

Write a Powerful Speech or Presentation

By Debra Koontz Traverso

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You've been asked to speak in public about yourself, your community, the national debt, world hunger. Terrific! You envision success resulting in more speaking gigs, but you experience panic resulting in a loss of words and ideas. Suddenly you're convinced your audience will fall asleep, heckle you, dig out the tar and feathers. Relax! It IS possible to get — and keep — your audience's attention and spur them to applause.

People have the ability to select what they will listen to, and to block out the rest. When we select a speech (presentation, class, sales pitch, etc.) to listen to, we choose to attend to it; we focus on it. When the time comes to deliver a speech, keep in mind that your potential listeners have the same choice. Your job as a speaker is to motivate them to select your message. Following are ten ideas from a class at WriteDirections.com ("Write a Powerful Speech or Presentation") to include in your speeches that will help audiences focus on — and retain — your message:

1. **Activity** – Your goal is to deliver an action-packed message. Sure you could stand on your head or do cartwheels if you think this will secure attention, but that's not the kind of action I'm referring to. In this article, I'm concentrating on your writing — the words and concepts you choose to use. Try to incorporate colorful and meaningful movement into your delivery through the use of action verbs and examples that impart movement or action. You can also add activity by moving on to the next topic before your audience drowns in boredom from the previous topic. In other words, don't belabor your point once you've made it. Keep your speech flowing briskly and smoothly.
2. **Concrete Words** – Effective speakers use words and images that the audience can visualize. Talking about furniture is not as vivid as talking about specific furniture; for example, furniture for rough and tumble kids. The goal is to create concrete pictures in the minds of your listeners; the more senses you touch (in this case verbal and visual, even if that picture is in the mind), the greater your chance listeners will remember your points.
3. **Novel Ideas** – Sure, people relate best to things they are familiar with, but they also embrace new ideas if you relate the concepts to personal concerns. This is especially effective — and important — in sales presentations. For example, if

you want to sell a new voice messaging system to an audience, determine what their number one problem is with their current system and tell them how your new system (novel idea) will solve that problem (personal concern).

4. **Issues Close to an Audience** – Although there is no single theory that explains how people make sense of the world, we do know that people understand what they hear by relating it to something they have already seen or heard. Therefore, to make an audience more interested in racism or sexual discrimination or even the lack of ice cream stands in our country, focus on the audience's experiences and problems in their own community. Listeners don't care to hear about the problems in another state on the other side of the country for which you just happened to have found mind-boggling statistics. People pay attention to what impacts them directly.
5. **Redundancy** – To help an audience remember your message, you will need to build in redundancy. When learning the basics of writing, you may have been taught to avoid repeating yourself. Oral communication, however, needs to be more redundant. An introductory statement summarizing your key ideas, a clear presentation of relevant points, and a summary of your thoughts will build redundancy into your message and help your audience remember it. And — to repeat myself — listeners will be more likely to remember your message if you relate it to their interests.
6. **Analogies** – Become a master in analogies and you'll simultaneously improve your speeches. Like a definition, an analogy increases understanding, but uses the added benefits of comparisons and relationships to enhance understanding. Analogies help your listeners comprehend new ideas, things and situations by showing how these matters are similar to something they already know. The pastor at my parents' church recently shared a very effective message about experiencing a spiritual drought by drawing an analogy to the climatic drought the community was undergoing.
7. **Stories that Create Suspense** – People's own thoughts will probably be your biggest competitor for their attention when you are a speaker. Most people would rather listen to their own inner speech than to the message of a public speaker. To combat this, try delivering a story. Stories generally win attention because people are more intrigued by a story in which they don't know the ending, than by their own thoughts in which they already know the outcome. Too, everyone likes — and can easily follow along with — a good story, especially if it adds suspense or builds up to a long-anticipated and colorful conclusion, or presents a situation with which the audience can readily relate.
8. **Conflict** – To foster attention, use examples or stories that pit one side against another, or descriptions of opposing ideas and forces in government, religion, or interpersonal relationships. The Greeks demonstrated long ago that the essential ingredient for a good play is conflict. Thousands of years later, the plots used by the Greeks are retold repeatedly in various versions in our modern-day books and movies.
9. **Humor** – Adding a bit of humor makes the point while holding the listener's attention. Humor also lets your audience know, without saying it specifically, that you are conscious of their desire to be able to enjoy your speech. Your humor will

help them relax, and to trust that you going to hold their interest. But use humor carefully. It would not be appropriate, for example, to open a discussion on sexual harassment in the workplace with a humorous introduction; after all, how could any humor regarding sex not be misconstrued as harassment in itself?

10. **Confidence and credibility** – To be effective, a speaker's message must be understandable to listeners, achieve its intended purpose (to inform, persuade, entertain), and be ethical. If you mislead or lie to an audience, your credibility will suffer and your audience will tune you out. Too, depending upon your reputation and topic, some people will prejudge you or your talk, deciding it has little value for them even before they hear the message. When this happens, their ability to listen and understand you decreases. To counteract this sort of prejudice, deliver a compelling opening statement that focuses on your particular listeners' interests, needs, hopes and wishes. Use information and evidence that your listeners will find credible. Strong emotional appeals will be less successful than proper language, sound reasoning, and convincing evidence.

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