

Graduation Speeches

Brief: Typically, commencement speeches touch on a shared theme or common beliefs, often featuring words of wisdom or a call to action, and are less bound by the structure found in other forms of public address, like eulogies or wedding speeches.

Learning Objective: Identify the attributes of commencement speeches delivered to mark the milestone of graduation.

Key Terms:

- Commencement speech: A speech given at graduation, often by a prominent figure in the local or global community as part of a larger schedule of commencement ceremonies.
- Protocol: Acceptable behavior in a given situation or group.

Commencement Speeches

Graduations are often viewed as conclusions to educational endeavors. However, by definition, they mark beginnings, too. One you graduate from an academic program, you commence to the next phase of your life. Therefore, graduations are often called commencements and, therefore, graduation speeches are called commencement speeches.

Commencement speeches are often given by a prominent figure in the local or global community as part of a larger schedule of commencement ceremonies, including the granting of diplomas.

Typically, commencement speeches touch on a shared theme or common beliefs, often featuring words of wisdom or a call to action, and are less bound by the structure found in other forms of public address, such as eulogies or wedding toasts.

Effective Commencement Speeches

The purpose of a commencement ceremony is to affirm each student's educational accomplishments. The most effective commencement speeches celebrate their current achievements in the context of their anticipated future goals and experiences.

Commencement ceremonies generally include a long list of protocols that need to be included, which vary from school to school. For this reason, commencement ceremonies can be long (and at times tedious), adding pressure to the commencement speaker's need to be engaging, entertaining, inspirational, and memorable.

Examples from Effective Commencement Speeches

The following is an excerpt from a commencement speech delivered by George Saunders, an American author of short stories, essays, novellas and children's books, at Syracuse University in 2013:

Down through the ages, a traditional form has evolved for this type of speech, which is: Some old fart, his best years behind him, who, over the course of his life, has made a series of dreadful mistakes (that would be me), gives heartfelt advice to a group of shining, energetic young people, with all of their best years ahead of them (that would be you).

And I intend to respect that tradition.

Do all the other things, the ambitious things—travel, get rich, get famous, innovate, lead, fall in love, make and lose fortunes, swim naked in wild jungle rivers (after first having it tested for monkey poop)—but as you do, to the extent that you can, err in the direction of kindness.

Do those things that incline you toward the big questions, and avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial. That luminous part of you that exists beyond personality—your soul, if you will— is as bright and shining as any that has ever been. Bright as Shakespeare's, bright as Gandhi's, bright as Mother Theresa's. Clear away everything that keeps you separate from this secret luminous place. Believe it exists, come to know it better, nurture it, share its fruits tirelessly.

The following is an excerpt from a commencement speech delivered by J. K Rowling, a British writer well known for the Harry Potter series, at Harvard University in 2008:

President Faust, members of the Harvard Corporation and the Board of Overseers, members of the faculty, proud parents, and, above all, graduates...

Actually, I have wracked my mind and heart for what I ought to say to you today. I have asked myself what I wish I had known at my own graduation, and what important lessons I have learned in the 21 years that have expired between that day and this.

And someday, in 80 years, when you're 100, and I'm 134, and we're both so kind and loving we're nearly unbearable, drop me a line, let me know how your life has been. I hope you will say: It has been so wonderful.

From Concept to Action

Consider the excerpts above. What makes these commencement speeches particularly effective? How do they honor tradition, while at the same time managing to be engaging, entertaining, inspirational, and/or memorable in a unique way? What can you learn from these expert writers and speakers?

OER TEXT SOURCES:

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