

Practitioner's View

Lend Me Your Ears! Ten Tips For Writing Speeches

An IPD Seminar

In April 2005, IPD held a seminar on writing speeches. On the panel were Bilahari Kausikan, Second Permanent Secretary (Foreign Affairs), Ong Ye Kung, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister and Albert Chua, Principal Private Secretary to the Senior Minister. While each of the panelists took a slightly different viewpoint, they all agreed that the key to writing a good speech is to think clearly, consult widely and write simply. A summary of the main points from the session is below.

1. Think Clearly

Good thinking is the basis of good writing. Identify the purpose of the speech. Is it meant to entertain, inform, inspire, instruct or persuade? You should be able to crystallise the main argument of the speech into one paragraph. Once you have determined the main argument, map out the broad direction of the speech before starting to write. Ideally you should spend more time thinking than writing.

2. Engage the Principal

Do not attempt to second-guess the agenda of the speech—clarify it with the principal or his staff. If feasible, listen to his previous speeches. That should give you some insight to what works and what does not work for him. Run the outline of the speech by him to see if he agrees with the broad direction of the argument.

Where there is a clear agenda, argue the case professionally and do not shape it according to

your personal convictions. Where there is no clear agenda, you can propose one.

If you disagree with the principal on how the arguments are to be expressed, explain the reasons for your approach together with your outline. People are generally open to other views if they are reasonably presented.

Remember that this is an occasion for your boss to show off, not for you to show how smart you are.

3. Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Remember that not every speech will break new ground. Some speeches on the same topic are made several times to different audiences. Do not hesitate to plagiarize previous speeches made by the principal. In fact, politicians may not want to say something new every time. There are, however, some ways to alleviate the monotony—you can use different arguments, expressions and anecdotes to arrive at the same point.

4. Know Your Audience

Know the cultural, political, social and economic context of the audience. Is it a local or an international audience? Is it an intellectual audience like the Asia Society? Or is it a neighbourhood audience? Does the principal share their values and cultural references?

Taking the political context into consideration does not imply having to be politically correct. What it means is leveraging on such knowledge to bring the message across more effectively.

In most cases, you will address multiple audiences in a speech. These considerations should factor into the way your points are expressed.

5. Work with Others

Consult widely and wisely. Family members, friends and colleagues can be excellent sources of ideas and feedback. This year's Foundation Course provided the main ideas for PM's speech at the Administrative Service Dinner. Do not restrict yourself to the public sector—for PM's National Day Rally last year, details about the Duck and Hippo tours were obtained from the company itself and not from a government agency. Bounce the speech off different people to see how it works with them. Consultation is all the more important when you have to write a speech and know little about the topic. Get ideas from the experts.

6. Write Clearly and Simply

Good writing does not consist of ornate language and rhetorical flourishes. Be clear and succinct. While the language will vary according to the type of audience, one rule of thumb for speeches to local audiences is to write as though you were speaking to a Secondary 3 student. Use plain language, simple words and short sentences. Keep expressions simple: instead of using "58 percent", say "more than half". Use the active rather than the passive voice.

Read your drafts aloud as you write. Speeches are meant primarily to be listened to, not read, and must have an immediate impact; what looks good written on a page might not sound good. For some writers, dictation may be a good way of composing a speech.

7. Use Anecdotes and Statistics

Anecdotes are useful if chosen wisely and used sparingly. They build the emotional quality of the speech. Relevant anecdotes however, are not always at hand when you need them. If you write speeches regularly, it can be helpful to keep a collection of anecdotes and newspaper clippings to draw on. *The New Paper* and *Today* can be very useful sources. Be wary of including jokes—telling them is a very personal matter.

Many speeches rely too heavily on statistics as a substitute for an argument. Choose only a few striking statistics which support the main argument strongly.

8. Don't Angst about Style

Customize the style according to the speaker if you can. What makes for a great George Yeoh speech does not make a great Minister Mentor speech. However, style is not the writer's primary concern; most of the best speeches have been written in point form, which goes to show that the thinking and content that go into a speech are of greater importance than its style. Angst about content, if you must, rather than style. Ultimately, the principal will change the style if he is not comfortable with yours.

9. Prune and Polish Mercilessly

No speech should exceed half an hour. Having too many points is as bad as having too few. Right from the start, as you map the outline, prioritize the points you truly want to bring across.

Make sure the facts you quote are accurate—check your sources. The quality of the facts, not the quantity, determines how well a point is delivered. Even if an argument has been brilliantly argued and structured, its integrity is put in question if it contains even one dubious point.

In pruning and polishing, read the speech aloud to yourself and sleep over the draft if there is time.

10. Evaluate

If you have the chance, listen to the speech when it is delivered. Learn what worked and what could be improved.

Three Pitfalls to Avoid

A lack of preparation: writing before you are ready

A lack of clarity: not knowing the main argument

A lack of focus: trying to do too much