

Using Humor in Special Occasion Speeches

Brief: Humor is one common method special occasion speakers use to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy with their audience.

Learning Objective: Understand the appropriate use of humor during a special occasion speech.

Key Terms:

- **Punch line:** The final part of a joke; the word, sentence, or exchange of sentences that is intended to be funny and provokes laughter from the listeners.
- **Self-deprecating:** Expressing disapproval or being critical of oneself, especially modestly or humorously so.

Why Use Humor?

Although the specific purposes and requirements of each special occasion speech can vary widely, all special occasion speakers share the challenge of connecting with their audience in a way that's meaningful to their specific event. Humor is one common method speakers use to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy with their audience.

Audience members have a positive physiological and psychological response to humor. Studies show that exposure to humor can increase personal resilience and undo the negative effects of stress. For this reason, humor is often used as part of special occasion speeches, even at the most somber of events, including funerals.

Types of Humor to Avoid

Special occasion events are primarily public events that require adherence to cultural norms. Some types of humor that might be used by speakers at private gatherings or by professional comedians—such as aggressive humor, sarcasm, and picking on individuals—are inappropriate at public gatherings. Racist, sexist, and other discriminatory humor are always inappropriate and should never be used.

When told well, respectful jokes can stimulate just as much laughter as harsh or crude jokes. And, polite jokes are more likely to contribute to a positive atmosphere at an event.

Sometimes we pick on ourselves, getting a laugh at our own expense. This is referred to as self-deprecating humor. When it's done in a light-hearted manner it can stimulate an empathetic response in the audience and help build a connection. However, when it's overly negative, it can make an audience feel uncomfortable.

Tips for Using Humor Effectively

If you're preparing to deliver a special occasion speech, determine at what point in your speech you'd like to use humor. Inserting a well-chosen joke in your introduction can strengthen your connection with your audience and put them at ease. Including humor intermittently during the body of your speech can provide breaks from more serious elements of your speech and help to hold your audience's attention throughout. And, concluding with humor can leave your audience with a positive memory and help set the tone for the rest of the special event.

Here are some practical tips for preparing jokes:

- Know your audience. All aspects of the joke you tell—from the content to the length—need to be suited to your audience. Compare the kind of humor you find funny today to types of jokes you used to laugh at when you were a child. Do the same things make you laugh? Consider age, but also other demographic and psychographic factors.
- Listen to your favorite comedians telling jokes. What makes you laugh? Pay special attention to how they set up and deliver jokes.
- Never plagiarize jokes.
- The opening of the joke—or setup—should be realistic and at the same time bigger-than-life in order to be funny.
- Be sure to pause before your punchline. Waiting an extra second or two right before your joke's conclusion will get you a bigger laugh.
- Practice, practice, practice. Tell the jokes to friends and family, over and over again. But, at the same time, try to maintain a certain level of spontaneity. The best jokes are well-rehearsed, but not overly rehearsed to the point of sounding completely scripted.

From Concept to Action

Being able to deliver an effective joke is a very special skill. If everyone could do it well, we'd all be well-paid standup comics. But, even if you're not planning to make your living entertaining others with humor, being able to tell an effective joke is a skill worth nurturing. Therefore, start preparing now. Notice what other people do when they tell jokes. If the person does a good job, take note of how they set up and delivered the joke, as well as the tone they used while telling it. Notice how the person uses timing and pauses as part of their effective delivery. Consider how you could add touches of humor to stories drawn from your life experience. And, when you get the chance, practice adding those humorous touches. Don't expect to get it perfect the first time. Almost everyone appreciates an opportunity to laugh, though, so you might be surprised at how much fun using humor can be!

OER TEXT SOURCES:

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