

How to End a Speech

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People in my speechwriting workshops often ask how to structure a speech – especially how to end it.

The first thing I tell them is to ignore the old saw that says “Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them.” Audiences don’t need to be bonked on the head. What they do need is to know at every moment where the speaker is going so they can stay with her.

That means you have to construct an invisible arrow that goes straight through the speech, beginning to end. For some speechwriters, that means a formal outline. Others use less structured notes that serve the same purpose, but still keep the speech on track.

What the opener of the speech should do is pretty obvious: It should grab the audience by the lapels -- with a story, a shocking statistic, a question, a scenario of the future, or some other device that draws them in. The body of the speech should go on to establish the theme and flesh it out with convincing arguments, weaving in stories and (depending on the subject and occasion) humor. Preferably all in about 20 minutes.

Writing conclusions is often tougher. (Which is why so many speakers trail off with things like “Well, I guess that’s all . . . Are there any questions?”)

The best way to figure out how to make the ending memorable is to think about why the speech is being given in the first place. Is it to motivate the audience? Amuse them? Educate them? Give them a ringing call to action?

Once you’re clear about that, it’s easier to come up with a conclusion that achieves the objective. Usually, that means “looping back” to the opening.

The ending of Barack Obama’s famous March 2008 speech on race in America is an example.

It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.

Since the speech was given in Philadelphia, across the street from where the Declaration of Independence was signed, he opened with the Declaration's opening words: "We the people." His ending recalls his beginning.

If you started the speech with a big question like, "If the world does not take action on global warming now, where will we be 20 or 30 years from now?," end it by giving your answer. It will probably be such a frightening prospect the audience will *want* to take action.

If the speech started with a funny story about how badly the speaker did in school – or that he was a juvenile delinquent -- end with how got to be head of his law firm.

Whatever the tone or subject of a speech, you want the audience to feel satisfied when it ends, as though it had been worth every minute to show up and listen.

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