights and ideas as you write.
- Writing your speech gives it a long life - You can practice it ahead of time, and afterward, you can give copies to your public relations department or the media.

## **Make an Outline**

A speech outline is very useful, but it is only a "road map." As you work on your speech, you'll probably have to modify or reorganize your original plan. During this process, you'll develop your ideas and discover their implications - in other words, you'll be creative. To draft an outline for your speech, follow these seven steps:

1. Research your topic - Note anecdotes and quotes as well as facts.
2. Prepare a statement of purpose - Go back to the six purposes of speechmaking.
3. Define your desired outcome - When your speech is finished, what action do you want the audience members to take or what do you want their emotions to be?
4. Brainstorm your points - List all the points you might make in your speech.
5. Prioritize your list - Select three or four main points. Some of the items on your list will become supporting arguments.
6. Identify your main point - Be able to state your thesis.
7. Organize your points and supporting arguments in order - There's your outline.

“A speech must be organized logically so it is easily understandable on the first pass...A listener can't go back and relisten.”

Of course, the correct order in which to present your ideas is not always obvious. If you are telling a story, chronological order is usually best. Conventional wisdom advises speakers to "tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. Then tell 'em. Then tell 'em what you've just told 'em." That advice is overly simplistic - but you should announce your thesis early in your speech and summarize it at the end. You can organize your speech according to "thought modules" each consisting of a main point plus supporting material such as data, stories or quotes. Many writers collate material in thought modules and then arrange the modules in logical order. Also consider a "cause and effect" approach or a "big bang," where you begin with a surprising idea and then explain it.

## **"Well Begun is Well Done"**

When you start giving your speech, you can be pretty sure you have your audience's attention. This initial "speaker's grace period" is an advantage that slips away quickly, so don't misuse it. Your first few sentences must accomplish many tasks, including:

- "Establish common ground with the audience" - President John F. Kennedy gained the trust of a large audience in Germany's capital by announcing, "Ich bin ein Berliner" ("I am a Berliner").
- "Set the tone" - Often, beginning formally is appropriate: thank the event organizers and point out important people in the audience by name (which you are prepared to pronounce correctly). Offer a bit of humor or a personal story so your listeners relax.
- "Establish the speaker's credibility" - The person who introduces you may already have done this for you.
- "Arouse interest in the subject" - Your audience might already be prepared, due to pre-event publicity and your introduction. If not, you'll have to work harder.
- "Segue smoothly into the topic" - If you tell a story, connect it to your main thesis.

## **Body Language**

"The visual impact of a speech accounts for...55% of the audience's impressions," but don't conclude from this fact that what you say is insignificant. It just means that your physical presence can heighten or undermine the effect of your words. Controlling your physical

communication, such as habitual gestures, is difficult - you may not even be aware of your personal tics. Ask someone who will be candid to watch you in action and give you feedback. Or, better yet, videotape yourself. Using too many gestures will distract your audience. Your posture should be straight. Keep your weight balanced equally on each foot and your arms at your sides, not clasped in front of you or crossed over your chest, which can appear threatening. Don't point, even when calling on audience members during Q and A periods. Never fidget.

## **Strong Language**

"The slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts," George Orwell cautioned in his famous essay, "Politics and the English Language." When you prepare your speech, avoid slovenly language by following these 11 guidelines:

1. "Be yourself" - If you try to use words that don't come naturally to you, you will sound pretentious rather than authoritative.
2. "Talk with, not to or at, the audience" - Use personal pronouns like "me" and "you."
3. "Don't hesitate to use personal references" - Your audience is curious about you.
4. "Use strong, active verbs and vivid nouns" - These are "gut words, because they seem to come from the gut rather than the brain."
5. "Prefer the active to the passive voice" - Ronald Reagan once said, "Mistakes were made," which is quite different from saying, "I made mistakes."
6. "Use specific, concrete language" - Generalizations will dilute your message or even render it incomprehensible. "It was very cold that day" could mean it was 60 degrees Fahrenheit, if you live in Florida, or minus 10 if you live in Minnesota.
7. "Use jargon sparingly, if at all" - If you're speaking to a trade or professional group, specialized language may help you communicate. Otherwise, it will distance you from your audience.
8. "Be aware of word connotations that go beyond their actual meanings" - "Skinny" and "slender" may have similar denotations, or meanings, but they have different connotations, or emotional valences.
9. "Set the right tone for your speech" - Don't condescend or whine.
10. "Get to the point" - Abraham Lincoln's brief, eloquent Gettysburg Address is the classic example.
11. "Follow the rules" - Speaking idiomatically and personally does not mean abandoning correct word usage, pronunciation or sentence structure.

## **Humor Dos and Don'ts**

Humor can help your audience relax, identify with you and feel engaged with your ideas. It can also offend and alienate. The following pointers can make the difference between whether - as comedians say - your jokes "kill" (succeed) or "die" (fail):

- Don't say the "punch line" more than once.
- After you say something funny, don't stand there waiting for your laugh.
- If a joke doesn't work, just keep going.
- "Never ad lib a joke."
- Jokes should be short and simple, and should link directly to your topic.
- You can be a bit "irreverent," but never be mean.
- "Never use ethnic humor...or humor based on religion, gender, physical disability, obesity, appearance, sexual orientation...or other human characteristics."
- Do not use swear words or sexual innuendoes.
- A little humor is good seasoning for a speech, but don't go overboard.

## **Making Your Getaway**

You could just say, "thanks for having me," and leave the stage, but you would be missing a chance to re-emphasize the purpose of your speech. Your closing can be a summation in which you bring your argument full circle, a request for the audience to take action or a restatement of your main point. Use it to inspire, to provoke one more laugh or to allude once more to the occasion or your main point. And then say "thank you," and sit down.

# About the Author

**Richard Dowis** is a former journalist and former vice president of a public relations firm. He is the author of How to Make Your Writing Reader-Friendly and co-author of The Write Way and Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay. He leads business writing seminars.

