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FINISHING STRONG

"You live and die by how you start." That's what I tell people in my OpEd-writing seminars. But how you finish is important, too. Here are a few tips for strong endings that will help you get your message out.

- [1] Speeches: Wake 'em up
- [2] OpEds: You grabbed them once, grab them again
- [3] E-mails: Tell a friend.

1. Speeches: Wake 'em up

I'll be honest--I have a tough time with the endings of speeches. Too often, I use up my energy crafting a compelling opening, then finding ways to weave all kinds of diverse material together into a whole that's coherent and - ideally -- engaging. So by the time I near the end, I feel pretty tired and cranky about still having to come up with a strong finish.

If you get those feelings, fight 'em. No matter how super the first part of your speech is, audiences' attention has the tendency to wander by the time your speaker hits the home stretch.

So how can you wake that audience up again and make listeners remember the speaker's point? First, give them some advance notice of what's coming: "I'd like to leave you tonight with a vision." Or "a question," or even "a vision and a question."

Then deliver. Finishing with a question can be effective, because it makes the audience think: "Do we want to leave our children with fewer acres of wilderness than we enjoyed?"

A warning isn't bad either: "There is no shortage of good ideas. But unless we decide to take action now, scientists may never find the cure these families need."

Whatever you choose, find an ending that breaks the flow of what came before, and is easy to remember.

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2. OpEds: Zing 'em.

I do believe an OpEd will fall flat without a good beginning. But it's kind of like a tennis swing--you won't score a point unless you end with a good follow through, too.

To learn how to finish strong, look at the OpEds or other opinion pieces in today's paper. I bet you'll find that the good ones have a final paragraph that echoes the opening of the piece. If it starts by talking about Iraq and Vietnam (arguing whether one is or is not like the other), the piece will probably return to Iraq and Vietnam at the end.

And that is the key. To finish strong, find a way to take the reader back to the beginning (what I call the grabber) of your OpEd piece. If you start with a joke about the presidential race, return briefly to that joke. If you start out talking about a patient who needs medical research, return to her at the end. And so on.

3. Action E-mails: Spread the word.

A good action e-mail is very darn short and really, really focused; so you don't have to worry about keeping your audience awake at the end or reminding them what the piece they're reading is trying to say.

Instead, use the ending of your e-mail to spread the word. Don't forget: one of the great things about e-mails is that they are supremely easy to forward. Just a couple mouse clicks does it. So use the end of an e-mail to encourage your readers to do just that. Something like:

"It only takes a minute to help. And if you forward this message to your friends and family, we'll really get the ball rolling."

Sounds pretty basic, but tests show that a message like this can really help.

So you live and die by how you start, and you make an impact by how you finish, too!