

The ART of the Start

How to Get a Great Start to Your Speech or Presentation

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What do you think are the two parts of a speech that causes the most concern to public speakers? If you said “The opening” and “the closing,” you are spot on. Most speakers can reasonably deliver the “body” of their talk – the part that contains the bulk of the content of the speech. They just don’t know how to get started and how to bring the speech to a satisfactory conclusion. The sad truth is that however good the body of the talk is, if the opening is poor, a substantial portion of the audience may lose their interest in the speech before the speaker gets to the body of the talk. Think of it this way: If you are looking at houses to buy, would you be attracted by a house that has an ugly color on the front door, cracked windows, peeling paint on the outside and a weed-filled front yard? The inside of the house could be beautiful, but we tend to judge a house by what we see of its outside before we enter it, don’t we? We tend to believe that if the outside looks terrible, we probably won’t like what we see inside. Likewise, members of an audience will make up their minds if they want to pay attention to your speech (translate: enter the “house” of your speech) by what they perceive from your introduction (the “outside of the house” of your speech). So the introduction of your speech plays a crucial role in the success of your talk. If you are to get the audience to “enter your house” you need to attract them to it. Let’s find out how we can create an inviting beginning to your talk or presentation.

The opening typically takes about 5% to 10% of the time of the entire speech or presentation. The opening serves as a bridge to connect the audience to three important things: a benefit to the listener, the topic, and to you, the speaker. As a speaker, there are three things to keep in mind about any audience: (1) the audience’s attention has to be captured. The speaker has to overcome visible and invisible distractions to get the audience members to pay attention. (2) Every listener suffers from a human condition called egocentrism. Imagine that each person in the audience holds a tin cup with these words engraved on it: What’s in it for me? WIIFM. This is the most tuned to radio station in the world! (3) By the end of the introduction listeners would like to have an idea of where you are going to go with your speech. Just as people don’t want to walk blindfolded, they also don’t want to listen with no idea as to where you are going to go with your talk.

My ART of the start technique is a simple but effective way to address the above three concerns:

ATTENTION
RELEVANCE
TOPIC

Grab the audience’s attention; acknowledge the audience’s WIIFM tin cup by showing relevance between the subject and the audience’s self-interest/s; lead into the topic and give a brief preview.

ATTENTION

The ABC of gaining the attention of the audience is this: To gain the Attention of the audience, you must Believe that you have something of value to say and you must mentally Command the interest of the audience. Another way of saying it is that you must genuinely believe that you have something of value to say and that you are worthy of the attention of the audience. That internal belief will cause you to display natural and effective body language, relaxed but commanding vocal tones and a focus on the topic and the audience that will cause them to want to listen to you.

Five Attention Grabbing Techniques

1. Ask an Intriguing Question

There is something in the makeup of the human mind that causes it to want to answer an interesting question that is asked of it. To use this technique, you throw out to the audience a pre-planned question that is intriguing and is likely to engage the minds of the listeners. The answer should lead into your speech topic. For example, if your topic is the technology behind Global Positioning Systems (GPS), a simple question to open your introduction could be, “When you are driving in unknown parts of the country, what can be your best friend?” An intriguing question can be, “What connects a satellite, a computer and a traveler?” Do you see how the attention of a listener can get sucked in with the right question?

2. Make a Challenging Statement

Newton’s third law of motion states “Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.” When you make a challenging statement, members of an audience (or at least some members of the audience) will push back, either mentally or verbally. When that happens, you’ve got the audience’s attention. You want to design the statement in such a way that the “push back” leads into the introduction of the topic. For example, if you are speaking to employers about the subject of customer service, a challenging statement might be, “Your most important customer is not your customer, it’s your employee.” The push back from the audience might be, “What do you mean? I’d have no business if not for my customers!” That push back allows you to state the Central Idea of your speech: “Happy employees give superior customer service; so your primary customer should be your employee!”

3. Use an Appropriate Quotation

The right quotation can be the perfect bridge to connect your audience to your speech topic. Generally, if the author of the quotation is highly respected in that topic area, audience members are more likely to engage their minds with the quotation. However, even an anonymous quote that is enlightening or humorous can be a very effective way to grab the attention of your audience. For example, if you are going to speak about generosity, you could use a quote like this to capture the attention of the audience: “It has been said, “A man who is wrapped up in himself makes a very small package!” Today I will share with you the secret that helps you break out of any small package and enrich and warm your world.”

4. Tell a Short Illustration or Story

There is something in us that loves a good story. Start telling a story at your next party and watch how people around you turn and start paying attention. The key to using a story as an attention grabber is that the story should be short, it should be interesting, it should make a point, and it should relate to your speech topic.

Here's an example of an opening story: "Accidents can reveal to us what is important in life. I had an experience like that when I was about 18 years old. It was a Friday evening in my hometown in Colombo, Sri Lanka. My High School was having a fair and a dance. I was looking forward to joining friends there for a fun evening. My parents were going to be there too. That evening at home, after a quick bite to eat, I showered and changed and went downstairs to let myself out when I realized that the front and back doors were locked and everyone had left. I didn't have a key to either door. I didn't want to unlock a door from the inside and leave the house with an unlocked door. So I went back upstairs, lowered myself down to a ledge that ran along the upper side of the house, grabbed the edge of the ledge and swung down, planning to hang for a second and then let go to land on the lawn below. However what happened was that as my body swung down in an arc, my right foot went crashing through the glass of the dining room window below! Fortunately my shoe protected my foot from being cut, but I was concerned about what my parent's reaction to me might be. Would they reprimand me for not paying attention and getting stuck at home without a key? How about the expense of replacing the large pane of window glass that I had destroyed? My excitement about the evening dampened by these worries, I went to the fair and when I saw my parents, told them about what happened. Imagine my relief when their reaction was not of reprimand but of concern for me and gladness that I had not been hurt! They never mentioned the cost of replacing the window or my inattentiveness to what was going on in the house that I got locked in by accident. The message that came through to me was that my parents valued my well being far more than a pane of glass! That accident revealed something I remember to this day – the priorities of my parents. Do your children know where you stand in terms of the priority they have in your life? Let's take a closer look at the topic of our talk today, Communicating Love to Our Children.

5. Show a Visual Aid

Some studies indicate that 60-70% of the world's population is visually oriented. We live in a world where people are used to constant visual stimulation. A visual aid is an effective attention-getter if it is interesting or intriguing. There is no need to say anything when you start off by showing a visual aid that captures attention. In fact, when you show the visual aid in silence, since there are no sounds to listen to, the eyes of the audience will gravitate towards the visual aid. Some topics naturally lend themselves to opening with a visual aid. Many years ago I gave a talk about magic. I opened the talk silently – simply showing a silk scarf to the audience, mysteriously moving my hands around gracefully (as I thought a magician would do), and suddenly, voila! The scarf had turned into a walking stick in my hand! Then I said one word – "Magic!" and the audience was hooked.

Combine Attention Grabbing Techniques

Any of the above techniques can be combined to create a powerful attention grabber. You are only limited by your creativity ... and the time limit of your speech!

RELEVANCE

The next thing to do after you capture the attention of the audience is to create relevance. Earlier in this article I mentioned the radio station to which all human beings tune in – WIIFM – 'What's in it for me?' An effective speech opening addresses this need by helping audience members perceive that there is something in your talk that will provide value in an area of their

need or interest. This is how your talk will appear to have relevance for the listeners. When you spend sometime thinking about how your talk can address a need or interest of your audience, you will find that the way you structure the talk becomes more audience-centered. Always endeavor to make the talk about them (the audience) and not about you!

Sometimes gaining the attention of the audience and creating relevance are rolled into one. Here is how I recently captured the attention of an audience by creating relevance. The topic of the talk was Communicating Effectively. “World famous trainer Anthony Robbins said, “The quality of your life is the quality of your communication.” Why do you think he would say that? How does the quality of your communication affect the quality of your life? (I then waited for responses from the audience, acknowledging each response). Note that in this instance, audience members who answered the questions were creating their own relevance to the topic! Creating relevance will make the audience members want to listen to your speech.

LEAD IN TO THE TOPIC

After capturing the attention of the audience and creating relevance, only one more thing needs to be done to complete the introduction: lead into the topic. This can be done with one or two straightforward sentences. For example, in the case of the talk mentioned in the above paragraph, I said, “If the quality of your life is affected by the quality of your communication, then our topic today, ‘Communicating Effectively’ is of vital importance to all of us, isn’t it? Let’s consider specific ways we can increase our communication effectiveness.”

When Giving a Preview

Some talks more than others should have a preview to give the audience an idea of where you are going to go with your talk. A preview is especially applicable to an informative or educational talk. A preview also will satisfy the “need to know” of some members of the audience. A preview takes only a few seconds to deliver but can help the audience be more attentive.

An example of a preview as applied to the talk mentioned above on effective communication could be:

“We are going to learn a philosophy that lays the foundation for powerful communication, three techniques for connecting with an audience, and a simple approach that will make your audience want to listen to what you have to say.”

As important as it is to know how to open a speech, it is also important to know how NOT to open a speech. Following are five things to avoid doing when opening a talk:

1. **Apologetic Statement**
This weakens your credibility and gives a reason for listeners not to pay attention to your speech.
2. **Joke or Story that Does Not Relate to the Topic**
There is a popular myth that one has to open a speech with a joke. Don’t use a joke or story unless it has direct relevance to the topic. Never tell a joke that you don’t feel is

funny, even if it relates to the topic.

3. Trivial Observation or Question

A weak observation or question casts doubt about your competence and the value of your presentation.

4. A Long and Slow-moving Statement

Don't put the audience to sleep before you even get to the body of your talk! Some people say that the worst thing a speaker can do is to bore his audience. Stay away from anything that suggests lack of energy and passion.

A good speech deserves a good start. Follow these suggestions and you will not only get a great start to your speech, but you will help your audiences get more value from your speech.

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