

Five F's For Fabulous Speech Formation

By: Vic Clevenger

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I love to speak! I eat, sleep, drink and breathe speaking. I get a thrill when I stand in front of a crowd of people and begin to express what I have learned to them. The butterflies I have those few seconds I wait to be introduced are exhilarating. The bit of nervousness I feel just helps to get the adrenaline flowing. As I step out onto the stage all that gives way to an exciting time of rapture. I love speaking so much that I even teach it as an adjunct professor at a private college in Florida.

It is hard for me to comprehend sometimes why people fear speaking so much. We have all read and heard about survey after survey that places public speaking as one of the top fears among people. But why is *glosiophobia* such a burden for some? My students ask me every semester, “How do you do it?” “How do you give a speech?” “How do you prepare?” One of the reasons people are afraid is that they do not know where to begin. So I teach them the method that works for me in forming a fabulous (I hope) speech.

FIND THE IDEA

One of the questions I get the most from my students is, “Where do you find the ideas for speeches?” The answer is very simple. So simple in fact it will amaze you. I find ideas ... everywhere. A person just has to be an observant observer. I have come up with topics for speeches from some of the strangest places.

While driving back home in eastern Kentucky I observed a plot of land where a house once stood. The reason I knew a house used to be there was that I saw three items that gave it away. I saw a chimney that stood there alone. I recognized the concrete foundation upon which the house once stood. I even knew where the family used to enter this home because there were three steps that led up and in. These three items have led to obvious speeches (and illustrations) on vision, goals, and building on firm foundations.

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You also must be a person who reads everything that you can get your hands on. Will Rogers was the most sought after and best paid speakers of his day. He is quoted in books and speeches all the time and by everyone. Wherever his travels took him he had the major newspapers delivered to him and he would scour each of them on a daily basis. This kept him informed and current. It also formed ideas for his speeches.

We as speakers must get in the habit of doing the same. I am not suggesting that we have every major newspaper delivered daily to our homes and hotels (besides most hotels will already have a local and major newspaper available). But I am suggesting that if you are not a reader that you begin right now and if you do read, keep it up. I love to read everything I can get my hands on. I always have a book, newspaper or magazine in my hand and often time reading a couple at a time. From the pages that flow from a printing press are ideas that are as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

Formulate a Plan

Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance. We have all heard this little phrase or a form of it sometime in our lives. This little nugget of gold is relevant to everything, especially speeches. But many have the notion that once the idea is formed that the work is done and they can speak off the cuff. Mark Twain said, "It takes me 2 weeks to write a good impromptu speech." Winston Churchill used to give all his speeches impromptu until he gave a poor one. After that he would spend hours preparing and practicing an upcoming speech so it would seem as if he came up with it on the spot. Several speakers and speech coaches suggest that for every minute you are scheduled to speak you prepare for an hour (1 minute of speaking = 1 hour of preparation). This may not be a bad rule of thumb. Many speakers start off with great ideas and good intentions but fail because of lack of planning.

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The main focus when forming a plan around your new speech idea is to make it memorable. I can not tell you how many times I have forgotten what the speaker has said because it simply had nothing in it that made it memorable. It is a waste of everyone's time and energy if the speaker does not spend time preparing and constructing the speech in such a way that the listeners go away with the knowledge of what you have said in their memory. Another reason to spend the time making the speech memorable is so you as the speaker will remember it. I know that sounds funny but unless you read your speeches (please tell me you don't do that) you need to remember what you have prepared so you can present it effectively.

It was my turn to speak on evening in a Toastmaster meeting and the speech was only to be 5-7 minutes in length. I spouted off my introduction flawlessly and moved right into my first point without missing a beat. It was the beginning of point number two that made me come to a sudden and complete halt. I looked into the air to see if my point was written somewhere on the wall or in a mysterious cloud. Embarrassed I continued on stumbling and stammering trying to move past the wall but it was insurmountable. Once I finally remembered my point I was able to move on and conclude. This occurred not because I was nervous but because I lacked making the speech memorable to myself.

One of the best ways to make any speech memorable to both the speaker and listener is making the points into an acronym or acrostic. This is the plan I use more often than not. Let me give you an example of what I mean. Comedian Jeff Foxworthy joked, "If an episode of Walker, Texas Ranger ever changed your life ... you might be a redneck." Well, one evening while watching Walker, Texas Ranger, District Attorney Alex Cahill had established a home for women who have been in the system and could not seem to get ahead. In an effort to help these women move forward she began the House of H.O.P.E. (Helping Our People Excel). So I took

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this acronym (and story) and made it into a memorable speech I give to businesses that want the people they work with to excel.

Although they are a good way to make it memorable, acronyms and acrostics are not the only ways. You can use word pictures for each point. It can be your presentation skills that help them to remember. There are a number of ways and a good speaker will use several in an effort to plant the speech idea deep into the minds of the listeners. But regardless of the memorable method the main point is to take the preparation time to make it so. Your listeners deserve it.

FACTS, FUNNIES, and FABLES

Coming up with an illustration is easy, they are everywhere. Coming up with the right one is where the difficulty lies. "Do I want a statistic or a funny story?" "I am not a good joke teller but I enjoy conveying facts." There are illustrations for every type of point you want to make in a speech. I personally lean toward telling stories, preferably humorous ones. But sometimes one needs to back up the point with statistics which on the surface can seem boring but can be extremely helpful to the speech's credibility.

Bill Cosby has made millions telling funny stories of his childhood in Philadelphia. Do you remember *Fat Albert*, *The Cosby Show* and if you have a preschooler ask him or her if they know *Little Bill*. His TV career has been established on his ability to convey his life's story in a very humorous manner. Almost everyone has seen a video of Bill Cosby's live comedy performance. It is full of one humorous story and joke after another and have no trouble finding our funny bones. When we finish hearing them we can not wait until we get to re-tell them. How many funny stories and jokes have you told to the first person you met after you heard it?

But not everyone is as good a comedian as Bill Cosby, Jerry Seinfeld or Jeff Foxworthy, so try adding a good story. Everyone loves a good story, this is why our DVD cabinets are full.

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We go to the movies, watch TV, and read fictional and non-fictional books all because we love a good story. They do not have to always be funny. A simple definition of a good story is that it connects with the listener. We have all heard the stories that touch the heart as well as the mind. Look for these stories everywhere, especially in your own life. Personal stories in a speech make you a bit transparent and approachable to the audience. One word of caution, when telling personal stories about yourself make sure they are about you. In other words DO NOT STEAL a personal story and claim it as your own.

World renowned speaker W Mitchell has a unique story of his life. He was conveying thoughts on storytelling to a group of professional speakers and warning those in attendance about stealing another person's story. The point he was making is that someone will eventually be in the audience and know that if it is your story or not. In fact someone had taken his story and claimed it as their own. This type of behavior is simply unethical.

Now here is a word about facts. Usually when we think of facts we picture those pesky, boring statistics. Whether it is a statistic or historical event or a quote from someone, facts are one of the most important parts of the speech. It will appeal to those analytical types that are in your audience. They will realize that you are not all smoke and mirrors but contain substance. They will see that you have put in some time and effort into your research. In addition to appealing to the analytical it reveals to the others that you know what you are talking about. Bottom line is that facts will give you and your speech credibility and as a speaker they should be embraced.

FIRST THINGS FOURTH

I love watching movies, especially the classics. Great movies have a way of grabbing your interest from the very beginning. Take the movie *Rear Window* with James Stewart for

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instance. The opening scenes have you intrigued because the star of the movie, the hero, is in a wheelchair confined to his room with a camera in his hand looking at the other apartments. You can not wait to see what happens to him. A more recent movie would be *Forrest Gump* where the hero starts off as a little boy who has physical and mental shortcomings but learns to overcome both and ran his way into our hearts and onto our DVD shelves.

The same can be said of your speeches. As a speaker the introduction is probably the most important part of the speech but the least amount of time is spent here. A lot of speakers researched, planned and with great skill and precision put a magnificent speeches together that would greatly benefit the hearers. But sadly no one would hear much of them because the speaker just threw together his introduction and most of the audience zoned out because they were not intrigued from the very beginning.

We can discuss, argue and otherwise debate the fact that it is the body of the speech that has the most meat and therefore the audience should listen closer to that part. That may be true but the fact is, that if they are not hooked within the first 30 seconds or so then you have to try doubly hard to get them back later in the speech, if you can at all. If the speaker does not WOW them at the start what makes the listener think that this speaker will WOW them at any point throughout the speech? But how do you WOW your audience?

There are many ways this can be accomplished, you just have to be creative and spend time developing your introduction. Perhaps you like to tell stories or are a comedian at heart. Choose a good story that fits your speech like a glove and practice it. Tell it to yourself in the mirror and to your spouse. Use it at parties and family gatherings. These are great times to practice new opening material. If it does not work with them (they do not seem interested or do not laugh) then chances are it will not work with your future audiences and you have just saved

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your speech introduction.

Here are couple pieces of advice about telling jokes. I was talking with a preacher years ago and told him that I always begin my speeches with a joke. He told me something that now seems as common sense as anything but back then it was like a ton of bricks just hit me in the head. The illumination of this advice has stuck with me for years and I tell my speech classes this every semester. *If you are going to open with a joke make sure it directly relates to your speech otherwise do not waste the audience's time.* See I told you it was common sense. From that moment on every joke I tell in my introductions relates directly to my speech.

While we are on this subject allow me to tell you another piece of common sense advice that I just learned. Again once you hear it you will say, "Boy that is obvious." I agree. This piece of advice is so obvious that I overlooked it for years. This ray of light is, *do not tell a joke to begin your speech. The reason for this is that there will be people in your audience that have already heard it. If you are re-telling the same joke that many have already heard the audience will perceive that the rest of your speech is just as un-original as your opening joke.* Opening up with something original is always better and will ensure that no one else has heard it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Do you remember the movie *Old Yeller*? What memory stands out the most to you? If you are like me it is the end when (if you have never seen this movie stop reading and go watch it then pick up right here when you are through) the boy has to shoot his dog because Old Yeller contracted rabies. Perhaps you remember the end of *Gone With The Wind* where Rhett Butler leaves Scarlet sitting on the staircase as he utters those famous words, "Frankly my dear..." If the introduction grabs us and the body of a speech holds us then it is the conclusion that goes home with us.

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Conclusions should be handled with the same amount of care and time as the introduction. They should not be rushed or thrown together but rather send the listener home ready to put what he has learned into action. The conclusion of the speech is more than just knowing when to stop speaking. This is a time to call your listeners to action based on what you have taught them during the course of your speech.

Some conclusions will recap the main points of the speech while others draw on the emotional side of the audience with a touching story. Although there are several ways to conclude a speech one of the ways I tell my students not to use is the phrase, "In conclusion..." I tell them to come up with more creative and thought provoking ways to conclude. The phrase "In conclusion" and other variances lack flair and thought for the transitional point from body to conclusion. When listeners hear the words, "In conclusion" they stop listening and start preparing to leave. The part you want them to hear the most and they totally miss the call to action that you have so diligently prepared for them. Seek to be creative when you conclude.

As you prepare for your next speech remember these little Five F's for fabulous speech formation. With this process you will go onto to develop well thought out speeches to captivate audiences both great and small.