
Moving the Mind and the Emotions:

10 Secrets to Delivering an Effective Speech

“If you want men to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

The Wisdom of the Sands
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

These words from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a pioneering air mail pilot and the author of “The Little Prince,” are a twist-and-a-half on the old saying: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” Rarely would we use either Saint-Exupéry’s quote or the old saying in a speech, the first because so few speakers could deliver it credibly; the second, because it is frail with age (*See box on using Saint-Exupéry’s words.*) But both speak to the core of our art and craft: moving hearts and souls and minds. We move people when we make them feel a pressing need for action—emotionally and intellectually; or to reach out to something beyond themselves. If moving them to “yearn for the vast and endless sea” seems too distant for either them or us, we will move them to something more immediate, say, crossing the metaphorical river raging between them and what they want—or preventing them from escaping the rapidly approaching trouble at their backs.

Our aim is clear: We write, the speaker speaks, listeners act. Or at least they gain greater insight into an issue, or feel a common purpose with others or comfort in a time of crisis. All from our writing words for other people to say. Here in a nutshell—10 nutshells—are steps to writing words that will allow our speakers to move their listeners the way they want to.

1. Know the audience to connect with the audience. A successful speaker connects with an audience emotionally and intellectually—right away. In fact, this connection is more important than polished speaking technique. Messages ride this connection, which begins with the credibility and conviction the speaker brings to the event. Building on these requires knowing the audience in some detail. Knowing it in general is not enough. Every audience is unique in its mix of individuals and organizations, in its location, in events happening locally, on scores of other things. Touching on several of its unique characteristics, in the opening and in other places through the speech, is an effective way to strengthen the speaker’s connection with the audience. Another is to ...

2. Help the speaker to be authentic. People are increasingly suspicious of political and corporate “slick,” the image crafted and polished by a herd of handlers. They want authenticity, someone who might stumble on a word now and then, but who is genuine. Speechwriters should teach speakers, especially inexperienced ones, how to be authentic. This is not the “faking sincerity” of Hollywood lore. Instead, it is teaching a speaker to draw more widely and deeply on her own thoughts and beliefs; on her own experiences, whether from childhood or recent incidents in day-to-day work. A corporate executive might refer to a recent conversation with a customer or an employee; a university president, with a student or alum. On the ride in from the airport, speakers should ask their hosts to point out things they should be aware of, a new civic center or museum, a landmark, anything the speaker could use to add a sense of freshness to remarks. Likewise, refer to a story of interest in the morning news. An audience is impressed when a speaker reinforces a point by saying: “As you might have seen on the front-page of *The Wall Street Journal* this morning, China is going to ...” Or anything of that stripe from another paper, maybe the local one, or a morning TV show.

3. Get a focus, take a stand, sharpen the focus. Audiences are hungry for substance. They dislike the obviously safe statement that says nothing except that handlers—and the lawyers—are in charge. They want a speaker to say something, preferably something that provides new insights or moves beyond generalities to suggest specific action. Take a stand, then get a focus: Before you start writing, ask the speaker and others in the process what two sentences they would most like to see on the front page of the publication most important to your organization. This usually results in a jumble of ideas you will distill into the seed of a message. The message will become sharper as you work with others in the back-and-forth process of putting a speech together. Again, the general will not do: Forget anything as bland as “We need to improve education,” and write something more along the lines of, “Given the skills necessary for someone without a four-year college degree to get a higher-paying job, we need to improve advanced math and science education in K-12.” The first is yet another general call for action among the scores since the “Rising Tide of Mediocrity” report was released in 1980; the second suggests a range of specific things that can be done, from training more math and science teachers, to making more parents and school board members aware of the growing number of jobs that do not require a four-year degree but do require training in advanced algebra and trigonometry and even basic calculus. Likewise for any statement that smacks of “We are customer-focused” or “our employees are our most valuable asset.” Be specific. Be concrete.

4. Write for listeners, not readers. Write for the ear, conversationally. Keep speaker and listener in mind every word of the way. Our aim is to make it easier for the speaker to deliver the words, easier for listeners to follow the narrative, grasp the main points and remember them. Sound by itself matters. Pay special attention to the length and structure of sentences, which create their own sound; vary these according to message and emotion. Create a pleasing rhythm; use repetition to reinforce the message. Coach your speaker in the tools of sound—volume of voice, speeding up or slowing down the pace, drawing out words and phrases for effect, or running them together. (Study the best words that are written to be spoken aloud to an audience, great speeches along with poetry and great monologues and soliloquies from drama. Dissect everything about them to learn how sentences are put together so the ear can grasp them, how they create varying sounds that keep the audience listening, how they match emotion and the like.)

5. Open clearly and with purpose. Be straightforward. Start with a clear declarative sentence. If a speaker ad-libs the first minute or so of a speech, make sure they do so with energy. Lethargy early in a speech is deadly, spurring listeners to reach for their Blackberries. Urge the speaker to avoid a long and looping sentence that winds and wends its way slowly toward a statement of some sort, not quite getting there or anywhere else for that matter and whose unspoken message communicates uncertainty of purpose and direction. The opening sentence does not have to be profound, just clear and purposeful. A series of such sentences, combined with the speaker’s manner, should communicate confidence, friendliness, knowledge and purpose—all important for connecting with the audience. Tell an illustrative story, offer an image or analogy or a phrase that carries the message. Speak to the unique characteristics of the audience. Help the speaker to be authentic.

6. Keep the narrative moving. Readers like “page turners,” listeners like speeches that keep them listening. Tell a story that hooks them and carries the message. Stick to the theme. Write tight, with clarity. Be ruthless in cutting needless words, sentences and paragraphs that don’t buy something—that is, that fail to strengthen the speaker’s connection with the audience, or advance the message, or quicken their interest. Make every element count. Use “telling detail,” a quick number or fact that strikes the audience, sticks with them, and carries them to the next element of the argument. Make sure any background is absolutely necessary. Our aim should be for our speaker to say more in 15 minutes than others say in 20 or 25.

7. Reinforce the message. Repeat a key phrase several times. Or refer to the story or quote you might have used in the opening. On occasion, especially in a keynote, a line or phrase can be made into a refrain. In an essay, such repetition might be bothersome. But we’re not writing an essay; we’re writing words to be spoken aloud. We’re writing for listeners, not readers. We need to make it easier for them to get the message and remember it.

8. Write with an eye to other communications. You started with a two-sentence summary of your message, and sharpened it as you polished the speech. Now, insert that summary sentence in the speech—maybe more

than once; also, make sure there is a sound bite that captures each point. (A media savvy executive will always want to know: “What is the headline? How will the evening news play it? Likewise, a savvy speechwriter will include answers to those questions in the cover memo with the speech.) Besides increasing the chances the media will quote what you want them to quote, these sound bites give your organization the tight points it will need for internal publications and videos. We’ve all seen plenty of internal videos weakened because an executive made a brilliant four-minute explanation of something but did not capture it in a 25-second sound bite.

9. In the closing, move their hearts. Recall Saint-Exupéry’s words above. Make them yearn for something beyond themselves. You’ve moved their minds; you’ve built a case on reason that has them in your camp. Reinforce that reason. Refer again to the story or image or quote from the opening. And then move their hearts. Tug on their emotions. Tell them what the issue means to them, to their families, to their community, their organization. Tell them what they mean to each other. Call them to a larger purpose, one shared with other people and organizations. If the occasion doesn’t call for moving them to “yearn for the vast and endless sea,” at least move them “... to gather wood, divide the work and give orders” and let them see how this fits into the bigger picture.

10. Prepare a full text. Do this even if the speaker works from talking points or an outline. Preparing a full text sets a writer’s creative juices flowing more freely. We gain new insights into evolving issues, and come up with new ways to say things. In other words, a full text will make the speech more effective. The full text should be the best statement the organization can make on any given topic or issue; it should drive messaging throughout the organization. Additionally, a full text is a powerful way of explaining complex issues to key policy makers and communicators elsewhere: city and county officials, legislative and regulatory staffs, and key reporters, editors and news directors. Ultimately, these can be your most important audience—give them the best statement possible, not a set of talking points, not an outline, a full text, one put together by the back-and-forth between a speechwriter, the speaker and the subject-matter experts.

Quoting Saint-Exupéry

Only a select group of speakers could use the Saint-Exupéry quote above credibly. For many it would sound out of character or pretentious, just the kind of thing a speechwriter would dig up. But a speaker could use the quote credibly—while also adding a good story—by introducing it this way:

“As we look at leadership—inspirational leadership—I turn to what at first will seem an unlikely source: French author Antoine Saint-Exupéry.

“He is best-known for writing *The Little Prince*, one of the best-sellers of all time.

“But Saint-Exupéry was also a pilot; he knew danger and the hearts of men.

“In the ‘20s, he flew mail through the high mountain passes between Buenos Aires to Patagonia. In those days, of course, planes didn’t have electronics. He survived several crashes.

But years later, in 1944, while on a secret mission for the allies, he didn’t make it. He died when his P38 fighter crashed into the Mediterranean. His plane was not found—not then.

But in 2004, divers confirmed that a P38 found on the sea floor a few years was his. Suddenly, Saint-Exupéry's story was everywhere.

Many of you, I am sure, saw it or read about yourselves.

He was a fascinating man—a courageous man, who knew the human heart, how to inspire people.

And that bring us back to leadership—inspirational leadership.

He knew about moving hearts and minds and souls to larger purpose.

In his memoir, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, he wrote:

“If you want men to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

This story would not only make the quote credible, but would put a new face on a speech about leadership, all in 225 words—less than 2 minutes at 125 words a minute.

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