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Inject your voice, passion into manuscript speeches

Speaker's Notes

By Brian Regrut

When I became the speechwriter for a telecommunications company, I studied previous speeches and scrutinized videotapes of the CEO's presentations. His speeches sounded as though someone else wrote them. He delivered the lines as though he wasn't interested in the talk. He drew attention to the manuscript with each page turn, sometimes even stopping in the middle of a sentence as he turned the page.

Some presentation consultants would say this CEO breaks an age-old speaking rule by reading a speech that's been written in its entirety. But I believe it's perfectly acceptable to read a speech -- if you make your audience believe you wrote it, if you're passionate about it and if you read without drawing attention to the pages.

Sound like yourself

Whether you rely on a speechwriter or write your own copy, the speech must sound like your own words. Think about how you speak in conversation. How long are your sentences? What words do you prefer? What words do you avoid? After you've written your ideas and draft copy, rewrite the speech so it sounds like something you'd say to someone in a one-on-one conversation.

When writing for myself, I like to read my speech aloud with a tape recorder on. This helps me judge by ear whether what I've written really sounds like the way I talk. When I worked with the CEO, I taped our conversations and discovered key phrases he liked to use. I placed those speech patterns into the speech copy, which made him sound authentic when he delivered the speech.

Tap into the power of believing

If you believe what you are saying, let your audience know. You convey passion to listeners through your voice and body language. By selecting the right words and putting them in sentences that convey belief, you can work passion into a speech manuscript.

Keep your sentences short and personalize your ideas. Consider the difference in expressing something as mundane as statistics in a report. Instead of saying, "A recent study reported..." you might say, "I read a study the other day and learned that ...". Personalizing content shows the audience you really care about the subject. To emphasize the CEO's passion for his subject, I added a few of his own "I believe" and "I know" statements, which I had captured on tape during our discussions. These were his personal beliefs, and the audience not only heard but felt them.

Make the manuscript invisible

Subtle steps you take in speech preparation and at the podium can help you minimize the appearance of reading from printed text:

Print your speech in the largest type size necessary to read without reading glasses. Use a serif typeface, such as Times New Roman. Don't use all caps.

End each page with a complete sentence. Even if you leave a third of the page blank, you won't be caught in the middle of a sentence when you move to the next page or be stranded if your pages get out of order.

Use a transparent color marker. Highlight the phrases you want to emphasize.

Keep two pages in front of you at all times. Start with page one to the left of your pile of pages. As you finish page one, discreetly slide page two to the left as you speak. Continue sliding -- not turning -- each sheet to the left.

Slide a finger down the text just beneath the line you are speaking. That way, when you lift your head to speak to the audience, you can immediately return to your place on the page.

Place a small Post-it note at the place in your text where you plan to ad-lib a few remarks. This frees your hands and brings you back to the script when you're ready.

Memorize your opening and closing. Deliver both with energy and conviction.

Some of these techniques may seem to be common sense, but they have quite an impact before an audience. Consider the transformation of the telecommunications CEO. Within several months, he delivered an important company address. Afterward, audience members talked about his great speech and the confidence he inspired.

Although I'd love to claim credit for the turnaround, the speaker deserves the accolades. As a presenter, he took the necessary steps to convince his audience that he wrote the speech. He delivered it with passion because he believed what he was saying. And he employed these techniques to de-emphasize his use of a prepared manuscript.

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