



Building a Speech



“A lot of years have passed since 1832 and during that time it would have been greatly unusual for any political party to ask Barbara Jordan to deliver a keynote address. I feel that, notwithstanding the past, my presence here is one additional piece of evidence that the American dream need not forever be deferred. Now that I have this grand distinction, what in the world am I to say?”

First lines of a speech by Barbara Jordan
Democratic National Convention, July 12, 1976

- **Use a “soft” opening.**

The opening does one of three similar things:

- Makes people feel good.
- Establishes a bond.
- Builds rapport.

- **Have clear major ideas supported by evidence.**

No more than three major points, each backed up by evidence, facts, examples, etc. Ask yourself, if people remember only three things I say, what should those be?

“After you leave the United States, Soviet Russia, Great Britain, West Germany, France, and I could name the others, the Negro collectively is richer than most nations of the world. We have an annual income of more than thirty billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States, and more than the national budget of Canada. Did you know that? That’s power right there, if we know how to pool it.”

Martin Luther King Jr.
Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968

“I know not what course others may take. But as for me, give me liberty or give me death.”

Closing lines of a speech by Patrick Henry
March 23, 1775

- **Write a concise and definitive ending.**

The close is everything you say after you support your last major point. It should be short — 30 seconds to a minute — and have a smooth rhythm.



Write Like You Talk



Writing a speech is not like writing a paper for English class. Good speeches are conversations with your audience.

- **Use simple words.**

“Find out” is better than “ascertain”. “On” is better than “upon”. “Use” is better than “utilize”. “People” is better than “persons” or “individuals”. And “for” is not a substitute for “because”. (“I want to ascertain how to utilize the microwave for I am hungry.”)

- **Use active voice and as few words as possible.**

Instead of “The construction of the new gymnasium at Family Village will greatly enhance the recreational opportunities for the children of this community.”... Use “The kids at Family Village are going to love this gym.”

- **Avoid jargon.**

Don’t use yours but do learn and use your audience’s jargon; it makes you one of the gang and builds rapport.

- **Use contractions.**

People use them when they talk. Your speech will be stilted and overly formal without them.

- **Limit use of the word “very”.**

If you need it to amplify an adjective, then you probably need a better adjective.

“Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world’s estimation.”

Susan B. Anthony



Write Like You Talk, *continued*

- **Pay attention to non-alienating words.**

Be sensitive to gender-specific and ethnically offensive words. Alternate genders in examples – use “she” to refer generically to a CEO or company employee in one reference, “he” the next. Be aware, but don’t overdo political correctness.

- **Don’t start sentences with “___ing.”**

It prompts passive writing. Instead of “Providing affordable housing is a goal of the YWCA.”... say “We strive to provide affordable housing.”

- **Use fragments to add impact.**

Powerful phrases used without a formal subject/verb sentence structure can add drama to speeches.

- **Clichés: Avoid them like the plague.**

- **Numbers can be numbing.**

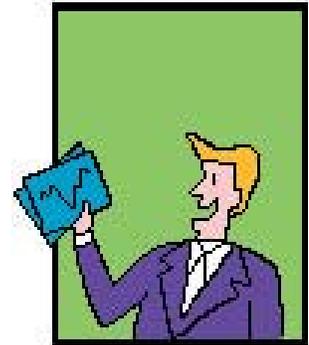
Instead of “Because of I-695, King County cut funds to our program by \$64,212.”... say “Because of I-695, King County cut funds by more than \$64,000.”

- **Don’t say, “To be honest.”**

Or, “Let me be frank” or “Sincerely” or “To tell the truth”. These statements imply everything else you’ve said is a lie.

- **Strive for good rhythm.**

A good rule throughout speech. Example: John F. Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”





Rhetorical Devices



Add spice to your presentation with the use of repetition, alliteration and other rhetorical devices.

■ Alliteration

Works well at the beginning of short, punchy sentences and in three's.

Speechwriting Tip

The Internet and emails are a great resource for speeches. File those funny, quirky and interesting tidbits you get from friends via email into a special “speech material” folder. You’ll be surprised how handy they are for adding humor or themes to a speech.



■ “Rule of Threes”

Short examples and emphasized words work well when grouped by three: “We need strength, courage and conviction.” Typically, your strongest word is the last word, second strongest is the first, least strongest is the middle.

■ Themes

Carrying one theme or reference point throughout a speech helps people follow along and adds interest. For example, a speech on homelessness might begin by telling a story of a woman named Jane, referring to her plight throughout the speech to emphasize neglect of the issue by society, government, etc. You might close the speech by referring to solving the problems faced “by Jane and the thousands of her brothers and sisters on the streets in America today.”

■ Repetition

Repeating a line throughout the speech helps drive home a point. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech used that sentence frequently to help make it one of the best and most often quoted speeches of the millennium.