

# Ceremonial Speeches

You will hear a great many informative and persuasive speeches in your lifetime, but some of the more memorable presentations you encounter will be of neither type. Instead, you will be more likely to remember creative and colorful commemorative speeches than the informative speech about the state of your company's finances, or the persuasive speech designed to get you to vote for a candidate. These commemorative speeches are the third general category of presentations, and they contain characteristics that make them quite distinct from informative and persuasive remarks.

In this chapter, we will first explain the different types of commemorative speeches, paying particular attention to the contexts in which they occur. We will then detail how these speeches differ from informative and persuasive speeches before concluding the chapter with some helpful suggestions for creating and delivering a good commemorative address. As you will see, these speeches contain room for creativity and can be some of the most enjoyable speeches to write and deliver.

## Types of Commemorative Speeches

Many different occasions call for a celebratory speech. These speeches are called commemorative because they commemorate, or celebrate, a person, event, object, or even an idea. In this section, we will identify and discuss five different forms of commemorative address with which you might be familiar. The first, and saddest, is a eulogy, which occurs when someone passes away. The second form of commemorative address is a toast, which is reserved for happier occasions. The next two take place when someone presents, or receives, an award. Finally, we will detail a specific form of commemorative address you will hear in the not-too-distant future: a graduation address.

### Eulogies

The first type of commemorative address we will discuss is a **eulogy**. Eulogies are emotional speeches; however, that emotion need not be one of sadness. As we indicated in the definition above, commemorative speeches are celebratory, not depressing, and so eulogies should be a celebration of a person's life, not a moment to focus on his or her death.

If you are called upon to deliver a eulogy, you will most likely have a few days to prepare your remarks. These types of speeches should focus on major events and accomplishments in the life of the deceased. Since these speeches are to be celebratory and happy, you might also consider telling a humorous story about the deceased person. It is imperative, however, that you do not appear to be mocking the person, but rather emphasizing a positive quality he or she exemplified during life. This story helps to establish a common bond between you, the audience, and the dearly departed person.

Although eulogies are intensely personal and emotional speeches, you should take care to talk about the person in such a way that the audience feels involved. You should refrain from telling "inside jokes" that people in the audience would not understand or appreciate. The speech is as much a moment of emotional release for you as it is for them. In fact, eulogies are best understood as communal celebrations of a life, and not personal retrospectives about another individual. They should emphasize the qualities of the person by telling specific stories from his or her life that illustrate those aspects. You are, in essence, creating a way to remember another person.

### Toasts

In contrast to eulogies, one of the more entertaining and enjoyable commemorative speech events involves giving a toast. The most common occasion when toasts are used is at a wedding. If you are the maid of honor or best man at a wedding, you will likely give a toast for the bride and groom. Like eulogies, wedding toasts are personal in nature and are celebrations about the union of two people. Of course, toasts occur at other times than just weddings, such as at holidays and dinner parties, but the same general expectations apply. Usually you will know you will be delivering a toast well in advance, so you will have plenty of time to prepare your remarks for the occasion.

There are certain characteristics and expectations common to all toasts. First, the person making the toast should talk about the person being toasted by connecting that person to the occasion and the audience. Often this is accomplished through telling a brief anecdote about the person you are toasting. In all toasts, it is important to name the people being celebrated or honored and discuss the qualities that make them deserving of a toast. Remember, these events are celebratory in nature and should never be confused with roasts where the honoree is mocked. Toasts also are usually quite short, rarely going beyond two or three minutes.

### Presenting an Award

Toasts are not the only way we commemorate the achievements of others; sometimes we present them with awards. Like toasts, presentations of awards are usually short because you, as the presenter, are not the focal point of the event. The important person

is the one you are introducing. When presenting an award, there are certain goals you need to accomplish before handing over the microphone to the award recipient.

It is important to know if the winner of the award has been announced in advance, or whether you are the first to make the person aware of the award. If the award is announced in advance, then it is acceptable to talk about the individual by name, but if the awardee is not known to the audience then you should reserve the name until the very end of your remarks to maintain a sense of excitement and anticipation.

Regardless of whether you say the name of the honoree, or conceal it to the end, when presenting an award you still need to do several things. First, talk about the award itself. If it is named after someone be sure to discuss who the individual was and why the award is named after him or her. Explain the qualities required to win the award and how the winner fits those characteristics. This connects the award recipient with the award itself, thus commemorating the recipient and the occasion. These remarks, however, differ from those you should prepare when receiving an award.

## Receiving an Award

As we mentioned a moment ago when discussing speeches that present an award, sometimes honorees know they are getting an award and sometimes they do not. In either instance, usually there is (though not always) an indication that you might receive an award and should be prepared to speak. Based on contemporary practice, you might think that this type of commemorative address is a simple laundry list of “thank yous,” but you would be mistaken. There are, in fact, certain expectations in a good award acceptance speech, and they begin with a level of humility.

Of course, expressing gratitude for receiving the award is important and mentioning a few people who made your winning possible is always a nice thing to do, but it is not the only thing you should do. In fact, in accepting an award you should also express knowledge about the award itself and convey an appreciation of the qualities it celebrates. Thus, award acceptance speeches should exhibit gratitude and also an understanding of the award and what it commemorates. Doing this connects you to the award in a way the audience appreciates and wants to celebrate.

## Graduation Addresses

Commencement, or graduation, is an important milestone in anyone’s life, and that is why graduation ceremonies come paired with several different speeches celebrating the importance of the moment. School principals, presidents, keynote speakers, and class valedictorians often deliver remarks at these ceremonies. Should you be in a position to give a commencement address, there are several things you should keep in mind.

First, these speeches should be between five and seven minutes because there are many other elements to a graduation than just the speech, and you do not want to delay the ceremony with an unnecessarily long presentation. Additionally, these speeches should celebrate the achievement of the entire graduating class, not just yourself, so you should refer to common experiences and not personal achievements while in school. These speeches also are more forward looking than eulogies or even toasts, and should contain some discussion of what will come for everyone after graduation. In this respect, commencement addresses are hopeful regarding the future. Finally, commencement addresses should thank those who made graduation possible.

Whether it is a commencement address, eulogy, toast, or award ceremony, all commemorative speeches require that you tie the occasion to the audience. They also call for a positive tone; after all, commemorative speeches are celebrations of milestones or achievements. As they are celebratory in nature, such speeches are different from informative and persuasive speeches, and in the next section we will detail those differences.

## Characteristics of Commemorative Speeches

All speeches have certain common requirements. For example, they need to be organized, keep the audience in mind, and rely on a balance of emotion, logic, and credibility in order to be successful. There are certain elements that make speeches different. Informative speeches, for instance, are designed to convey information to an audience, while persuasive speeches attempt to move an audience to a particular belief or action. Commemorative speeches seek neither of those goals, but rather wield information in order to celebrate an event, person, object, or idea. This section of the chapter will illustrate what makes commemorative speeches different from informative and persuasive speeches.

## Language Differences

One of the most significant differences between commemorative speeches and other forms of speech is that they rely on more colorful and ornate language. In an informative speech you fulfill the role of teacher by helping an audience understand a complicated subject. In a commemorative speech you draw an audience's attention with emotional and colorful language, not information. As you are well aware, there are many ways to say something, and the occasion and audience often dictate the best way to do it. Look at a couple of examples:

**Basic:** "Today we graduate."

**Commemorative:** "Today, we celebrate four years of tireless effort that allows us to open the next chapter in our lives."

**Basic:** "Today we celebrate Larry's retirement."

**Commemorative:** "Today we recognize Larry for his thirty years of service, the countless students he taught, and the lives he changed."

Notice in each example how the language makes the event more meaningful by being more elaborate and descriptive. This is a hallmark of any commemorative speech, whether it is a toast, a eulogy, or an award acceptance.

## Emotional Quality

In using ornate language you tap into the second unique quality of commemorative speaking: the audience's emotions. How could someone not be emotional at someone's death or the celebration of a commencement? These are important events in our lives that mean a lot to us. Language provides a way to express that meaning to ourselves and others, so a commemorative address is by its very nature emotional. The emotions you express, however, must also be shared by the audience, so it is important to keep their feelings about the event in the forefront of your mind when developing a speech.

## The Importance of Context

All speeches must pay attention to audience and context, but the degree to which it is necessary is heightened for commemorative speeches. Connecting the occasion to the audience through the values being celebrated is the core element of any commemorative speech. Yes, knowing and adapting to an audience is necessary in informative and persuasive speeches, but in commemorative speaking the context, or occasion, is the focus of the speech, not something to which you adapt.

## Less Rigid Organization

One thing you should note when constructing a commemorative speech is that there are no set organizational patterns as there are with an informative or persuasive speech. When celebrating a person or commemorating an event it does not make sense to have previews, or set patterns for addressing a problem. In fact, the best way to arrange main points in a commemorative speech is topically. Make sure the topics connect to the values you are honoring in the individual or event. This topical arrangement provides commemorative addresses with a less rigid structure.

Just because they are less rigid, though, does not mean commemorative speeches have no required elements. Commemorative addresses still entail getting the attention of the audience and signaling that the end of the speech is near, but they do not contain summaries and have little cited material. They also still necessitate an engaging delivery, and depend more than other speeches on the speaker's tone and delivery to emotionally connect with the audience. Simply put, if you are celebrating something, your delivery and demeanor should convey that excitement to the audience.

As you can see, commemorative speeches have some similarities and some differences from informative and persuasive speeches. In this final section, we will provide guidelines to help you construct commemorative speeches.

## Guidelines for Commemorative Speeches

Due to their unique nature, commemorative speeches require careful attention, often in shorter periods of time than persuasive or informative speeches. After all, we are usually given plenty of advance notice when we are asked to help nonexperts learn about something or give persuasive speeches, especially in a business setting. Commemorative speeches come with some, but often not much, time to get your thoughts in order before presenting to an audience. To help you prepare commemorative speeches, we will provide three guidelines for constructing commemorative speeches.

## Connect the Audience to the Event

It is crucial for a commemorative speech to use language to connect the audience to the event. Examples of ways to accomplish this are:

- Note the reason why everyone is there together.
- Note the significance of the event.
- Note how you connect to the event, and then how the audience does as well.
- Tell stories that exemplify the values being celebrated.

Each of these strategies helps the audience understand why they are gathered at the event, and places the actual gathering as the most important element of the occasion.

## Use Descriptive Language

Commemorative speaking turns the speaker into an artist who creates a visual image of an important event. The best way to do this is by using colorful, vivid, and ornate language. Commemorative speeches do not happen every day, and so you should not use everyday language when delivering them. Rather, take the time to detail what the occasion means, why it means what it does, and why people should celebrate. This takes time and creativity, so be sure to think through exactly what feeling you want to convey and use language that does exactly that.

## Consider the Audience

Finally, you need to consider the expectations of the audience. If you are speaking at commencement, then graduation should be the center of your speech, as that is what the audience expects to hear about. Sometimes speakers use these events to push their personal agendas, addressing politics and other topics not relevant to the occasion, but that is not what the audience is there for. This is not to say that a speaker could not exhort the audience, especially the graduates, to be involved in their cause, but that should be held to a minimum. Instead, focus on the moment and values embedded within it that are being celebrated.



