

The OECD Toastmasters club ...

SPEECH WRITING CHECKLIST

This checklist contains some of the tools and techniques that many of the world's most successful speakers use when writing speeches. Perhaps it will help you take your speech from good to great! It is amazing how just a few small changes can make your speech that much more effective. Check out the following points, write your speech and then check them again!

Here we go:

1. A clear premise

A premise is the **central thought or idea** you want your audience to take home. When people in your audience think back to your speech a month, a year or even years later, this is the one idea they need to remember.

Write it down for yourself in 15 words or less. If you need more than 15 words to write it down, it is not clear enough in your own mind.

A good way to get your premise clear is to ask yourself the following question: what do I want my audience to **think, feel** and **do** after my speech?

Examples

☹ **Unclear:** *"I am going to tell the audience about the project we are working on"*

☺ **Clear:** *"To stay healthy, you should get 30 minutes of exercise a day"*

Once you have your premise clear, everything that you write in your speech must illustrate, underpin, and communicate this one single idea.

2. An engaging opening

Your opening sentences need to **immediately grab people's attention**. Start with something that makes people curious, surprises them or makes them think. Ways to achieve this: ask them a question, start with an intriguing fact, or tell a compelling story.

Even if you don't write out your speech, you should **learn the first few sentences by heart**, no room for improvisation!

Examples

- Matt Walker started his Ted Talk "Sleep is your superpower" with the following sentence: *"I would like to start with testicles"*
- The winner of our 2019 club speech competition, Mathilde Pak, opened her speech about Paris with: *"I hate you"*, once she had the attention, followed by *"and I love you. That's what I would say to Paris if it was a person"*.



Most common mistake: You can easily lose your audience's attention by starting with platitudes and clichés: *"Good afternoon, I am so honoured to be here, thanks for inviting me, my name is, blablabla..."* If you want to be polite and thank the organisers for giving you a stage, do it *after* your engaging opening".



Useful source: Watch this [video from Conor Neill "How to Start a Speech"](#)

3. What's in it for the audience?

You may have a great story, but how does it **serve the audience**? What is in it for them? Maybe you have climbed the Mount Everest, which was a spectacular adventure, but this is irrelevant to the audience if they cannot **relate** to it. The story is about you but not about them!

However, maybe this adventure taught you valuable lessons about dealing with fear and discouragement and about achieving goals; these are things most people can relate to. You can share these lessons with the audience and your Mount Everest adventure gives you credibility and concrete stories to illustrate and underpin your message.

For professional presentations: you may have international data sets, fancy graphs and glossy reports, but what exactly are you going to give policy makers to solve a concrete problem?

4. What is the “you/I ratio” of your speech?

How often do you use the word ‘I’ and the word ‘You’ in your speech? The difference between the two is: “I” is about the speaker, ‘You’ is about the audience. Often “you” makes it easier for people to relate because you are talking about *them*.

Of course there is nothing wrong with using “I” if you are telling a personal story. However, if the speech is full of ‘I’ and contains little “you” or “we”, the speech might be too much about yourself and too little about your audience. Check whether you can use the audience’s perspective more often and increase your “you/I ratio” (term learned from [Mark Brown](#)).

“I” in this case can also be your organisation; (“my organisation did this amazing project and then *we* built this amazing dataset and then *we* published this ‘flagship report’ etc.”)

Compare these two:

- ☹ About the speaker: “I have climbed the Mount Everest, I thought I would never make it, but I took the challenge!”
- 😊 More about the audience: “Have you ever take a major challenge? Something you never thought you could do? I did!”

5. Tell stories!

Most of us have trouble remembering numbers and dry facts, but our brains are wired to remember **stories**. Who doesn’t love a story? If possible, include at least one story in your speech. It makes your speech more entertaining and memorable. It does not have to be an epic adventure. A simple personal story that people can relate to often works better than an odyssey. A story should always serve a purpose: to illustrate a point, to teach a lesson, etc.

If you want to learn more about the art of storytelling, I recommend these episodes of the Unforgettable Presentations podcast:

Useful source: **Unforgettable Presentation:**



Episode 6: [How to find stories right under your nose!](#)

Episode 55: [The art of Unforgettable Story Crafting with Graig Valentine](#)

6. Show, don't tell

When you tell a story, **dialogue** works better than **narrative**. Rather than *reporting* about a dialogue or something that happens, *be* the character, *show* us and *bring* us there. Signals that you are reporting rather than taking people to the scene is the use of words that describe emotion: "my mother sounded disappointed"; rather quote your mother and use your disappointed voice.

7. What is your foundational phrase?

"I have a dream!"; "Yes we can!" do you recognize these phrases? These are called **foundational phrases**. A foundational phrase is used several times in the speech.

A message will resonate more if you have a catchy phrase that people can easily remember and that makes your main point. A basic phrase may or may not be the same as the premise (point 1) and is often shorter.

2018 World Champion of public speaking [Ramona Smith](#) used "I am still standing!" (After an Elton John song) as her foundational phrase.

This is your opportunity to use the power of language: there are thousands of ways to say it , but make it sound catchy and it becomes memorable!

8. Make me laugh! 😊

Humour is extremely powerful when used well. Can you find a funny angle? Can you play a little with the audience and add an unexpected twist? Is there a funny story related to your topic? Using humour is more than just fun: when people laugh, their brains relax, making them more receptive to what you have to say. Laughing together creates a connection and helps you connect with the audience. Even in a serious speech, you can often inject a little humour. There is evidence that when people laugh, they produce dopamine, which also helps them remember your words.

Stay away from 'canned jokes', people may have heard them before.

Making people the target of a joke is risky and can backfire.

Note that using humour to get your message across or to 'lighten up' your speech is very different from what comedians do. Anything too controversial or inappropriate will only distract.

9. Structure

There are many ways to structure your speech. In all cases, it should contain three main elements:

- Opening (to introduce the topic, connect to the audience, make them lean in)
- Body (the main content)
- Closing (wrapping up, reiterating the main message)

Although this is a minimum requirement, there are many ways to structure your speech. Look at the different 'chunks' of your speech: can you change the order to make it more impactful? To build up more suspense? Make sure that there is a climax at the end: if the big surprise, the big revelation is halfway, everything after that may be anti-climactic'.



Useful source: **Nancy Duarte** discovered that **all legendary speeches have a similar structure**, check her [Ted-Talk here](#)

10. Timing

Time is precious, including the time of the audience and other speakers at your event / meeting. Running overtime with a prepared speech is a sign of lack of preparation and a lack of respect for the audience and the organisers. Fortunately, this element of speech writing is 100% under your control.

Here are a few practical tips:

- People speak an average of 150 words per minute, so bear this in mind when writing.
- Read your entire speech out loud and use a timer
- The speech should be at least 1 minute shorter than the time allotted to you. You will find that when you give the speech it always takes a little longer, for example because of audience reaction.

If your speech is too long, don't speak faster; there is always something you can take out. **Try to say it better with fewer words**, this will make your speech shorter but most likely also better.

11. An engaging title

The title is an often-neglected part of speech writing. This is a shame, because your title is the first piece of information your audience will receive, it is your first chance to make an impression. It sets the audience's expectations, and they will begin to form an opinion of your speech before you even begin.

Your speech is a gift to the audience and your title is the wrapping paper. Like the wrapping paper, the title should give just enough away to make the audience curious about what is inside.

12. A punchy ending

The very last sentence you speak should be your **punchline**. This could also be your foundational phrase (see point 7). It should make a clear point, something that you want to resonate, and you want people to remember.

After your punchline, stop talking! People are reflecting and processing what you just told them. Give people this moment of reflection.

A common way to end a speech is by saying 'thank you'. Although this is very accepted, it is also boring, and cliché and it weakens your punchline. Ending with a punchline and a pause is much stronger.

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- Patricia Fripp, www.Fripp.com (on premise: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ic0WR-rN3w>)
- Chris Anderson, TED Talks, The official TED Guide to Public Speaking (go get that book!)
- Graig Valentine <https://craigvalentine.com/52-speaking-tips/>
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