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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, AND Q&A, TOO

Sometimes speechwriting help comes from where you least expect. Here's an old lesson, that's too often forgotten, plus some thoughts on how to turn lemons into lemonade, and how to use questions in your speech to win over an audience.

- [1] Speeches: The Spoken Outline
- [2] Speeches: Use Your Mistakes
- [3] Speeches: Getting the Most out of Q&A's.

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**1. Speeches: Getting the Most out of Q&A's**

It's a fairly common device for speakers to engage audiences by asking them questions during the speech. Tom Mucciolo, a business presentation expert and president of Medianet, has some good advice on how to use those questions to win over an audience. (<http://www.medianet-ny.com/>)

He says that if you ask a question that is difficult for the listeners to answer, you may alienate them. After all, no one likes to get the wrong answer or be shown up as uninformed in front of a crowd.

So stay away from asking questions of fact. (Who knows how much the United States invests in solar power? Which of Shakespeare's plays focuses on leadership?) Instead ask for opinions. (What's your biggest worry about the environment? Who's the most impressive speaker you've ever heard?) Those are questions audiences simply can't get wrong.

Listeners are guaranteed to look good when they reply. That will get them on your side and help keep them engaged throughout the speech.

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**2. Speeches: Use Your Mistakes**

Most speechwriters agree that, if you're going to use humor, the self-deprecating variety is the safest bet. It helps the audience identify with you by showing that you not only have flaws, but that you are willing to laugh at them yourself.

There is also a specific variety of self-deprecating humor that can be especially effective—embracing your mistakes. This is especially true when you know that many in the audience will know about your mistake. Here's an example.

Recently, Business Roundtable, AARP and the Service Employees International Union joined together in an organization called "Divided We Fail," dedicated to raising public awareness about the crises in health care and retirement benefits. The groups paid for full-page ads in national publications. But when the first one was printed, the word "Divided" was dropped somehow.

Here's how Business Roundtable President John J. Castellani handled the incident. "Congressman Steny Hoyer told me last week that he never would have stopped to read our partnership's ad in the *Washington Post* the morning of our launch, had it not been for the now-infamous and rather unfortunate omission of the word "divided" from the copy. He said, "I had to find out: What kind of a group runs an ad proudly proclaiming "We fail!"?"

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### **3. *Speeches: The Verbal Roadmap***

Remember that old chestnut about writing a speech: "Tell the audience what you're going to say. Say it. Then remind them what you just told them." It's an approach that some speechwriters shy away from, fearing that it's not "creative" enough. I'm a big believer in the first part of that advice, however, especially when the speech is going to be fairly long and wideranging.

Telling the audience what you're about to say to them is a kind of verbal roadmap that lets people know what kind of journey is ahead, and where it will lead.

It helps create what speech writing guru Fletcher Dean calls "active listening," because—done right—it's a tantalizing hint of what's to come and gets the audience involved. For a short speech, the "roadmap" can be as basic as, "Today I want to make four points."

For longer speeches, you'll need a fair amount of creativity to make the audience want to come along.

Surprise is good. For example: "I'm going to start by reviewing the challenges we face, but I'm going to end with some conclusions that may surprise, or even shock you."

And everyone loves a mystery: "I'll start with a mystery—why has this problem that everyone agrees must be solved proved so intractable. Then I'll try to suggest some ways we can start to solve it."