

## Limited presentation time?

# Create a Speech on Short Notice

By Angela Libby Jankousky, ATM-S

*Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of.*

— Benjamin Franklin

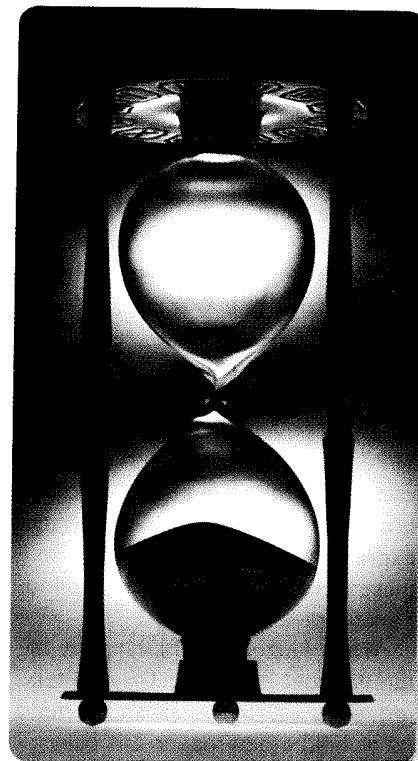
## Consider the 3 P's: purpose, practice and polish.

One summer when wildfires were raging across Colorado, I was talking with a friend on the phone. Her home was near one of the largest fires. She hadn't been ordered to evacuate, but was told she might be asked to leave on short notice if the wind direction changed. She told me that she was watching the house of a neighbor who had left town before the fire started. She had called the neighbor for instructions on what to snatch out of the house in the event of an evacuation. The neighbor faxed a list that was organized as follows:

- If you have only one minute, take Nana's needlework. It's hanging in the entry.
- If you have five minutes, take Nana's needlework, the photograph albums on the coffee table and the candlesticks on the mantle.
- If you have an hour, take ... and here there was a detailed list that specified the location of each item.

### Purpose

I liked the way the neighbor had organized her list. Nana's needlework was an embroidered wall hanging



her dear grandmother had made while losing a battle with cancer. To the neighbor, it was the most important thing in the house. If you have just a few minutes to prepare for a speech, spend your time zeroing in on your purpose. Ask yourself, "What do I want to accomplish? How do I want my listeners to be different after they've heard what I have to say? What is the Nana's needlework of this presentation?"

The answer to that question isn't always obvious. Before I joined Toastmasters, I was asked on a number of occasions to provide status reports to my company's senior leadership. I would spend significant time preparing. Like the good engineer that I am, I buried those folks in data and smothered them with detail. Finally, my exasperated boss said: "Look, these big shots are not about to make detailed decisions on these matters, that's your job. In fact, there are only two things they can do. They can fire you or they can give you a promotion. Which do you want it to be?" My next presentation was a well-focused status report, and I got the promotion.

Your purpose for each speech is different. You may want to propose a

course of action, to entertain, to inform or to inspire. If you can't state your purpose in one succinct sentence, you may be trying to do too much. My purpose for this article is this: I want you to be able to give the most effective speech you can – whether you have minutes, hours or days to prepare.

If I have only a few minutes to prepare, I concentrate only on achieving my purpose. If I can think of a good example to illustrate my point, I use it. If not, I make my point as clearly as I can and then I shut up. Listeners appreciate a speaker who doesn't ramble.

### Practice

If I have a few hours of preparation time, I still begin by writing one sentence that states my purpose. After that, I type out my thoughts on the computer. You may organize your thoughts on the back of an envelope or any way that suits you. As you prepare your speech, ask yourself whether each additional point furthers your purpose. If so, use it. If not, leave it out.

I try to be sure that I have included stories or personal experiences to illustrate each of my points. In this article, I used the Nana's needlework story to illustrate my point about zeroing in on your purpose. One well-illustrated point is stronger and more memorable than multiple points that are explained, but not illustrated.

Toastmasters' *Better Speaker Series* on "Preparation and Practice" contains useful suggestions on how to practice a speech:

■ **Practice ideas, not words.** A memorized speech is dangerous. If you lose your place, you're sunk. Additionally, you lose the spontaneity of being in the present. When you actually give your speech, you'll be able to insert comments about something from earlier in the meeting, as in, "This is consistent with the point Bill was making just a moment ago."

■ When you practice, **say your speech aloud to yourself.** I go through the

speech several times silently using my written notes and make changes and improvements as I go. Then I make a crib sheet of my main points and run through the speech out loud. The first run-through is painfully rough – I'm glad no one is listening.

■ **Run through the speech several more times, finishing it each time.** If you miss a point, keep going. Then go back to the section you had trouble with and work on it until it's smooth. When you're happy with it, go back to the top. That way you get practice in recovering from missteps and you spend equal time on each part of the speech.

If I had only one or two hours to prepare a short speech, that's probably the most I'd accomplish. I'd really know my purpose, and I'd have prepared and practiced a speech that hammered home that point. I'd probably practice it a time or two in the car on the way to the meeting. I used to worry that people would think I was talking to myself. Now I figure they'll think I'm talking on a hands-free cell phone.

### Polish

Contest speeches, important presentations or presentations to large audiences merit the highest level of preparation: polishing. Your investment of time to polish your speech honors your audience. Their time will be well spent listening to a speech that is succinct, stays on point, and is fluid, well-practiced and illustrated with memorable stories.

To polish a speech, practice it a number of times, working on gestures, inflection and pacing. Winston Churchill was one of the greatest public speakers of the last century. His rule of thumb for speech preparation was to spend one hour preparing to speak for each minute of his speech. He would spend 20 hours preparing to give a 20-minute speech!

The *Better Speaker Series* on "Preparation and Practice" suggests that you focus on one aspect of

delivery at a time. On your first run, work on vocal variety. Next time, practice gestures that enhance your meaning. Then, experiment with pacing.

If at all possible, rehearse your speech in front of several different audiences prior to the one that really counts. Each audience is different, and you will learn something new from each session. In 2001, Ed Tate won Toastmasters' International Speech Contest and was named the World Champion of Public Speaking. Ed not only practiced at his own club but also at as many other clubs and venues that would hear him. It paid off. He not only won the championship, he is now a sought-after professional speaker.

I'd like to conclude with a quote from Sir Winston Churchill, who said:

*If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever. Use the pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time – a tremendous whack.*

If you have only a few minutes to prepare to speak, focus hard on your purpose: your single most important point. What's the Nana's needlework of your presentation? If you have several hours, develop a speech that really supports your main point. Make sure it contains compelling illustrations and omits fluff that doesn't serve your purpose. Practice conveying the ideas without memorizing the speech. If the speech is important and you have adequate time, polish your speech. Add gestures, vocal variety and pauses. Arrange to rehearse your speech before different audiences.

Each of us has a limited amount of time to use or squander as we choose. The discipline of purpose, practice and polish allows me to create an effective speech, whether I have minutes, hours or days to prepare. ■

**Angela Libby Jankousky, ATM-S**, is a member of ASC Speakeasy Club 8361 in Lakewood, Colorado.