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Speaking on Special Occasions

Speeches of Introduction

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Special occasions are the punctuation marks of day-to-day life, the high points that stand out above ordinary routine. Christenings, weddings, funerals, graduations, award ceremonies, inaugurations, retirement dinners—all these are occasions, and they are very special to the people who take part in them. Nearly always they are occasions for speechmaking. A close friend proposes a toast to the bride and groom; the sales manager presents an award to the sales representative of the year; a family member

delivers a moving eulogy to the deceased. These speeches help give the occasion its “specialness.” They are part of the ceremonial aura that marks the event.

Speeches for special occasions are different from the speeches we have considered so far in this book. They may convey information or persuade, but that is not their primary purpose. Rather, they aim to fit the special needs of a special occasion. In this chapter we look at the most common special occasions and the kinds of speeches appropriate for each.

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Speeches of Introduction

speech of introduction

A speech that introduces the main speaker to the audience.

“Distinguished guests, the President of the United States.” If you are ever in a situation in which you have to introduce the President, you will need no more than the eight words that begin this paragraph. The President is so well known that any further remarks would be inappropriate and almost foolish.

Most of the time, however, a speech of introduction will be neither this brief nor this ritualized. If you are introducing another speaker, you will need to accomplish three purposes in your introduction:

- Build enthusiasm for the upcoming speaker.

- Build enthusiasm for the speaker’s topic.

- Establish a welcoming climate that will boost the speaker’s credibility.

A good speech of introduction can be a delight to hear and can ease the task of the main speaker. Usually you will say something about the speaker and the topic—in that order. Following are some guidelines for speeches of introduction.

Be Brief

During World War I, Lord Balfour, Great Britain’s foreign secretary, was to be the main speaker at a rally in the United States. But the speaker introducing him gave a 45-minute oration on the causes of the war. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, “Now Lord Balfour will give his address.” Lord Balfour rose and said, “I’m supposed to give my address in the brief time remaining. Here it is: 10 Carleton Gardens, London, England.”¹

Everyone who has ever sat through a long-winded introduction knows how dreary it can be. The purpose of a speech of introduction is to focus attention on the main speaker, not on the person making the introduction. A speech of introduction will usually be no more than two to three minutes long, and may be shorter if the speaker is already well known to the audience.

Make Sure Your Remarks Are Completely Accurate

Many an introducer has embarrassed himself or herself, as well as the main speaker, by garbling basic facts. Always check with the speaker ahead of time to make sure your introduction is accurate in every respect.

Above all, get the speaker’s name right. If the speaker’s name is at all difficult—especially if it involves a foreign pronunciation—practice saying it in advance. However, don’t practice so much that you frighten yourself about getting it wrong. This was the plight of an announcer whose gaffe is now a classic: “Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States—Hoobert Heever!”

Adapt Your Remarks to the Occasion

In preparing your introduction, you may be constrained by the nature of the occasion. Formal occasions require formal speeches of introduction. If you were presenting a guest speaker at an informal business meeting, you might be much more casual than at a formal banquet.

Adapt Your Remarks to the Main Speaker

No matter how well it is received by the audience, a speech of introduction that leaves the main speaker feeling uncomfortable has failed in part of its purpose. How can you make a main speaker uncomfortable? One way is to overpraise the person—especially for his or her speaking skills. Never say, “Our speaker will keep you on the edge of your seat from beginning to end!” You create a set of expectations that are almost impossible to fulfill.

Another way to create discomfort is by revealing embarrassing details of the speaker’s personal life or by making remarks that are in poor taste. An introducer may think this line is funny: “Why, I’ve known Anita Fratello since she was 10 years old and so fat that everybody called her Blimpo!” To the speaker, however, the statement will probably not be a bit funny and may be painful.

Adapt Your Remarks to the Audience

Just as you adapt other speeches to particular audiences, so you need to adapt a speech of introduction to the audience you are facing. Your aim is to make *this* audience want to hear *this* speaker on *this* subject. If the speaker is not well known to the audience, you will need to establish her or his credibility by recounting some of the speaker’s main achievements and explaining why she or he is qualified to speak on the topic at hand. But if the speaker is already personally known to the audience, it would be absurd to act as if the audience had never heard of the person.

Also, you will want to tell each audience what *it* wants to hear—to give the kind of information that is interesting and accessible to the members of that audience. If you were introducing the same speaker to two different groups, some of the information in the speeches of introduction might be the same, but it would be slanted differently.

Suppose, for example, that J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, is going to address two groups—an audience of elementary-school children and an audience of educators at the International Reading Association. The introduction to the schoolchildren might go like this:

Children, we have a very important guest today. You know her by the character she has created—Harry Potter. What you don’t know is all the hard work that goes into writing the books that we all love to read. Today she is going to tell us how she came up with the idea of Harry Potter and his friends and how she goes about writing her books. Let’s give a big round of applause to J. K. Rowling.

But the introduction to the International Reading Association would be along these lines:

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to introduce to you today the world’s best-selling author. We are all well acquainted with her Harry Potter series that has captured the imagination of children—and more than a few adults—around the globe.

Many of us know the remarkable story of her writing life: The inspiration for Harry Potter came on a train ride from Manchester to London in 1990. Over the next few years, she compiled notes as the story took shape in her mind. The bulk of the writing took place when she was a single mother on public assistance in

Edinburgh. She was teaching French to teenagers in the mid-1990s when she heard that the first Harry Potter book had been accepted for publication. The rest is literary history.

She will be telling us this afternoon more about what inspired her fascinating story of wizardry, where she gets her ideas, and what kinds of books she wants to write next. Please give a warm welcome to J. K. Rowling.

Try to Create a Sense of Anticipation and Drama

You may have noticed one detail shared by the two speeches introducing J. K. Rowling: In both cases the speaker's name was saved for last. This is a convention in speeches of introduction. While there may occasionally be a good reason to break the convention, usually you will avoid mentioning the speaker's name until the final moment—even when the audience knows exactly whom you are discussing. By doing this you build a sense of drama, and the speaker's name comes as the climax of your introduction.

Often you will find yourself in the situation of introducing someone who is fairly well known to the audience—a classmate, a colleague at a business meeting, a neighbor in a community group. Then you should try to be creative and cast the speaker in a new light. Talk to the speaker beforehand and see if you can learn some interesting facts that are not generally known—especially facts that relate to the speaker's topic.

Above all, if you expect to be creative and dramatic, be sure to practice your speech of introduction thoroughly. You should be able to deliver it extemporaneously, with sincerity and enthusiasm.

Speeches of Presentation

Speeches of presentation are given when someone receives a gift, an award, or some other form of public recognition. Usually such speeches are brief. They may be no more than a mere announcement (“And the winner is . . .”) or be up to four or five minutes in length.

speech of presentation

A speech that presents someone a gift, an award, or some other form of public recognition.

The main purpose of a speech of presentation is to tell the audience why the recipient is receiving the award. Point out his or her contributions, achievements, and so forth. Do not deal with everything the person has ever done. Focus on achievements related to the award, and discuss these achievements in a way that will make them meaningful to the audience.

Depending on the audience and the occasion, you may also need to discuss two other matters in a speech of presentation. First, if the audience is not familiar with the award, you should explain it briefly. Second, if the award was won in a public competition and the audience knows who the losers are, you might take a moment to praise the losers.

On page 357 is a sample speech of presentation. It was delivered by President Bill Clinton in presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to former South African President Nelson Mandela at a ceremony in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. Because the Congressional Gold Medal is a special honor bestowed by the U.S. Congress, there are no public competitors for the award. Thus Clinton did not need to say anything about the “losers.” His speech focused on Mandela's battle against apartheid and his efforts to promote reconciliation among the people of South Africa.

PRESENTING THE CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

Bill Clinton

To my friend, President Mandela, Americans as one today, across all the lines that divide us, pay tribute to your struggle, to your achievement, and to the inspiration you have given us to do better. Today we offer a man who has received the Nobel Prize the highest honor within the gift of this country. . . .

Those of us who share his vision and lift him up in honor today owe it to him to build a permanent partnership between Americans and Africans—for the education of our children, for the solution of our problems, for the resolution of our differences, for the elevation of what is best about us all. . . .

In forgiving those who imprisoned him, he reminded us of the most fundamental lesson of all—that in the end apartheid was a defeat of the heart, the mind, the spirit. It was not just a structure outside and jail houses within which people were kept; it was a division of the mind and soul against itself. We owe it to Nelson Mandela not simply to give him this award, but to live by the lesson he taught us and to tear down every last vestige of apartheid in our own hearts—everything that divides us, one from another.

For those of us who have been privileged to know this remarkable man, no medal, no award, no fortune, nothing we could give him could possibly compare to the gift he has given to us and to the world. The only gift that is true recompense is to continue his mission and to live by the power of his profound and wonderful example.

Now, as prescribed by the law, it is my privilege to present the Congressional Gold Medal to President Nelson Mandela.



Speeches for special occasions are part of the ceremonial aura that makes certain events special, as in these remarks by Army Staff Sergeant Salvatore A. Giunta receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Speeches of Acceptance

acceptance speech

A speech that gives thanks for a gift, an award, or some other form of public recognition.

The purpose of an acceptance speech is to give thanks for a gift or an award. When giving such a speech, you thank the people who are bestowing the award and recognize the people who helped you gain it.

The acceptance speech below is the companion piece to the speech of presentation by Bill Clinton. It was delivered by Nelson Mandela in accepting the Congressional Gold Medal, and it exemplifies the major traits of a good acceptance speech—brevity, humility, and graciousness.²

ACCEPTING THE CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

Nelson Mandela

Thank you. President Clinton, Mr. Speaker, distinguished members of the Senate and the House, ladies and gentlemen. . . .

It has been my great privilege to serve a people whose bondage to an inhuman system evoked the solidarity of all those who love freedom and justice, a people whose triumph over the divisions of racist doctrine has given new life to humanity's hope for a world without hatred and discrimination. I am conscious that in bestowing the Congressional Gold Medal upon me you are evoking these bonds between our nations and paying tribute to the whole South African nation for its achievements in realizing our shared ideals.

It is in that spirit that I humbly accept the award, aware at the same time of the great honor you do me by using me as the vehicle of a unique distinction conferred by this hallowed institution of American democracy. As one who has dedicated his life to the pursuit of unity, I am moved by the consensus in your nation's regard for the achievements of my people. And I feel a great pride in the fact that with a few citizens of other countries who have received this high honor, the name of an African is now added. . . .

The award with which you honor me today is an expression of the common humanity that binds us, one person to another, nation to nation, and people of the north to people of the south. I receive it with pride as a symbol of partnership for peace, prosperity, and equity as we enter the new millennium. I thank you.

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View an excerpt from Nelson Mandela's acceptance speech in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 18.1).

Commemorative Speeches

Commemorative speeches are speeches of praise or celebration. Eulogies, Fourth of July speeches, and dedications are examples of commemorative speeches. Your aim in such speeches is to pay tribute to a person, a group of people, an institution, or an idea.

As in an informative speech, you probably will have to give the audience information about your subject. After all, the audience must know *why* your subject is praiseworthy. As in other speeches, you may draw on examples, testimony, even statistics to illustrate the achievements of your subject.

Your fundamental purpose in a commemorative speech, however, is not to inform your listeners but to *inspire* them—to arouse and heighten their appreciation of or admiration for the person, institution, or idea you are praising. If you are paying tribute to a person, for example, you should not simply recount the details of the person's life. Rather, you should penetrate to the *essence* of your subject and generate in your audience a deep sense of respect.

When speaking to commemorate, you want to express feelings, to stir sentiments—joy and hope when a new building is dedicated, anticipation and good wishes at a commencement celebration, lament and consolation at a funeral, admiration and respect at a testimonial dinner. A commemorative speech is like an impressionist painting—“a picture with warm colors and texture capturing a mood or a moment.”³

But while the painter works with brush and colors, the commemorative speaker works with language. Of all the kinds of speeches, none depends more on the creative and subtle use of language. Some of the most memorable speeches in history, including Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, have been commemorative. We continue to find such speeches meaningful and inspiring largely because of their eloquent use of language.

One of the most effective commemorative speakers in recent history was President Ronald Reagan. After the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986, Reagan delivered a nationally televised eulogy to the astronauts killed in the blast. Below are two versions of Reagan's closing lines. The first is what he *might* have said, stripping the text of its warm emotional content and poignant language:

Like Francis Drake, the great explorer of the oceans, the *Challenger* astronauts gave their lives for a cause to which they were fully dedicated. We are honored by them, and we will not forget them. We will always remember seeing them for the last time this morning as they prepared for their flight.

Here is what Reagan *actually* said:

There's a coincidence today. On this day 390 years ago, the great explorer Francis Drake died aboard ship off the coast of Panama. In his lifetime the great frontiers were the oceans, and an historian later said, “He lived by the sea, died on it, was buried in it.” Well, today we can say of the *Challenger* crew: Their dedication was, like Drake's, complete.

The crew of the space shuttle *Challenger* honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and “slipped the surly bonds of earth” to “touch the face of God.”

The final words—“slipped the surly bonds of earth’ to ‘touch the face of God’”—are especially effective. Drawn from a sonnet called “High Flight” that

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View the ending of Ronald Reagan's eulogy to the *Challenger* astronauts in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 18.2).

many pilots keep with them, they ennoble the deaths of the astronauts and end the speech on an eloquent, moving, and poetic note.

When speaking to commemorate, your success will depend on your ability to put into language the thoughts and emotions appropriate to the occasion. It is easy—too easy—to fall back on clichés and trite sentiments. Your challenge will be to use language imaginatively to invest the occasion with dignity, meaning, and honest emotion.

commemorative speech

A speech that pays tribute to a person, a group of people, an institution, or an idea.

In doing so, you may want to utilize the special resources of language discussed in Chapter 12. Metaphor, simile, parallelism, repetition, antithesis, alliteration—all are appropriate for commemorative speeches. Some highly acclaimed commemorative speeches—including Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” and John Kennedy’s inaugural address—are distinguished by their creative use of such devices.

Confronted with the evocative speeches of a Kennedy or a King, you may decide that the speech of commemoration is far beyond your abilities. But other students have delivered excellent commemorative speeches—not immortal, perhaps, but nonetheless dignified and moving.

Look, for example, at “My Crazy Aunt Sue” in the appendix of sample speeches that follows Chapter 19. The speaker’s aim was to pay tribute to her aunt, who for years had battled rheumatoid arthritis. Although the speaker provides basic information about aunt Sue and her physical condition, the speech does not recount all the details of her life. Instead, it focuses on her courage, her sense of humor, and her refusal to complain about her fate. The speaker provides enough details to let us see why aunt Sue is so commendable, but not so many as to slow the pace of the speech.

The speaker also uses vivid language, repetition, and parallel structure to give the speech the kind of formal tone appropriate for a commemorative speech. You can see this even in the opening lines:

The strongest person I know cannot peel a potato. The strongest person I know has trouble putting on her makeup. The strongest person I know needs a special key holder to turn the key in her car’s ignition.

In addition to arousing curiosity about the subject of the speech, these lines have a simple elegance that comes partly from the repetition of “The strongest person I know” at the start of each sentence. Consider, in contrast, how much less effective the opening would have been if the speaker had said:

My aunt Sue can’t peel a potato, has trouble putting on her makeup, and needs a special key holder to turn the key in her car’s ignition.

These lines convey the same information, but not with the same effect.

For another example, consider the student commemorative speech printed on page 361. The subject is Elie Wiesel—humanitarian, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and tireless campaigner for international justice. Notice how the speaker uses the repetition of “A-7713” to capture attention at the beginning and to give the speech artistic unity at the end. Also notice how he tells us enough about Wiesel to know why he is praiseworthy without getting bogged down in biographical details.

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View “My Crazy Aunt Sue” in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 18.3).

ELIE WIESEL

A-7713. His new name, the graffiti stamped on his skin. A-7713, a concentration camp tattoo. At age fifteen, A-7713 was taken from his home by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz, one of the twentieth century's most potent symbols of evil. Here A-7713 witnessed the deaths of thousands of human beings, including his mother and younger sister. Somehow, A-7713 survived, and when World War II ended, he put his pain and grief to work making sure the world did not forget the Holocaust and making sure another Holocaust did not take place.

Today, the world knows A-7713 as Elie Wiesel, noted speaker and lecturer, author of more than 40 books, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Congressional Gold Medal, and the Nobel Peace Prize, among others. Elie Wiesel is an eloquent, fearless, selfless leader who took the evils of Auschwitz as motivation to improve the world.

An eloquent leader, Elie Wiesel uses the power of language to confront the problems of humanity. Through compelling prose and brutal honesty, he explains that we cannot root out evil unless we recognize it and battle it wherever it exists. In his classic book, *Night*, he says of Auschwitz: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky." Haunting words that remind us of the reality of evil.

A fearless leader no less than an eloquent one, Elie Wiesel has spent 40 years battling the evils that continue to plague our planet. To the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua, displaced from their homeland, he brought inspiring words of strength and compassion. To men and women facing apartheid in South Africa, he brought a powerful denunciation of racial segregation and violence. To Cambodian refugees suffering from starvation and disease, he brought food and the promise of a new beginning. And to those of us who follow his work, he continues to provide inspiration.

A selfless leader as much as an eloquent and fearless one, Elie Wiesel has consistently put the needs of others before his own. With every award, his modesty stands side by side with his achievements. As he stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. . . . Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe."

Today, at 80 years of age, Elie Wiesel continues to fight against the night. Through all his trials and all his triumphs, the tattoo remains: A-7713, a constant reminder of evil, injustice, and indifference. In battling these forces, Elie Wiesel has shown the kind of moral leadership too often lacking in today's world.

There is no better way to conclude than to quote his own words: "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest. . . . What these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone, that we are not forgetting them, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs."

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View "Elie Wiesel" in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 18.4).

Summary

In this chapter we have considered speeches of introduction, speeches of presentation, speeches of acceptance, and commemorative speeches.

Your job in a speech of introduction is to build enthusiasm for the main speaker and to establish a welcoming climate. Keep your remarks brief, make sure they are accurate, and adapt them to the audience, the occasion, and the main speaker.

Speeches of presentation are given when someone receives a gift or an award. The main theme of such a speech is to acknowledge the achievements of the recipient. The purpose of an acceptance speech is to give thanks for a gift or an award. When delivering such a speech, you should thank the people who are bestowing the award and recognize the contributions of people who helped you gain it. Be brief, humble, and gracious.

Commemorative speeches are speeches of praise or celebration. Your aim in such a speech is to pay tribute to a person, a group of people, an institution, or an idea. A commemorative speech should inspire the audience, and its success will depend largely on how well you put into language the thoughts and feelings appropriate to the occasion.



Key Terms

speech of introduction (354)

speech of presentation (356)

acceptance speech (358)

commemorative speech (360)

Review Questions

After reading this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What are the three purposes of a speech of introduction? What guidelines should you follow in preparing such a speech?
2. What is the main theme of a speech of presentation? Depending on the audience and occasion, what two other themes might you include in such a speech?
3. What are the three major traits of a good acceptance speech?
4. What is the fundamental purpose of a commemorative speech? Why does a successful commemorative speech depend so much on the creative and subtle use of language?

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For further review, go to the LearnSmart study module for this chapter.

Exercises for Critical Thinking

1. Attend a speech on campus. Pay special attention to the speech introducing the main speaker. How well does it fit the guidelines discussed in this chapter?
2. Observe several speeches of presentation and acceptance—at a campus awards ceremony or on a television program such as the Academy Awards, Grammy Awards, Emmy Awards, or Tony Awards. Which speeches do you find most effective? Least effective? Why?
3. Analyze “Elie Wiesel” (page 361) in light of the criteria for commemorative speaking presented in this chapter.