

ROADMAPS FOR WRITERS

One of the challenges of writing an OpEd or a speech is to provide your audience with new or even surprising information, without ever making them wonder, "Where the heck is this thing going?" If a listener feels lost during a speech, or a reader can't follow an OpEd, he or she will stop paying attention—and fast.

In this issue we suggest some ways you can provide roadmaps for your audience. The tips will keep you on course as a writer and ensure your readers will follow the trail you're blazing.

- [1] OpEds
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1. The OpEd Roadmap: All Paths Lead to the Point

A good OpEd introduces the point it wants to make early on, ideally in the first paragraph. Something like,

"The Texas legislature is now considering a bill, HB 1175, that is meant to address the public's worries about human cloning. Unfortunately, although the bill is well intentioned, it could devastate the medical research enterprise in Texas."

The point is then followed by five or six short paragraphs that are meant to prove it. To keep the reader from getting lost, be sure to read each of these paragraphs carefully, making sure it is crystal clear how each links to the beginning of the OpEd. No detours. Better still, ask someone who doesn't know the issue at hand to read the paragraph in question. See if he can see the link quickly. If his eyes glaze over, reshape the evidence paragraph or use something else.

Don't leave your readers stranded.

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2. The Speech Roadmap: Don't Wander Too Far from Your Theme

When you write an OpEd, you only have to capture an audience's attention for a few minutes. With a speech, you may have to keep the audience with you for fifteen minutes or even longer. To keep their minds from wandering, start with a strong theme. As you move from one part of the speech to another, keep

returning to that theme. You don't have to be compulsive about it, referencing the theme in every paragraph. In fact, one of the fun parts of speech writing is you can wander off the beaten track just a little bit. Just be sure to return to the theme regularly.

So what is a theme, anyway? It can be a great phrase or metaphor. Churchill, of course, was the master. A long speech on the Soviet threat invoked the powerful image of "the iron curtain." During World War II it was "their finest hour" and "blood, tears, toil, and sweat." A theme can also be a personal anecdote or a memorable event that happened to you, or some other kind of "story" -an historical event, a fable, a recent news event, even the punch line of a joke.

Just remember, in a speech, all roads should lead to the theme.

3. [The Perils of PowerPoint](#)

In an attempt to keep an audience following along, many speakers use Microsoft's PowerPoint to illustrate their speeches. Edward Tufte, a design specialist has sounded a loud warning. His "The Cognitive Style of Power Point," is a withering assault on the world's most popular presentation software. You can find it at www.edwardtufte.com.

I'm more of an agnostic. PowerPoint can be great, if you use it to highlight your speech with graphics. It can be deadly, however, if you use it to outline your speech bullet by bullet on the screen. You'll turn your audience into readers, not listeners.

In his essay, Tufte includes a brilliant satirical piece, created by Pete Norvig, on the PowerPoint version of the Gettysburg Address. The final "Summary" slide reads

- o New Nation
- o Civil War
- o Dedicate Field
- o Dedicated to Unfinished Work
- o New Birth of Freedom
- o Government Not Perish