

## What Makes Special Occasion Speeches Special?

**Brief:** There are moments in our lives when we participate in gatherings that bring people together for special purposes; these gatherings call for the development and delivery of special occasion speeches.

**Learning Objective:** Understand the factors that set special occasion speeches apart from other speeches.

### Key Terms:

- **Rite of passage:** A ceremony or series of ceremonies, often very ritualized, to celebrate a transition in a person's life. Baptisms, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals are among the best-known examples.
- **Special occasion speech:** A type of speech delivered at gatherings that bring people together for special purposes.
- **Storytelling:** The conveying of events in words, sound and/or images, often by improvisation or embellishment.

## What is a Special Occasion Speech?

There are moments in our lives when we participate in gatherings that bring people together for special purposes. Some of these special gatherings occur around milestone events, such as births, graduations, weddings, and funerals. In other cases, we're called to special gatherings through our school, work, or civil involvement to honor those who have made significant contributions to supporting a group's endeavors. These types of gatherings call for the development and delivery of special occasion speeches.



*A graduation speech is an example of a special occasion speech.*

Special occasion speeches call on us to congratulate, toast, celebrate, or say goodbye in creative and eloquent ways. Through these special occasion speeches, we reinforce our group identities, show others admiration and respect, or serve as a source of comfort.

Chances are that you will be called on many times in your life to present special occasion speeches, so it's important to know what sets them apart from other types of public speaking.

## Speaking from the Heart

Compared with other types of speeches, special occasion speeches are more likely to incorporate an emotional tone. Because special occasion speeches most often occur alongside major rites of passage, the intensity of feeling associated with these major life events is

reflected in these speeches. A single special occasion speech can include a wide range of emotion, profound sadness to intense joy.

While persuasive speeches may use emotional appeals, or pathos, to convince audience members to agree with a particular point of view, special occasion speakers use pathos to seek heart-felt connection.

### ***The Power of Storytelling***

Storytelling is the conveying of events in words, sound, and/or images, often by improvisation or embellishment. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation, and instilling moral values.

Most special occasion speaking incorporate some form of storytelling for several reasons:

- Good storytelling engages the hearts and minds of the audience.
- Stories are universal forms of expression that unite people, bridging cultural, linguistic, and generational divides.
- Storytelling is an appropriate way to honor those who are receiving recognition at a special occasion, whether because of an award, graduation, wedding, or death.

### ***Good Storytelling***

Good storytelling shouldn't be forced, but should come across as a natural part of your speech. Remember you're sharing a story so that your audience will connect with and care about the person you're honoring. Your narrative should be something heart-felt with which your audience can easily relate.

If you're called to give a special occasion speech about someone who you don't know well, take time to learn more about them. If possible, ask others who are closer to them to recall their stories and share them as appropriate.

If you can, keep your stories short and sweet. Limit your narrative to three or four minutes at the most. Even if the details of the story are compelling, sharing too many of them will risk losing your audience's attention.

The best stories paint a picture, so use sensory language when you share yours. Give enough detail to allow your audience to visualize what you are saying.

Make sure your story has a beginning, middle, and end. A good story builds over time so it doesn't get boring. Keep your audience interested until the end.

### ***From Concept to Action***

Storytelling is an art form. Professional storytellers share polished performances that bring words to life, from their memories, a book or script, or improvised inspiration. Although we may be lacking in professional polish, the rest of us (you included) are storytellers, too. Think of the last time you told a story. Perhaps you were sharing a significant memory with a group of friends? Or maybe you were sharing the events of a particularly stressful day with a friend or family member? Recall the elements of the story you shared. Did your story have a beginning,

middle, and end? Or did you present it in a way that was jumbled and difficult to follow? Did you share every little detail? Or did you select only those details that really mattered? Next time you tell a story, how might you be able to convey your meaning more effectively?

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