

The Pros and Cons of Memorizing Your Speech

Brief: One of the main challenges of delivering a speech from memory is that you're likely to sound rehearsed or, worse yet, like you're reading.

Learning Objective: Demonstrate how to deliver a speech from memory in a way that appears natural and relatable to the audience.

Key Terms:

- **Gesture:** A form of non-verbal communication in which visible bodily actions communicate particular messages.

Public Speaking as Conversation

Successful public speakers know that public speeches are most effective when the audience feels that you are engaging in a meaningful conversation with them. One of the main challenges of delivering a speech from memory is that you're likely to sound rehearsed or, worse yet, like you're reading.

It's possible to memorize and deliver a speech with vocal variety and a sense of audience connection, but to do so you need to pay special attention to the following:

Interactivity

Rather than talking "at" your audience, it's important to be viewed as speaking "with" your audience. Audience members should have a sense of interactivity, a perception that you are giving information as well as receiving their feedback.

Eye contact

In most Western cultures, people who avoid eye contact when speaking are viewed in a negative light, as withholding information and lacking in general confidence. People who make eye contact, even if only briefly, are seen as respectful and courteous.

Voice

You want to speak naturally, but loud enough to be heard by all the members of the audience. You also want your voice to reflect a conversational vocal variety, a natural ebb and flow of pitch and tone.

Gestures

A gesture is a form of non-verbal communication in which visible bodily actions communicate particular messages, either in place of speech or together with and in parallel to words. You want to avoid any gestures that seem to rehearsed or contrived or those that might, out of nervousness or habit, distract the audience from the message.

The Pros and Cons of Speaking from Memory

When reading a manuscript speech, it's extremely difficult to maintain eye contact and remain conversational. By contrast, when you memorize your speech, you are more easily able to make eye contact and to stay in touch with your audience. Once you've committed your entire speech to memory and know exactly what's coming next, you can also focus more attention on the audience.

On the other hand, reciting a speech from memory is a bit like making an internal audio recording. As you're repeating your memorized recording, you run the risk of momentarily losing your place. It can feel as if your internal audio recording just turned itself off. In the best of circumstances, this creates an awkward pause and self-conscious recovery. In the worst of circumstances, the stress of losing your place can become overwhelming, causing you to forget the rest of what you're expected to deliver. Without notes to fall back on, what should be a momentary lapse can easily become a larger problem.

Tips for Delivering Memorized Speeches

Below are some guidelines to follow when delivering a memorized speech:

- Develop an outline of the main points and then memorize the outline.
- When writing the speech, write as if you were speaking naturally, directly to an audience.
- If delivering the same speech to different audiences over time, memorize the individual sections and then weave them together for each occasion.
- If you forget a word or two or a small section, just continue speaking.

From Concept to Action

Are you tempted to memorize your speech because you think it will make your speech easier to deliver? Memorizing your speech is actually more difficult than you'd first think. Not convinced? Try it yourself. Select a sample of at least three paragraphs from a piece of expository writing, such as an article from a magazine or a passage from one of your textbooks. Read it to yourself, over and over, until you have it memorized and can repeat it at will. Then, stand in front of a mirror and recite the piece out loud in a conversational tone of voice – at the same time that you attempt to maintain eye contact with yourself. How'd you do? Did you lose your place? Did your voice retain a conversational style or did it become monotone? Were you able to make enough eye contact to convince your audience that you're speaking directly to them? Based on this experience, do you think memorizing your entire speech will be a good choice for you?

OER TEXT SOURCES:

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