

Genre Guidelines for Ceremonial Speaking

Guidelines for speeches to inform or to persuade apply for ceremonial speaking (historically called *epideictic* rhetoric). In ceremonial situations, however, audiences also expect standard forms or traditional patterns of speaking.

The ritual or familiarity of the “genre” or type of speech can be comforting to the audience-community in times of sadness, or emotionally rewarding for an audience-community in times of celebration. An important challenge for a speaker in preparing a ceremonial speech, then, is both to meet expectations and to convey a distinctive message. Crafting a “fitting” speech without being too creative matters for successful achievement of speech goals.

The purpose of this short guide is to outline standard forms or genres so that, as you consider what are the needs of the audience you are called to address, you can achieve a good balance of fittingness and originality.

Speech of Introduction

- The key purpose is to create harmony between the speaker and the audience, such that the audience likes and respects the listener, and wants to listen well.
- Based on research and consultation, be brief, but adequate. If the speaker wants particular things to be said, or not said, honor those requests. Be sure you can pronounce the speaker’s name correctly.
- Your role is to enhance the speaker’s credibility, so consider what familiarity the audience has with the speaker. You may want to emphasize the appropriateness of the subject or the speaker for the given situation.
- Remember that you are not the main speaker; you should not speak for more than 3-4 minutes. As you include emphasis on the importance of the speaker’s topic, avoid explaining the topic in depth or covering the speaker’s content.
- Avoid commenting on the person’s speaking skills. Be a model listener to the presentation.

Speech Presenting an Award or Honor

- The key purpose is to communicate honor, appreciation, and recognition.
- Unless surprise is part of the tradition, name the person early in your speech.
- Explain briefly the criteria for the award, how the person was selected, and by whom.
- Incorporate a brief anecdote or story to convey something unique about the person, in addition to a list of achievements or admirable qualities.
- If a tangible object is being given as an award (e.g., trophy, plaque, certificate, etc.), and that object has a particular meaning to the group, explain what it symbolizes.

Eulogy or Memorial Speech

- Only agree to speak if you are able to keep your composure.
- Acknowledge shared feelings of sadness, loss, even anger, but avoid dwelling on those.
- Celebrate the value of the person by highlighting key attributes.
- Use language that brings the group together, such as “all of us . . .” “we all know . . .”, and communicate to the closest survivors that they are supported by a caring community around them.
- Try to frame the loss in a larger, optimistic perspective. Often this can be done by focusing the good qualities of the person toward the future (perhaps as a model), or by sharing a quotation, a short poem, or similar text that focuses thoughts forward.
- Avoid playing on the captive grief of the listeners to promote any specific religious, political, or social cause.

Speech of Tribute

- Examples include: anniversary of a birth, commemoration of an historical figure, dedication of a building or other structure, or a speech of nomination.
- The key purpose is to honor the memory or give a memorial to a person, event, or thing; or to highlight the attributes and achievements of a person as a nominee for recognition or leadership.
- Develop a good understanding of the subject.
- Focus on building respect, fostering appreciation, and/or promoting emulation of the values or behaviors being honored.
- Be fair and objective, and avoid stretching the facts. You can focus on virtues and achievements, even as you allow the person you are honoring to be human.
- Tributes often call, at least in part, for a more elevated style than daily discourse.

A Toast

- Choose your language carefully. You can use humor, puns, metaphors, etc., but avoid being corny or contrived. It is acceptable to express your sincere thoughts gracefully without stretching to be witty.
- Craft a short message of goodwill and then practice, practice, practice until you have it memorized.
- If the toast is a longer speech than just a few sentences, wait until the close to ask the audience to raise their glasses.

Accepting an Award or Tribute

- Unless you have been asked in advance to prepare a major speech, keep your remarks to a few sentences.
- Accept the honor with pride, as well as humility, and share the honor with those who deserve it.

- Give something back to the audience, such as a tribute, an insight toward the future, or a humorous story related to how you have worked with them.
- End with a future-oriented comment about what the award or honor means to you.

References from which the foregoing content was gathered:

Ross, R. S. and D. K. Leonard. *Introduction to the Speechmaking Process*, 14th edition. BVT Publishing, 2012, pp. 397-406.

Sprague, J. and Stuart, D. *The Speaker's Handbook*, 3rd edition. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984, pp. 284-289.

Another short guide from Pennsylvania State University is available at

<http://sites.psu.edu/cas100a/wp-content/uploads/sites/5195/2014/05/CeremonialSpeaking.pdf>.

Prepared by Kristine Bartanen, Professor of Communication Studies

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