WORD COUNT WRITERS TALK ABOUT WRITING

Seven Ways to Write a Better Speech

April 8, 2009
By Daphne Gray-Grant

I don't pretend to be a great public speaker; I think I had more nerve as a 14-year-old debater than I have now! But I was keenly motivated by the gleam of trophies in high school and I learned the tricks it takes to do reasonably well at speaking.

In later years, I also wrote speeches for industry leaders and CEOs. So when a friend emailed to request advice on how to write speeches, I decided to summarize the seven things I know.

1) Learn your time limit and calculate your word count. The average person speaks at somewhere between 125 and 150 words per minute. It's always better to speak more slowly than quickly. Thus, if you're speaking for 20 minutes, you want a total word count of about 2,500 words. Be careful! I once got the math wrong and saddled a good friend with a 48-minute speech when he was trying for 30!

2) If you have to speak for more than 30 minutes, be *certain* to work in some sort of interactive component. Invite questions or give the audience tasks to do. The TV and the Internet have ruined our ability to sit quietly and listen to a talking head for very long.

3) Divide the speech into five parts: an introduction, point 1, point 2, point 3 and a conclusion. Or, in other words, tell people what you're *going* to tell them, tell them *your points* and then wrap up by telling them *what you just said.* This format is adaptable to a speech of just about any length but I'd divide a 20-minute speech as follows:

> Introduction: 2 minutes (250 words)
> Point 1: 5 minutes (625 words)
> Point 2: 5 minutes (625 words)
> Point 3: 5 minutes (625 words)
> Conclusion: 3 minutes (375 words)

If you're thin on ideas for the three points, consider using a mindmap to help you. (Anyone who subscribes to my free newsletter receives an ebook on mindmapping at no charge.)

4) Tell stories or give examples. If you have a story to illustrate each of your three points, so much the better. Stories are "sticky" — that is, people remember them. Unless you're a scientist, always prefer sticky stories to statistics.

5) Employ humor — but use it carefully and build it into the subject of your speech. I hate opening jokes that are unrelated to the actual speech topic — they feel so fake and tacked on. You want humor to be organic — that is, related to the topic you're covering. Also be sure to avoid any comments that could be considered even

remotely vulgar, or sexist, racist, ageist, etc. But if you're one of those people who can't quite pull off a joke, don't try. No humor is better than lame humor or bad delivery.

6) Read the speech aloud. Make sure the language is easy to say — even if you're writing the speech for someone else. Say it out loud many times, so you can check to ensure there are no stumbling blocks. For example, the line "a lower-cost alternative to traditional plans" is harder to say than it looks (try it!). Change that kind of language, fast.

7) Be yourself. Barack Obama and Winston Churchill are/were both excellent speakers. They're also totally different. While you can gain pointers from observing great speakers, you need to be true to yourself. Don't try to be someone you're not! And if you are writing a speech for someone else, it's important you spend significant time interviewing them and learning *their* speech patterns — as well as their stories. Are there any expressions that they use regularly? Can you work them into the speech?

Finally, as a kind of a P.S., let me say that I *never* use PowerPoint in my speeches or presentations. I know not everyone agrees with this philosophy — but most will concur that if you use PowerPoint you need to be skilled and practiced with it. It's not a good tool for beginners.

Article Topics:

Writing, How to write

Click here to read more articles from Word Count.

A former daily newspaper editor, Daphne Gray-Grant is a writing and editing coach and the author of 8� Steps to Writing Faster, Better. She offers a free weekly newsletter on her website Publication Coach.

Click here to read more articles by Daphne Gray-Grant.