

Special Occasion Speaking



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Your public-speaking experience will include informative and persuasive presentations. Often, however, you will be in situations that invite a somewhat different approach to public communication. Significant events in people's lives call for public recognition. From birth announcements to eulogies, the rituals of life involve the ritual of speech making. Consider the following situations and the role a public presentation would play:

- You have just received an award and are asked to “say a few words.”
- Your best friend is getting married. At the reception, you are responsible for proposing a toast to the newlyweds.
- A local civic organization invites you to give a speech at their annual banquet.
- Your college roommate has just been elected class president. The campaign manager asks if you would be willing to introduce your friend, who will then make her victory speech.
- Your favorite uncle has just died. The family asks you to deliver a memorial speech at the funeral.

These examples represent just a few of the many special occasions where public speaking is expected.

Special Occasion Speaking: An Overview



Special occasion speeches—or ceremonial speeches—differ from informative and persuasive speeches. Unlike informative presentations, ceremonial addresses do not offer large doses of new knowledge or present detailed instructions. Unlike persuasive presentations, special occasion speeches do not generally deal with controversial issues or attempt to change the way audiences think or act. In general, ceremonial presentations avoid controversy and reaffirm the audience's beliefs. Figure 16.1 outlines the key characteristics of informative, persuasive, and special occasion speaking.

Organization of Special Occasion Speeches

Special occasion addresses, like informative and persuasive speeches, are organized with an introduction, body, and conclusion. Let's look at the introduction first. No matter whether you start your speech with a compelling story, a memorable quote, or a startling fact, you should include something in your introduction that evokes the common values or feelings that have brought your audience together.¹ For example, Barbara Jordan, who delivered the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention, began her talk by pointing out how the participants were continuing a 144-year-old tradition. Also, as the first African-American woman ever to deliver the address, she acknowledged the party's role in making this part of the American Dream

Figure 16.1
Objectives of
Informative, Persuasive,
and Special Occasion
Speaking

	Informative	Persuasive	Special Occasion
Goal	Share knowledge: instruct, demonstrate	Influence belief or action: gain compliance, alter behavior	Entertain and reinforce: strengthen bonds among audience members
Sample Topic	To explain the process of public speaking	To convince listeners that they should take a course in public speaking	To congratulate students in a public-speaking class after their first speech

come true for her. After referring to the history of Democratic nominating conventions, she said, “And our meeting this week is a continuation of that tradition . . . but tonight here I am. And I feel that notwithstanding the past my presence here is one additional bit of evidence that the American Dream need not forever be deferred.”²

Depending on your audience and the occasion, you may need to establish your credibility in the introduction as well. This is especially important if you are unknown to the audience or if your expertise on the topic is unknown. And, in most special occasion speeches, you should clearly state the purpose of your remarks and preview your main points. Although in some speeches to commemorate, it may be more appropriate to state the purpose only. For example, in a brief toast, tribute, or eulogy, no preview is necessary.

In the body of a special occasion speech, you will want to concentrate especially on making your main points clear and on supporting them with a variety of entertaining and even inspiring materials. Review Chapter 7 for a summary of the various types of supporting materials.

The conclusion of special occasion speeches refocuses audience interest not simply on the presentation but on who the listeners are and what they stand for. The speech gives audience members an opportunity to strengthen their sense of identity and purpose.

Since visual aids can capture audience attention rapidly and effectively, they can be especially useful in special occasion speeches. During his final State of the Union address, Ronald Reagan complained about the unnecessary complexity of congressional regulations. Instead of just talking about wasteful paperwork, Reagan placed near the podium the bound volumes of the several-thousand-page-long federal budget, which weighed in at more than 20 pounds. That gesture demonstrated more clearly than any words just how much paperwork Congress was generating.

You can use visual aids to your advantage during a special occasion speech. If you are introducing a well-known writer, you might display a stack of his books to show how productive his career has been. If you are presenting an award, you could show a

chart that lists the criteria for the award and then match the recipient's accomplishments to the criteria. Keep alert to the opportunities for incorporating visual aids into special occasion speeches, especially when you want to offer audience members a concrete reminder of what they should recall from the speech.

Purposes of Special Occasion Speaking

Special occasion speaking already was well established in Greece by the fifth century B.C. In the fourth century B.C., Aristotle recognized ceremonial speeches as a class of oratory known as *epideictic* (sometimes called *epidictic*), which he defined as speeches of praise or blame.³ These speeches would reinforce the values of the community by praising virtue and condemning vice.⁴

Today, the opportunities for ceremonial speeches abound. These presentations perform an important function because they are designed to strengthen the listeners' commitment to values they hold dear.⁵ Thus, a speaker at a special occasion serves as far more than a mere ornament. Although there are many types of special occasion speeches, the following are the most common: speeches of introduction, presentations of awards, acceptance speeches, commemorative speeches (including tributes, toasts, and eulogies), and after-dinner speeches (including speeches given at graduations, conventions, meetings, and luncheons).

Speeches of Introduction



The speech of introduction is one of the most common types of ceremonial oratory. The introductory speech simply prepares the audience for the featured speaker(s). Although speeches of introduction tend to be short, often five minutes or less, they must accomplish a lot. An effective speech of introduction should do the following:

- Tell the listeners enough about the featured speaker that they will understand why that person has been selected to speak.
- Encourage the audience to listen.
- Generate interest in the upcoming presentation.
- Welcome and encourage the featured speaker.⁶

Introductory speeches might seem simple: you just get up and tell the audience who will speak and what the topic will be. However, there is much more to a good speech of introduction. The introduction of a speaker prepares the audience to listen to that person. By giving listeners a basic idea of what to expect, you enable them to adapt better to the speaker and topic. An introduction also allows you to express appreciation to the speaker. If you are introducing a speaker, you might note why the topic is particularly relevant to some recent events in the community. This official recognition becomes especially important when you are representing the group that sponsored the speaker's appearance. When a speaker is being introduced, that per-

son's reputation and credibility temporarily lie in the hands of whoever gives the introduction.⁷

To avoid the embarrassment of presenting inaccurate information, verify all facts about the speaker you will introduce. Whenever possible, get biographical information directly from the speaker.⁸ This is the only way you can be certain that your information is accurate. Of course, if the person is well known, you may be able to find additional information in *Who's Who*, the *Dictionary of American Biography*, or other biographical references. You may also want to interview some of the speaker's friends or professional associates—a good source for personal anecdotes that will help reveal the speaker as an individual. Remember, however, to review your introduction with the featured speaker to ensure accuracy and reduce the risk of saying something inappropriate.⁹ Imagine revealing information you thought was interesting, only to have the speaker become angry or embarrassed that you included some facts that were not supposed to be discussed publicly.

Remember that speeches of introduction are *short*. Ordinarily, such a speech should last only a small fraction of the time scheduled for the featured speech. Exactly how long should your introductory speech be? Rarely does an introductory speech last more than a few minutes. For example, if you are going to introduce a classmate who is delivering a seven-minute speech, your introduction should take no more than one to two minutes.

Since speeches of introduction are so common and their use is so specific, speakers can fall into the trap of using platitudes. Any speech genre that is well established invites the use of stock phrases that can instantly make a presentation seem trite. At best, such remarks will tell the audience that your presentation lacks originality. A speech of introduction filled with platitudes also sends a clear message that you did not gather specific information about the speaker. Figure 16.2 lists some stock phrases to avoid when making a speech of introduction.

Also, before your speech, make absolutely sure you know how to pronounce the speaker's name. Even a slight mispronunciation can be embarrassing for you and disconcerting to the speaker. One of the worst garbling of a speaker's name happened at a banquet honoring the renowned Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko. The introducer didn't make just a little slip. He mangled the Russian's name so grievously that the poet himself yelled out the correct pronunciation. The introduction ended with the unnerved introducer saying: "I present . . ." He paused, looked at his notes, gave a puzzled frown, totally mispronounced Yevtushenko's name again, and sat down. Before they applauded, most of the audience shouted in unison the correct pronunciation. The lesson is, whatever it takes, make sure you pronounce the speaker's name correctly.

Correctness extends to the title a speaker wants you to use.¹² This point is very important because social roles and especially gender roles are changing rapidly. For example, don't assume that just because a speaker holds a Ph.D. she wants to be called "Dr." Some women prefer to be called "Ms.," others prefer their professional titles, and still others avoid all titles. Many political and religious offices carry with them titles that are part of professional etiquette. For example, judges have the title "The Honorable" before their name. Government officials have other titles appropriate to their offices (such as "Supervisor" and "Congresswoman"). The proper form of address is a combination of professional etiquette and the individual's preference. In-

1. *"Here is someone who needs no introduction . . ."* If so, then you never should have begun your speech. The audience probably will think, "Needs no introduction? Then sit down and keep quiet."
2. *"We are truly honored to have with us today . . ."* This comment is too vague to have value. You would do better to explain briefly why the speaker's presence is an honor.
3. *"Without further ado . . ."* You have just trivialized your own remarks, treating them as "flurry, confusion, upset, excitement, hubbub, noise, turmoil."¹¹ The preface "without further" labels your speech inconsequential.
4. *"It is indeed a high privilege . . ."* This is another empty phrase that should be replaced with specifics.
5. *"On this most memorable occasion . . ."* You cannot judge now how memorable this event will be in the future. I have heard this phrase used to describe many decidedly forgettable events. I would list them, but I can't recall what they were.
6. *"We have none other than . . ."* This comment is at best redundant. It sounds as if you weren't sure whether the speaker was an impostor, and you just wanted to make sure the audience recognized him or her.

Figure 16.2
Stock Phrases to
Avoid in Introductory
Speeches¹⁰

stead of relying on generalizations about what "that sort" of speaker might prefer, confirm the appropriate form of address with the speaker directly.

Exactly what should your speech of introduction include? Your speech should do the following:

- State who you are if the audience does not know already.
- Highlight the speaker's name. In most cases, you should mention the speaker's name early in your speech and again as the last thing you say so that the audience will remember it.
- Recognize the reason for the occasion. Why is this speaker here now?
- Express appreciation to the speaker.
- Include only biographical information relevant to the occasion and preapproved by the speaker.
- Whenever appropriate, add some specific, personal material that humanizes the speaker—after clearing this with him or her.
- Mention the topic of the speaker's talk.

A speech of introduction should focus audience attention on the featured speaker, not on you. Some speeches of introduction include so much explanation of the occasion that the audience learns little about the actual speaker. Also, be careful to avoid upstaging the speaker by making frequent references to yourself, your accomplishments, or your qualifications to give the introduction. Briefly mention who you are, then place the featured speech at the center of your presentation. Resist the temptation to evaluate the speech because the listeners can make an informed judgment

R e m e m b e r :

In speeches of introduction . . .

- ▮ Don't speak for too long.
- ▮ Don't mispronounce the featured speaker's name.
- ▮ Don't give inaccurate or unwanted biographical information about the featured speaker.
- ▮ Don't upstage the featured speaker.
- ▮ Don't evaluate the upcoming speech instead of letting the audience decide for itself.

only after they have listened to the speaker. For example, don't say, "Marie's speech will be the finest presentation you'll ever hear on Haiku poetry." Specific analyses and evaluations mean little to an audience that has not yet heard what it should be appraising.

Presentations of Awards



Another common ceremonial speech is the presentation of an award. This type of speech should emphasize the worthiness of the person receiving the award and explain the award's significance. An award presentation should include at least the following components:¹³

- ▮ The name of the award and the reason it is being given
- ▮ The name of the winner and his or her reason for winning
- ▮ The reason you are glad to present the award

The content of your presentation "should be so specific that it couldn't possibly be said about anyone else."¹⁴ The more your remarks identify the recipient as unique, the more the audience will recognize the award as a personal distinction for the winner. Compare the impact of these fictitious presentations:

Now we come to the Outstanding Freshman award. And the winner is Elvira Earp. Congratulations, Elvira.

The award of Outstanding Freshman recognizes scholastic achievement and public service. This year's winner isn't content with a perfect 4.0 grade point average. She sets aside time from her busy schedule to work with children who have cerebral palsy. On weekends, you can find her teaching adult literacy classes

at the public library. I am happy to present this award to a model for my own children: Elvira Earp.

If you had won the award, which presentation would make you feel more acknowledged?

Acceptance Speeches



An acceptance speech demands more from the recipient of an award than a simple “thank you.” A properly crafted acceptance concisely expresses gratitude and dignifies the occasion by recognizing the significance of the award.

Your acceptance speech should show your goodwill toward the audience, the presenter, and the sponsor of the award. The speech should do the following, although not necessarily in this order:¹⁵

- Thank the donor and presenter.
- Demonstrate modesty while avoiding hackneyed phrases that ring false. Don’t say, “I really don’t deserve this” because it insults the donors by implying that they made the wrong choice. You could, for example, show humility by pointing to how you will try to live up to the high standards of the award.
- Thank others who may have contributed to your success. If you have ever watched the Academy Awards on television, you’ll recall that almost every acceptance speech includes a list of people the winner wishes to thank. Make sure you acknowledge those who contributed to your success, but only those who contributed directly. Giving more than a handful of thank-you’s begins to sound like the recital of a grocery list—and holds about the same amount of interest for the audience.
- Regardless of the gift or award, express your pleasure at receiving it. I have seen some award recipients actually mock the presenter by ridiculing a gift they were given. Such behavior is rude and ungracious. Even if you think the award itself is hideous or cheap, someone has exerted effort and thought in trying to find something appropriate.
- Express appreciation in your conclusion. Reiterating your gratitude shows that you acknowledge the award as a favor and appreciate it.

By following these simple guidelines, you will generate an acceptance speech that is fitting and polite. Your acceptance speech also should demonstrate your understanding of the award’s deeper significance. If you received the Outstanding Freshman award mentioned earlier, for example, your acceptance would call attention to its connection with the ideals of scholastic excellence and community service. Also, thinking ahead about structuring your acceptance speech in this way will help you avoid blurting out the first thought that comes to your mind in the excitement of the moment. For example, in 1984, Sally Field received the Oscar for Best Actress for her performance in *Places in the Heart*. Her acceptance speech consisted of an outburst of tears and the inane pronouncement, “You like me! You really, really like me!”

By contrast, Elie Wiesel's 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech epitomizes an appropriate response to the situation.¹⁶ He begins by demonstrating modesty: "It is with a profound sense of humility that I accept the honor you have chosen to bestow upon me. I know: your choice transcends me." Wiesel recognizes that the award acknowledges not simply his efforts in raising public consciousness about the Holocaust but those of others who have suffered: "[T]his honor belongs to all the survivors and their children, and through us, to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified." He concludes with a brief but eloquent acknowledgment of the award and its sponsors: "Thank you, Chairman Aarvik. Thank you, members of the Nobel Committee. Thank you, people of Norway, for declaring on this singular occasion that our survival has a meaning for mankind."

Commemorative Speeches



Commemorative speeches are another type of special occasion address. These speeches formally recognize and honor a person, organization, or occasion. Commemorative speeches can occur in a variety of circumstances, from celebrating a coworker's retirement, to congratulating a friend for winning the lottery, to remembering a person who has just died. There are three basic types of commemorative speeches: tributes, toasts, and eulogies.

Tributes

An effective tribute renews the kinship between speaker and audience while recognizing the occasion. Norman Schwarzkopf's going-home speech to the troops serving in the Gulf War, included in Appendix B, provides a good example of a tribute. Schwarzkopf begins by emphasizing his closeness with the troops. Since all of them are soldiers, he praises that fact and adds "inside" references to military units in jargon that other soldiers will understand: "It's a great day to be a soldier! Big Red One, First Team, Old Ironsides, Spear Head, Hell on Wheels platoon, Jay Hawk patrol, today you're going home." His use of these terms establishes him as one of the group, in this case, military personnel. Here we see one characteristic of tributes: *recognizing or creating the identity of the audience*.

Schwarzkopf proceeds to summarize the events that made the occasion memorable. This exemplifies a second quality of tributes—*commending the audience's shared history or revered heroes*: "Valiant charges by courageous men over 250 kilometers of enemy territory. Along with a force of over 1,500 tanks, almost 250 attack helicopters, over 48,500 pieces of military equipment, moving around, behind, and into the enemy and totally breaking his back and defeating him in 100 hours." Another example of evoking a revered hero occurred in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, in Appendix B. He refers to Abraham Lincoln, the president known for his role in bringing slavery to an end, as a "great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today" at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.



This speaker is checking for gestures and facial expressions as he rehearses his wedding toast.

© Michael Newman/PhotoEdit

Tributes, therefore, generally honor an individual, organization, or occasion while commending the audience's shared history or revered heroes. Some forms of tributes, however, call for special consideration.

Toasts

An abbreviated type of commemorative speech is the toast, a very brief set of remarks traditionally delivered while audience members hold aloft glasses of wine or champagne. Although toasts have evolved into symbolic gestures that might include water or no beverage at all, one element has been preserved: the speech. We hear short toasts in many contexts. The traditional Jewish toast consists of a simple "*L'chaim!*" translated, "To life!" Löwenbrau beer used to begin their commercials with the toast "Here's to good friends." When a special occasion calls for a toast, however, the remarks must be more specific.

Since toasts originated with everyone holding a glass aloft, they were brief. That custom remains unchanged—a toast rarely lasts more than a minute or two. Because of their brevity, toasts may be memorized. The speaker has very little time, and a toast is almost always on behalf of someone or something specific. As a result, the toast itself should focus on one specific quality or theme that emphasizes the reason for the occasion.

Gratuitous comments such as "Here's to the happy couple" given at a wedding fail to capitalize on the potentially dramatic effect of toasts.¹⁷ The guests have paused to hear inspiring words, not clichés. Similarly, comments that run counter to the de-

sired mood spell disaster. You might have heard wedding toasts in the spirit of “Here’s to Bubba and Bertha. Hope this marriage turns out better than Bubba’s last one. Lots of luck.”

Eulogies

Another type of commemorative speech is the eulogy, which offers tribute to someone who has died (the word *eulogy* comes from the Greek for “good words”). The tradition of eulogizing probably extends to nearly the beginning of human speech. Pericles’ funeral oration in 431 B.C. for those who had perished in the Peloponnesian War was the first fully recorded eulogy delivered as a public speech.¹⁸ It exemplifies the basic format eulogies still follow. Your audience will expect a eulogy to do the following:

- ▶ Recognize the death.
- ▶ Temper the audience’s grief by explaining how the deceased “lives on.”
- ▶ Redefine the audience’s relationship to the deceased.
- ▶ Reassure the audience that life will continue.
- ▶ Sometimes advise the audience on how the death should affect their own lives.¹⁹

Perhaps more than other types of ceremonial speeches, the eulogy must “reknit the community” because members have suffered a loss. In his eulogy for the astronauts who perished aboard the *Challenger* space shuttle, Ronald Reagan stressed that the tragedy had brought all Americans together in spite of their differences.²⁰ Speaking of his wife and himself, Reagan said, “We know we share this pain with all of the people of our country. This is truly a national loss.”²¹

A brief examination of United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson’s 1965 eulogy for Winston Churchill shows what a eulogy can accomplish.²²

Component of Eulogy	Fulfillment in Stevenson’s Speech
Recognize the death.	Sir Winston Churchill is dead. The voice that led nations, raised armies, inspired victories and blew fresh courage into the hearts of men is silenced.
Show how the deceased lives on.	Churchill, the historian, felt the continuity of past and present, the contribution which mighty men and great events make to future experience; history’s “flickering flame” lights up the past and sends its gleams into the future.
Redefine the relationship to the deceased.	One rather feels a sense of thankfulness and of encouragement that throughout so long a life, such a full measure of power, virtuosity, mastery and zest played over our human scene.
Offer reassurance.	Contemplating this completed career, we feel a sense of enlargement and exhilara-

tion. . . . Churchill's life uplifts our hearts
and fills us with fresh revelation of the
scale and reach of human achievement.

Eulogies offer praise for the deceased, but the compliments must be sincere and proportionate to the actual accomplishments. Even a grief-stricken audience can recognize overly lavish praise. Claiming that the deceased was “faultless” or “perfect” rings false because everyone has shortcomings. Concentrate on the person's strengths while remaining realistic. Since a eulogist usually knows the deceased personally, some specific anecdotes that illustrate the character of the departed are especially appropriate. A poorly wrought eulogy can be interpreted as disrespectful or simply ridiculous. For example, in an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Lieutenant Commander Data offers an overly general eulogy for a brilliant scientist who has just died: “To know him was to love him. And to love him was to know him. Those who knew him, loved him. Those who did not know him, loved him from afar.” In contrast, an effective eulogy will be specific to the deceased and geared to the audience. Stevenson's moving tribute to Winston Churchill was full of quotes from Churchill and personal remembrances of the great leader's habits and mannerisms. Adapting to the dignitaries of many nations who were in attendance, Stevenson emphasized Churchill's roles in founding the United Nations and his belief that “humanity, its freedom, its survival, towered above pettier interests—national rivalries, old enmities, the bitter disputes of race and creed.”²³

After-Dinner Speeches



The final type of ceremonial speech—the after-dinner speech—is far less serious than the eulogy. This type of speech gets its name from the fact that it is often delivered as the conclusion to a meeting that includes a meal. The name now signifies any speech that is light, entertaining, and often inspirational in tone.²⁴ Occasions for after-dinner speeches abound, and they form a part of special events such as political rallies, graduation exercises, conventions, and bar mitzvahs. It would not be exaggerating to observe, “The after-dinner speech is one of the great rituals of American public speaking and public life.”²⁵ After-dinner speaking has become so established that it is an oratorical event at many interscholastic and intercollegiate speech contests.

Since after-dinner speeches are generally meant to be entertaining, they should avoid controversy and overly technical explanations while still reinforcing a central theme. Also, even when an after-dinner speech is humorous, there is no need to keep audience members laughing constantly. If you are asked to deliver this kind of speech, you should not feel obligated to put together a comedy monologue or an uninterrupted series of jokes. Forced humor such as this can end up detracting from your speech. Furthermore, people differ significantly in their ability to be humorous,²⁶ and different audiences will consider different things funny.

Be especially careful to avoid any comments that might have a chance of offending. Be aware that what you consider mild swearing could be interpreted by others as obscene, marking you as crude and inconsiderate. Ethnic, racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes are always unacceptable. The same goes for jokes that ridicule people who are mentally or physically challenged.

Ideally, you should gear your choice of humor to the background and interests of your audience. This type of humor creates a sense of identification between speaker and audience. Such a feeling of collegiality helps bond the speaker and audience, letting the listeners know that the speaker is “one of us.” Barbara Bush effectively established identification with her audience during her 1990 commencement address at Wellesley College. Recognizing that the graduating seniors at the women’s college wanted to embark on careers traditionally closed to women, she quipped: “Who knows? Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the president’s spouse. I wish him well!”²⁷ At its most powerful, humor can show that the speaker and audience share similar motivations and reactions, that the same sorts of things “make them tick.”²⁸

In general, the after-dinner speech will mark a specific event, so it’s a good idea to reaffirm the occasion and the reason your audience has chosen to get together. You will find that vivid narratives, instances, and jokes are especially effective in bringing ideas and events to life. You can use several related items to maintain audience interest and enjoyment, or you can focus the entire speech on a single extended story or illustration. Either way, the speech should carry a lesson that applies to the specific audience.

In the following speech, the speaker uses an extended illustration about messages people hear throughout life to unify a speech aimed at the life choices facing graduating seniors.

Sample Speech 8

Learn to Listen with Your Heart: Farewell to Graduates

by Martha Saunders

In the Department of Communication Arts we spend a great deal of time thinking and talking about words—the meaning of words, the persuasive value of words, the ethical implications of words and, generally, the impact of words as they are delivered in messages among people. Because of this, I was especially captured by a magazine article a few months ago which discussed how words influence people.

The article suggested that the most important messages that humans deliver to one another are usually expressed in very simple terms. I hope that doesn’t shock you now that you’ve spent these past few years having your minds crammed with complicated thoughts. The article went on to suggest that the *most influential messages* in our

I had to agree that three-word phrases such as “I love you,” or “There’s no charge,” or “And in conclusion” certainly were capable of prompting a strong reaction in me, and as I had hoped to impress you with profound thought today, I decided to share with you three three-word phrases that I have found useful as I have moved along in my life.

The first three-word phrase I’ve found useful in life is this: *I’ll be there*. Have you ever thought about what a balm those three words can create?

I’ll be there. If you’ve ever had to call for a plumber over a weekend you know how really good these words can feel. Or if you’ve been stranded on the road with car trouble and used your last quarter to call a friend, you know how good those words can be. Think about them:

“Grandma, I’m graduating in August!” *I’ll be there*.

“Roommate, I’m stuck at the office and can’t get to the airport to meet my sister!” *I’ll be there*.

“Mom, the baby cries all night and if I don’t get some sleep I’ll perish!” *I’ll be there*.

Recently I was talking with a local business person who is occasionally in a position to hire UWF graduates, and she told me the single most impressive thing a job candidate can do is to demonstrate a real interest in the well-being of that business. Someone who will help further the objectives of that organization, whether or not he or she is “on the clock” is going to be a valuable person. In other words, *be somebody who will be there*.

One of my favorite stories about someone who knew how to “be there” is told of Elizabeth, the Queen Mother of England, who was asked whether the little princesses (Elizabeth and Margaret Rose) would leave England after the Blitz of 1940. The queen replied:

“The children will not leave England unless I do. I shall not leave unless their father does, and the king will not leave the country in any circumstances whatever.” *I’ll be there*.

The second three-word phrase I want to present to you is perhaps the hardest to learn to say—I know it was for me and sometimes still is. That is, *maybe you’re right*. Think about it. If more people were to learn to say maybe you’re right the marriage counselors would be out of business and, with a little luck, the gun shops. I know from experience it can have a disarming effect on an opponent in an argument. In fact, one of my lawyer friends uses it often in his closing remarks—and he is a very successful lawyer. *Maybe you’re right*.

It has been my experience that when we get so hung up on getting our own way that we will not concede on *any* point, we are doing ourselves a real disservice. Make life a little easier on yourself. Remember the old saying—“There are a hundred ways to skin a cat—and every single one of them is right.” *Maybe you’re right*.

The third phrase I want to introduce to you I must have heard a thousand times when I was a little girl. Whenever I was faced with a hard decision I would turn to my caregiver and ask what I should do. Her response was always the same three-letter word phrase—“*Your heart knows*”—then she would go on about what she was doing.

“My heart knows?” I would think to myself. “What’s that supposed to mean? I need advice here. I need for you to tell me what to do.”

She would just smile and say, “*Your heart knows, honey, your heart knows.*”

But as I was an imperious child, I would throw my hand on my hip and say, “Maybe so, but my heart isn’t talking!”

To this she would respond—“*Learn to listen.*”

This brings me to the point of my speech. You know, life doesn't come in the form of a degree plan. There's no Great Advisor out there who will give you a checklist and say, "Do these things and you'll earn your degree in 'life.'"

To some extent, the page is blank now. You may have a rough outline of where you're headed, but I can assure you, you won't get there without having to make some tough decisions—and decision making is never easy.

You may be able to find people to suggest what you should do, but for the most part, no one will be willing to accept the responsibility for your mistakes. You'll have to make your own choices.

My advice to you today is to *learn to listen to your heart*. The psychologists call this "turning into our subconscious." Spiritual leaders call it "turning to a higher power." Whatever you call it, there is an ability in each of you to find the right answers for your life. It's there and it's a powerful gift that all the education or degrees in the world can't acquire for you. You've had it all along—now, you're going to have to use it.

In "The Bending of the Bough," George Moore wrote: "The difficulty in life is the choice." Choose well, Graduates.

Martha Saunders, Assistant Professor of Public Relations, University of West Florida, gave this speech on October 28, 1993.

Although this commencement speech was delivered in a traditional setting with a speaker at the lectern and an attentive audience, in many cases as an after-dinner speaker you will have to compete with distractions such as courses being served, glasses being filled, plates being cleared, and servers moving around the room. Make sure you speak with sufficient volume and clear enunciation to overcome these sounds. Also remember that the attention span of your audience will be low after a heavy meal, so you should include plenty of attention-getting material throughout the speech.

R e m e m b e r :

For digestible after-dinner speeches . . .

- ▶ Do use narratives and examples.
- ▶ Do use humor specific to the situation.
- ▶ Do keep the tone entertaining and light.
- ▶ Do focus your remarks on a central theme relevant to the occasion.
- ▶ Don't have complex or controversial content.
- ▶ Don't use overworked jokes, especially "A funny thing happened on the way to this speech . . ."
- ▶ Don't force humor; present only what you can deliver comfortably and skillfully.
- ▶ Don't ever use humor that can be considered racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive.

Summary



Special occasion speeches reinforce the shared identity and values of an audience. Regardless of the type of special occasion speech, its objective is to strengthen the bonds that unite the listeners.

There are several types of special occasion speeches. A speech of introduction focuses attention on a subsequent speaker and prepares the audience to listen to that person. Speeches of introduction are brief and highlight the featured speaker, not the person giving the introduction.

Speeches that are presentations of awards should include not only the name of the recipient but the reason that person deserves the honor. In speeches of acceptance, the recipient demonstrates humility and expresses appreciation to the sponsor of the award and to anyone who contributed to the winner's achievement.

Commemorative speeches are tributes to a person, event, or cause. Toasts are abbreviated tributes traditionally delivered at festive occasions such as weddings. Eulogies are tributes to someone who has died. When giving a eulogy, the speaker should acknowledge the death, redefine the relationship to the deceased, comfort the audience, and show what lasting contribution the deceased made.

After-dinner speeches are light, entertaining presentations that generally include humor. When using humor, tailor the humorous remarks to the audience and occasion. The more specific the jokes and anecdotes, the better the speaker and audience will identify with each other.

Practice Suggestions



1. If you are using *InfoTrac College Edition*, locate a recent article giving pointers on special occasion speeches (especially commemorative and after-dinner speeches). Prepare a one- to two-minute review to share with the class.
2. Prepare a one-minute speech of introduction to give prior to a classmate's informative, persuasive, or after-dinner speech. Follow the guidelines for successful speeches of introduction included in this chapter.
3. Prepare a brief tribute, toast, or eulogy. Follow the suggestions covered in this chapter.
4. Pretend you have just received an important award presented to you by the chairperson of your department. Prepare a two-minute acceptance speech to give to the class.
5. Divide the class into groups. Recalling special occasion speeches you have observed in the past, make a list of annoying behaviors that speaker's should avoid. Compare lists.