

# 11 Tips for Giving a Great Speech



Knowing how to give a good speech is a skill that's valuable in countless different circumstances.

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Chances are you'll be asked to give speeches or presentations in classes at school. If you get involved in volunteer groups, brief speeches to open events or thank participants are a must. Then there are the speeches at events such as weddings, as well as speeches that you might have to give in the workplace. That amounts to the average person being required to give quite a lot of speeches, even if they don't get involved in an area such as politics where the ability to give a good speech becomes even more important.

You might also have suffered through quite a number of bad speeches from other people – whether that's at family events where the microphone squeaks the whole way through or a school presentation where the headteacher can't quite make the jokes work. If you don't want to inflict the same sort of experience on others, here are our top tips for giving a great speech.

## **1. Practise your microphone technique**

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Correct spacing is key – you want to be heard but don't want to end up deafening your audience!

Nothing ruins a speech more than bad microphone technique. You can be Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King and Barack Obama all wrapped up in one improbable but brilliant speech-maker, but it counts for nothing if all the audience can pay attention to is the snuffly sounds of your breathing, amplified painfully by the fact that you are standing too close to the microphone. Similarly, if you're standing too far away from the microphone and your audience can't hear you, they'll probably be generous and strain their hearing for about thirty seconds, then give up on trying to make out what you're saying.

So find a microphone and a critical friend (ideally, in the setting where you'll actually be giving the speech) and get the friend to tell you whether you're standing too close, too far away, and hopefully pointing out anything else that comes across as weird while they're at it. For instance, if you're inclined to take the microphone out of its stand and wander across the stage with it, you will come across like a stand-up comedian – so only do this if it's an impression you're happy to give.

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## 2. Keep it short



Be strict with yourself when it comes to timing.

Particularly at something like a party or a wedding, no one will be unhappy if your speech runs a little short; it'll just give them more time to investigate the canapés. If you are giving a speech for a class in school, and it'll be assessed, you need to prioritise keeping it within the required time limits. But even under these circumstances, if you've been tasked – say – with giving a 10-15 minute speech, it's usually better to come in nearer the 10 than the 15 minute mark. Put simply, even if your speech is terrible, your audience can probably tolerate it for 10 minutes. Much longer, and they'll be struggling.

This shouldn't limit what you can cover; in the film *Up*, the whole of Carl and Ellie's heartbreaking love story is told in under 12 minutes. Do you really need longer to make your points? Achieve brevity by writing out the speech you would give if you had all the time in the world, and then cut anything that seems extraneous or boring.

### 3. Consider what your audience wants to hear

If you are giving a speech in class because it's your assignment, what your audience wants to hear is likely to be “the bell ringing for lunch”; you can't help them there. But under other circumstances, consider what your audience wants to hear and what you want to say, and strive for there to be as much overlap as possible.

In the context of a political speech, for instance, what you want to say might be why your party should receive votes; what your audience wants to hear is what your party would do for them, if they won power. Hopefully it should be possible to write a speech that meets both sets of needs, rather than focusing solely on whatever it is that you want to say and leaving your audience disappointed.

### 4. Pick a theme and stick to it



Beware: digressions ahead.

Here's a goal for giving a speech: someone sitting near the back, who's messing around on their phone for at least two-thirds of it and focusing mainly on how long it will be until lunch, should nonetheless be able to give a reasonably accurate answer to the question, "what was it about?" If you're supposed to be giving a speech in defence of the nuclear deterrent, for example, both the topic and your position on it should be clearly identifiable.

This means – to stick with the nuclear deterrent example – not talking for a while about jobs, and then the wider economy, and then the North-South divide, and then Scottish independence, and then Ukraine with a brief digression into South Ossetia before rounding off by squeaking out "and that's why we should renew Trident!" seconds before you run out of time – no matter how relevant that cornucopia of topics may feel (and they are all relevant, albeit tenuously). It means that even if you do have to take a while to explain a more complex idea, you need to be concise, and bring it back to your theme as quickly as you can.

## 5. Speak slowly

Most people speak more quickly than they realise when they're on stage, especially if they're nervous. But no one will be able to follow your speech if you're jabbering it out. Thankfully, this one is easy to fix with a little effort and practise. First of all, figure out how quickly you're actually speaking: do a word count for your speech and then time yourself saying it. A fast speaker will speak at maybe 160 words per minute, a slow speaker at 100 wpm and an average speaker at 130 wpm.

For a formal speech, you want to be speaking on the slow side. While this will vary by culture and environment, 120 wpm is a reasonable target to aim for; slow enough that everyone should be able to understand you, and fast enough that you hopefully won't be sending them to sleep.

## 6. Tell a couple of jokes

A touch of humour won't go amiss, even if you're not a natural comedian.

This is a tricky tip because there are lots of pitfalls in the world of telling jokes. For instance, there's the temptation to include an in-joke that three of your friends will understand and find hilarious, that is utterly baffling to everyone else in the room. Avoid this – if you include any jokes, witty references or anything along those lines, make sure they are accessible to everyone present.

All the same, if you can manage a joke or two, it can be a useful way to break up a speech and

retain the audience's interest. A little self-deprecation (not too much!) or the use of classic joke formats such as “the scene was chaotic; it looked as if a bomb had hit and we didn't know where to start on repairs – but that's enough about the hen party...” work nicely even if you're not very confident. Don't turn it into a stand-up comedy sketch if you're not a comedian, don't wait for ages for laughter that's not showing up, and don't make jokes at the expense of anyone who you don't know for sure can take it.

## **7. Don't be afraid to repeat yourself if you need to**

If you follow US or UK politics at all, you've probably heard some of these phrases recently: take back control, make America great again, long-term economic plan, son of a bus driver. Three of these have already led the party or people they're associated with to electoral victory; the fourth remains to be seen. To take the 'son of a bus driver' as an example, this refers to Sadiq Khan, now Mayor of London. There can be hardly anyone in London who doesn't know what their Mayor's dad did for a living. Meanwhile, many of them probably can't remember his rival Zac Goldsmith's name, let alone anything he said during the campaign.

The point is that repetition works. In pursuit of point 4, if you want people to remember your key theme, you're going to have to say it more than once. Don't assume that everyone will have paid attention to everything you've said, unless you're in a classroom setting where they'll get told off if they don't.

## **8. Only use the visual aids you need**

Scratch the notes and speak directly to your audience.

This tip applies to two things: PowerPoints and notes. If you can do without either (and your assignment allows it), then do. Every time you're glancing over your notes or up at the screen, fiddling with the laptop to get the slide to move on, fighting with a video that isn't working or struggling to read your own handwriting, is time that you're not spending engaging with your audience. A well-written, clear speech delivered without notes is always going to be better than someone awkwardly reading aloud the bullet points on their PowerPoint slides.

If you must do a presentation – for instance, because there are photos that need to be included – have as little text on it as possible, preferably none. That way, if there are people at the back who can't really see the screen through the sea of heads in front of them, they'll still be able to follow what you're saying.

## 9. Get a friend to check for awkward mannerisms

Mannerisms that are entirely fine in normal life become awkward and strange when you're speaking in public. Perhaps you're inclined to fiddle with your hair or your cuffs, you rock back and forth on the balls of your feet, or you have a habit of reaching your hand to your cheek when you're talking. No one would notice in everyday conversation, but when you're on a stage, it'll become all they'll see.

Some of this is easily avoidable – for instance, if you have long hair that you're inclined to twirl or otherwise fiddle with, tie it up. For other mannerisms, get the critical friend who helped you sort out your microphone technique to tell you what they are, and do your best to suppress the more annoying ones.

## 10. Look around the room

Overly intense eye-contact can easily feel intimidating.

Talking about eye contact usually has the effect of making normal eye contact a lot harder, and so does giving a speech. All of a sudden, you're up on stage, and you have no idea what a normal way to look at a group of people is. Some speakers deal with this by picking a point in the middle distance and speaking to it; others by picking a particular person near to the back and addressing their entire speech at them. This is obviously no fun for that person, who probably spends the whole thing feeling extremely uncomfortable, but it's not too weird for everyone else. Better still, though, if you can manage it, is to look slowly and steadily around the room, trying to make eye contact with a decent range of people, before returning to the middle distance for a while, rinse and repeat. This needs to be slow and steady, or you give the impression that you've just smelled smoke and are casting about for a fire exit before the stampede beings.

## 11. Don't be scared of a good reaction

If your speech is genuinely engaging, funny, inspiring or any of the other things you might hope it would be, your audience will react to it. There might be laughter, or applause, or even a bit of cheering depending on the setting. This can be daunting because when you're practising your speech in front of your bedroom mirror, there's no way to prepare for it. And it's where even the best speakers can go wrong, by launching straight into what they were going to say next without waiting for the laughter or applause to stop, or by looking painfully awkward while it's going on.