

Turn your speeches into conversations

Wendy Cherwinski

One way to achieve a conversational tone in your speeches is to write out loud.

Achieving a conversational style

My favourite definition of a speech consists of a single word. A speech is - or it should be - a conversation. That's certainly what I tell people who attend the speechwriting workshops I run in Ottawa, Canada's capital city.

Generally, my students are public servants and employees of national associations and other non-governmental organizations. Often they are policy analysts, program managers or people who do communications as part of wider duties. They spend most of their time writing briefing notes, position papers, reports and other documents that are meant to be read. But occasionally, they need to use the skills of a speechwriter.

Needless to say, one of the biggest challenges they face is learning how to shake off the constraints of written language and adopt a conversational style. It can be a bit of a leap for someone who is accustomed to writing formal documents to escape the gravitational pull of stiff, bureaucratic language.

Write out loud

One piece of advice that I share often gets a laugh. I tell the class that the easiest way to make a speech conversational is to write out loud. Rather than write down a thought and then try to say it, I urge my students to say it out loud and then write it down.

Expressing an idea out loud in conversational language helps to lift the information off the written page. The end result is often livelier and more succinct. It also becomes much easier for the speaker to say the material and for the audience to follow, absorb and remember what they hear.

Sometimes there's a bonus. When I practise what I preach, I frequently find myself answering my own oratory with quips or little asides. At the very least this exercise keeps my creative juices flowing. But, the odd time a remark makes it into the final draft, giving the speech a light off-the-cuff sound.

More tips

Here are three more tips for writing conversational speeches that I like to share in my workshops.

Favour the SVO format

Write in the SVO format (subject, verb, object). For example: Speechwriters are more than wordsmiths. When we speak English, we most often follow the SVO format to structure our thoughts. As a result, this is the way we are accustomed to hearing spoken language and

absorbing its meaning. Plus, the SVO format favours the active voice. Active verb constructions are simpler and convey more energy than passive constructions.

Keep it simple, sweetheart

Avoid subordinate clauses. They weigh sentences down with too much information. The more complex each sentence is, the more difficult it becomes for the audience to follow and absorb what the speaker has to say. To keep sentences simple and straightforward, limit them to one or two ideas.

Verbs trump nouns

Seek out and destroy noun strings. It's a fierce uphill battle for listeners who have to scale the rock face created by great piles of nouns. For example, ...the sustainability, predictability and stability of the capital acquisition program will be dependent on discipline, strategy and execution. That's verbs in them that hills. Extract and refine them and then use them to restate the ideas in more conversational language. Both your speaker and your audience will thank you for the effort.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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