

# How to Write a Speech that Keeps Attendees on the Edge of Their Seats

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

Speeches need to have clarity, power and purpose, a ring of personality, and excellent delivery.

**Understand Verbal Communication.** Language that is spoken is quite different from language that is written. It is a lot like conversational speech without the slang. To write a speech you have to have an understanding of the cadence of spoken language as well as the speech patterns of the person who will deliver the speech.

**Know the Purpose of the Speech.** If you are writing remarks for yourself, you know why you have been invited to speak and what you intend to accomplish. If you are writing for someone else, you need to find out the who, what, when, why, and where of the situation. What is the subject of the speech, where and to whom will it be given? Why was the speaker invited to give remarks? What does he or she know or do that is of interest to the audience that will be addressed?

**What Would the Speaker Say?** If you are ghosting the speech for someone, it is best to interview them in advance of writing. This gives you the opportunity to understand the person and what is important to them. You'll get a sense of their background, style, interests, and views. It is important to key in on speech patterns and phrasing so you can replicate them in the speech. Get the speaker to share stories and experiences with you. You may be able to use them in the speech or they may act as a springboard for related topics that make sense. Use what the speaker shares with you and creatively shape the information to capture the audience's interest.

**Do Your Research.** The direction and information given to you by the speaker will suggest logical avenues for research. It is better to gather more than you need so you can be selective when the time comes to write. Make sure you understand all aspects of the topic before proceeding.

**Outline Before Writing.** Creating an outline always make sense before starting to write something of substance. This most definitely applies to speechwriting. You as the writer need to establish a starting point, an ending point, and the path you are going to take to get there. Be sure to include your main ideas with sub-points and information that support it.

**Write with Passion.** From the get-go, it is important for the speaker to establish rapport with the audience. Using human interest stories that tie in with the subject of the speech works well. If the stories are personal anecdotes that spring from the speaker's life experience, all the better. If not, another human interest story told from the speaker's viewpoint works. Human interest stories are better than jokes. Jokes have the unpleasant possibility of backfiring when the audience does not respond as anticipated.

Rely on your outline to prepare cogent remarks that tell the audience what the speaker plans to say, followed by the telling of those items, followed by what the speaker did say. It all sounds

very redundant, doesn't it? Well, it is. The speaker must creatively repeat points to the audience so that some of what is shared stays with listeners. It is a fact that most of what speakers say is forgotten within an hour.

Make sure to follow your outline. Number your points if you think having guideposts will help maintain the audience's attention. Make sure you don't have more than five main points. You will lose your listeners if you do.

The final comments should give the speaker an opportunity to retell the points that were made during the body of the speech. You may want to conclude with another anecdote that ties into the first one, bring the speech full circle to where it began.

**Edit Until It Feels Right.** If you have not had significant speechwriting experience, you will find your speech needs a lot of editing. Make sure the speech flows properly, is well paced, and resembles conversation. Use mostly short sentences but vary the pace with longer ones from time to time. Occasionally use sentence fragments.

Active verbs are more colorful but you may want to slip a passive one in now and then. Vary your sentence structure, using questions and commands if they fit. Use language that is vivid and paints a picture in the minds of those who are listening. A short quote is OK but don't bore your audience with lots of them. They should be there for style and punch.

Speechwriting is an art all its own. If it's your first time out of the gate, don't expect to get it all right. Listen to your speaker. If he wants changes made, make them. He knows himself, what he wants to say, and how he wants to say it best. If the speech is for you, try reading it to a friend or relative and use their feedback to fine tune.

*Carol Dunitz, Ph.D. is president of The Last Word LLC, a communication and creative services company. She is a professional speaker and author of 'Louder Than Thunder,' a parable about listening and interpersonal communication. Dunitz is the playwright, lyricist and composer of 'Bernhardt on Broadway,' a musical about Sarah Bernhardt. She can be reached at 312.523.4774, [cdunitz@lastword.com](mailto:cdunitz@lastword.com) or [www.DrCarolDunitz.com](http://www.DrCarolDunitz.com).*