

Speaking Tips from “The Lustberg Communicator”

Arch Lustberg Communications publishes a quarterly newsletter entitled “The Lustberg Communicator.” Each issue features communication and speaking tips, the latest news on Arch's activities, timely commentary on current issues, and “Nits and Picks” — all tied together with Arch's trademark humor and insight. The following speaking tips have been compiled from previous issues of “The Lustberg Communicator.” For more tips, visit www.lustberg.net/newsletter.htm.

Lustberg On... The Speaker and the Speech

I sent out my e-mail commentaries #69 and #70 following President Bush's Inaugural and State of the Union addresses. I spoke of the words his writers gave him and how he said them. I felt it would be appropriate to use this forum to review my overall thoughts on speech writing and delivery. It really doesn't matter whether it's a presidential address or a presentation to the local Rotary. The principles are the same.

1. Be yourself.

You have nothing to prove.

The fact that YOU'RE the speaker says all that needs to be said about your competence. The first major mistake is trying to LOOK competent, in command, leader-like, qualified to be standing in front of the group. Most speakers make that mistake. They become actors in a very real sense. They're playing a part. The great irony is that Ronald Reagan, who was an actor, learned how to be comfortable being himself. His comfort made his audience comfortable.

Compare him to George Bush and John Kerry. Even though they've reached the top, they still look like they're trying to prove their competence, prove they're in control.

George Bush, who sometimes can come across as warm and comfortable, too often closes his face. He narrows his eye slits, magnifies the vertical lines in his brow, which are already deeply pronounced, and looks angry.

In his run for president, John Kerry constantly displayed a neutral face, with no glow, no animation: a “dead” face.

Both these men want to look serious, professional, in charge, the man to lead the country. Simply put, “acting presidential.” They never learned to show us the real person: the men we saw pressing flesh at a gathering of supporters, talking to a kid in a fifth-grade classroom, or chatting with someone's mother in an assisted living home.

You don't have to fall into that trap, even if all your role models do. If you've been reading my work for long, you know my classic example of this wrong thinking: Bob Dole's unforgettable words to David Letterman after he lost the presidential election were, “Now I can go back to being myself.” If he'd done that before he lost, he might have won.

Make it memorable.

Why bother to speak if no one remembers what you said?

And what are the keys to memorability? Relevant, well-delivered stories about you or someone you know; anecdotes or stories about someone famous from the past or present; figures of speech: metaphors and similes. These techniques paint pictures with words. They beat charts, graphs, numbers and statistics — we may see or hear numbers, but we don't remember them. We don't tell our family, friends, and colleagues about them.

Unfortunately, we don't think about memorability when we're called on to present. In fact, we've lost the art of the storyteller. Our culture and our role models seem to be saying "prove it with figures."

When someone comes along who's a great yarn spinner, storyteller, and magician with ideas, that person seems like an aberration instead of becoming a role model. House Speaker Tip O'Neill always had a story to indelibly print his point in our minds.

Ronald Reagan began what has become a "must do" in his State of the Union speeches. He introduced real people in the gallery and told their stories of heroism, patriotism, gallantry, and courage.

And what was the most memorable moment of President Bush's State of the Union? If you watched, you know: it was when his guest, Safia Taleb Al-Souhail, whose father was assassinated by Saddam Hussein's government, and who had just voted in Iraq's election, turned around and hugged Janet Norwood, whose son Byron — a Marine Corps sergeant — had been killed in Iraq. Real people. Real stories. Real emotions. That's what an audience remembers.

Rarely can a drama like that play out during a speech. But the point for you to remember is the stories. Find the stories or examples that fit your topic and share them with your audience: "You can't drive downtown without risking a \$400 repair bill from pothole damage" is more effective than "The infrastructure is in disrepair. It is incumbent upon us to..." *Zzzzzzz*

Those are two of the most important aspects of effective speaking: be comfortable with yourself, and make it memorable.

3. Speak from the heart.

It's the ability to say what you mean and mean what you say. It's about getting involved in your subject matter. That's easiest to do when you're telling a story, and when you do, it's easier to make it "from the heart."

A friend decided to run for office. It was his first try at politics. He'd written a speech to make at a dinner for and with supporters and other interested people. He decided to rehearse it with me.

His was a typical political speech, written to impress the audience with his understanding of the issues. He was eager to prove his competence.

By the end of the second dull paragraph I said, “throw it away.” We worked on telling the story of why he decided to run; what the people he talked to were needing from government; what his neighbors were concerned about; what his own family needed.

When he reached the lectern on speech night, he reached into his pocket, held up the original manuscript (many pages), threw it away and said, “My friends told me this was garbage.” Then he told the audience who he really was, why he was running, and what they could expect from him. He spoke for less than five minutes. His speech came after dinner, so that brevity was a blessing and the audience was truly grateful. He hadn’t wasted their time. He hadn’t ruined their evening. He didn’t win that first election, but he made a positive impression.

I’m constantly watching politicians. I work with lots of elected officials. And you know something? The greatest speeches presidential candidates make are inevitably their concession speeches. Know why? They’re speaking from the heart. They aren’t pretending. They aren’t trying to look presidential. They’re just themselves, taking off the mask and saying it hurts, but I hope the other guy makes America better.

Isn’t it depressing to watch the Academy Awards and see gifted actors dashing on stage to receive their Oscars, only to pull out a piece of paper and READ a prepared statement? From the heart? No way. And does anyone remember these canned speeches? Maybe the 50 or so people who were specifically mentioned in the thank-yous.

I’ve watched CEOs at annual meetings read from a prepared text, eyes glued to the page, and drone, “I’m extremely proud of what you’ve done for this organization,” sounding as though they’re about to throw up. They may really mean it, but it sure doesn’t sound that way.

4. Keep it simple.

My pseudo-mathematical formula is: simple + brief + clear + concise = easy-to-understand. I can’t say it better than that.

Think about how jarring it is to hear the police officer say: “We apprehended the alleged perpetrator exiting his vehicle in possession of a glassine container which housed a controlled substance.” That’s when the jury’s eyes start to glaze over.

Without realizing it, most of us are victims of this same disease: trying to impress rather than express. So, you can see how simplicity ties in with being yourself. That same cop might tell his buddy, “I caught this guy with cocaine.”

So make simplicity your rule for words, for sentences, for ideas, for whole speeches.

Politicians universally ignore this rule. They seem to believe that more is better. I’ve heard very few political speeches that I wish could have lasted longer. There’s an old saying from

vaudeville: “Always leave them wanting more.” My adaptation of that is “No one loves a windbag. Not even another windbag.”

Most speakers feel an urgency to tell the audience everything they know about a subject. Well, no one wants to know everything you know. You have to learn and practice the art of economy. Less is more. No one has the right to be dull.

Simplicity goes hand-in-hand with being memorable. The easier you make it for me to understand your message, the more likely I am to remember it.

Winston Churchill put the exclamation point on this subject:

“Short words are best. And short words, when old, are best of all.”

5. Make it your own.

One of my pet peeves is the political candidate who takes a speech that someone else writes, and delivers it just that way — in someone else’s words. One of the keys to successful speaking is to deliver it your way; to make sure the words are words you’d use in normal conversation and not words you think will make you sound like a true orator.

William Safire writes the “On Language” column for The New York Times. He’s a brilliant writer: articulate, literate, a language expert of the first order. But when he wrote speeches for others, he became a show-off and made his clients look bad, if not idiotic. It was Safire who had Spiro Agnew describing the media as “nattering nabobs of negativism.” The words were memorable, but an embarrassment for the speaker.

Don’t be tempted to write for the time capsule — for inclusion in a “Great Speeches” anthology. It won’t work.

6. Edit Yourself.

The bottom line is this: whether you write the speech yourself or someone else does it for you, make sure you could honestly answer “yes” to this question: Would I ever use these words in these sentences on a normal day?

If your answer is no, make sure you bring it down to earth. As you write, start with the premise that you’re having a conversation with a bright teenager. Then, in the edit phase, double-check yourself.

One important thing to keep in mind is to use contractions if you normally do in conversation. Most of us speak this way: “I can’t...” “He won’t...” I’ll... “She’s...” “I’m...” We don’t say, “I can not...” He will not...” I shall...” “She is...” “I am...” Contractions are the stuff of comfortable communication, so you should bring them into your speech.

Think about this: a podium isn't a reason for formal speech-making. Rather, it's a way to talk one-on-one to a group of other people.

Be sure that the words and expressions you use sound like you. I know very few people who use "indeed" in conversation. It's a terrific literary word. On the page it's emphasis. In speech it's phony. The same goes for "if you will," "as it were," "thus," and "therefore."

There's a whole vocabulary of words and phrases that have grown popular as we try to be IMpressive rather than EXpressive. I have no use for words that end in "ize." Have you noticed that no one uses anything anymore? We utilize. And after that, we maximize, prioritize and legitimize. And it isn't just the "ize" words. Have you noticed we don't repeat or copy anymore? We replicate.

My list goes on to include paradigm, synergy, exacerbate, parameter, penultimate, internecine. There's nothing wrong with using words that will make the audience think; but if they STOP and think, they'll miss the next thing you say.

A good way to handle words that others may not get instantly is to gracefully explain them: "I had an epiphany. The light bulb went on over my head."

I remember how one of my teachers handled it. He said, "The Greek Theatre was indigenous. It grew out of the folklore, the religion, the word-of-mouth, the cultural heritage. It was home-grown."

As you edit yourself, think of Eleanor Roosevelt. She urged her husband, who had a tendency to be a language show-off, to read his speeches to her first. If she couldn't easily understand what he was saying, he changed it.

The easier our message is to absorb, the more impact we'll have. Unless you're an expert speaking only to other experts, try to speak in a way that would be understandable to a high school — or even middle school — class. If you're speaking to experts, go ahead and use the vocabulary of your field. Just don't give your audience a reason to think, "What a pompous ass!"

7. Open Strong.

Those two words tell it all. Avoid "I'm delighted to be here today," "Let me begin by saying," "My dear friend, Dr. Whatzisname asked me here to speak to you today," "I'm totally humbled to have been invited to address this distinguished audience," "I want to thank. . ."

I call these openers "throat-clearers." They're "ahems." They do absolutely nothing but get you started without actually getting started. In fact, they do just the opposite. They stop the audience cold, and build a wall between the audience and your likeability.

One attempt to improve the impact of opening remarks was used so often it became a cliché. Then it became a groaner. I'm talking about the comics' "A funny thing happened to me on the way to. . ." Audiences, once upon a time, looked forward to what came next. Not anymore.

But you do need an opening with the impact that quote once had. Your objective is to make an instant connection with the audience.

I recommend a relevant, appropriate, well-told story, an anecdote, an example, a figure of speech, or a word picture. When you learn this technique, you can release yourself from the slavery of the PowerPoint presentation. You can hook your audience right away, and they'll want to hear what comes next.

The opening sets the mood, the pace and the chemistry between presenter and audience. To reinforce this concept, look at how newspapers and magazines have redesigned headlines and opening paragraphs to make sure you'll read on. Headlines like "Killers on the Loose," or "Another Rip-off?" are the norm today rather than the exception.

Not long ago, Journalism 101 taught "The Five Ws": who, why, what, when and where. All those questions were supposed to be answered in the first paragraph of a story. No more.

Now reporters do their best to grab your attention quickly so you'll keep reading. It's likely that a typical opening will be: "The president arrived in darkness, in the dead silence of what looked to be – and in many ways was – an abandoned city under military occupation." Or "Even a little leaguer knows a batter can't hit what he can't see." These are opening sentences from the September 25 issue of Newsweek magazine.

Here are a couple from the October 4 New York Times: "In the Mississippi Gulf Coast town of Bay St. Louis, an angry insurance customer came at an agent with a gun." And reporting from Miami: "A national gun-control group is riling Gov. Jeb Bush and Florida's mighty tourism industry by warning visitors that arguing with locals here could get them shot." The headlines were "Tempers Flare. . ." and "Tourists to Florida Get Warning as Greeting." They're invitations to read on. They're grabbers.

Your opening is an invitation to the audience to listen further; to pay attention, eager to hear what comes next. Try to keep three things in mind as you develop your opening. Get their attention with something interesting. Put it in story form. And finally, use simple, everyday English – the kind of language you'd use with your family, friends and neighbors.

Before training, one financial advisor I worked with opened her presentation conversationally with "Good morning. My name is So-and-So. I've been a financial advisor for x years. I've been helping people prioritize their asset allocation to maximize returns and prepare for a more comfortable retirement."

After the training, she opened: "My husband is 45. My father is 62. My grandmother is 94. Each has a totally different financial need. I've helped my loved ones with plans that work for today and for tomorrow. I'd like to help you. My name is..."

She was no longer just another financial advisor. She was a woman who was taking care of family members she loved. She'd made a personal, human connection with her audience, and

they were ready to go to the next step with her. Incidentally, her sales curve went through the roof after the training.

A man I worked with had trouble describing his job to clients. He'd say he "interfaced our thought leadership concepts to integrate with the client's needs." After training he told his clients "I build bridges from our firm to yours."

Once again, here are Winston Churchill's words: "Short words are the best and short words when old are best of all." Remember to prioritize, replicate, interface and exacerbate only in the privacy of your own home.

When you put an interesting idea into story form, and use everyday simple language, you've got a strong opening.

8. Build the Message, Keep the Focus, and Make the Point.

In 1986, Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas delivered the keynote address at the Democratic Nominating Convention – the one that made Michael Dukakis the nominee. Clinton spoke. And spoke. And spoke.

At the end of an hour or more of misery for the audience, he said "In conclusion..." and was interrupted by the crowd's thunderous applause. They were thrilled that the speech was finally coming to an end.

I'm sure no one but the speech writers remembers a single thought he expressed that night.

Most politicians and business leaders failed to learn from that example.

There was a time when the super-long oratorical address was treasured. After all, there was no television, no internet, no radio or film. Newspapers, the theatre and public speeches were the main sources of information and entertainment.

That's why Edward Everett's more than two-hour oration at Gettysburg got the rave reviews, while Lincoln's concise and focused speech was considered to be short-changing the audience.

The days of "tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've told them" are gone. Or at least they should be. What's important is to tell them what they need to know and tell it to them in a way they'll remember.

On pages 34 and 35 of *How to Sell Yourself*, I illustrated the "need to know" point with the O.J. Simpson trial. The prosecution spent WEEKS on the DNA evidence.

All the jury needed to know was that DNA is more accurate than fingerprints, and that the defendant's DNA was found all over the victims' bodies and the crime scene. That meant the jury had the equivalent of an eyewitness to two murders. Case closed.

But no. The prosecution put the jury to sleep with two weeks of droning testimony. The defense took the jury from a deep sleep to a coma with even more weeks of DNA experts, and the jury was left remembering nothing important.

There's no such thing as dull material; only dull presentations. "My material is dull." I hear that a lot. It's surrender. The audience has come to hear about that very topic. The challenge is to make it interesting, dynamic, and relevant. And remember my mathematical formula: simple + brief + clear + concise = easy-to-understand. Add "memorable" and you have a winner.

9. Close Strong.

Speakers rarely know how to end a speech. So many offer a weak "thank you" and exit stage left. It's the equivalent of the Warner Brothers cartoon ending, "That's all folks!"

Lately, the world of political speechmaking has changed "Thank you" to "God bless you and God bless America." It's not an ending, it's an exit line – a way to get off stage. And who'd have the nerve to criticize such a prayerful ending? I would!

Look at the Gettysburg address. The country was in far more trouble than we are now. President Lincoln was no less a believer than today's politicians. But did he give a rote ending to his speech? No, he closed strong:

...that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

If you do thank your audience, make sure you thank them FOR something – coming out in a blizzard, for example. Sometimes I thank the audience for "loving me back."

You might thank the sponsor who brought you. One way I've thanked a sponsor who paid for my appearance at a not-for-profit association meeting is: "Anyone can give you a great shrimp cocktail and a wonderful filet mignon. But tomorrow it's gone. If you're taking away anything you can use for the rest of your life, please remember it was brought to you by the XYZ Company." Believe me, the sponsors love that message.

Another strong ending is a memorable reminder of your message. Sometimes I close with the Chinese proverb "Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I'll understand."

Get your imagination working for you and, as they said in vaudeville, "Always leave them wanting more."