

4.9.17: Starting Your Speech

Learning Objectives

- Discuss effective ways to begin your speech

Your opening comments, like the lead sentences of an article, can make or break a speech. As William Zinsser phrases it in *On Writing Well*, “The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead.”^[1] In a chapter on speaking, *Management Communication* author James O’Rourke tells the story of a plant controller who was asked to make a five-minute presentation about his value to the company. In an attempt to tap into the imagination of the audience of eighteen senior executives, the controller opened with a race car metaphor. After four sentences, he was cut off and asked to leave the room. In another instance, a speaker’s opening joke, drawn from a book of speaking tips, fell flat. After the fact, the speaker reflected that a joke wasn’t the best fit for a rather serious audience and noted that “when you lose something in the first two minutes of a talk, you just can’t get it back.”

With this type of pressure, what’s a speaker to do? Often, the best option is to forget the introduction until you know what it’s introducing—until you have completed a full draft of your whole speech. That is, don’t force an introduction and don’t become too invested in your first idea. Write a draft or “working” opening and allow additional options to emerge as you work through the research (including audience research) and content development process. The dual objectives are to capture your audience’s attention and to set the stage for your speech. That is, your opening should reflect your stated intent and be an accurate indication of what will follow—the main substance of your speech.

In an article for *YPO*, an association for chief executives under the age of 45, communication strategist Matt Eventoll summarizes effective ways to open a speech and throws in one classic—and oddly common—fail. First, the effective options:

1. **Quote.** Use a relevant quote to set the tone for the speech.
2. **“What if?”** or, similarly, **“Imagine.”** Asking a “what if” or “imagine” question immediately engages your audience and invites them to be a part of the creative process.
3. **Question.** Posing a question engages the brain and prompts an instinctive answer, whether internal or verbalized.
4. **Silence.** A strategic silence of two to ten seconds creates an additional level of attention and expectation. The caveat: *you had better be able to deliver!*
5. **Statistic.** A powerful, relevant statistic can convey a key idea with impact and evoke emotion.
6. **Statement.** An emphatic phrase or statement can be used to create a sense of drama and anticipation.

The epic fail, generally followed by a collective disconnect on the part of the audience, is opening with some variation of “thank you for inviting me” or “today I’m going to be talking about.” If your audience isn’t invested from the beginning, it’s likely the point of your speech will never really be heard.

1. <http://training.npr.org/digital/leads-are-hard-heres-how-to-write-a-good-one/>

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