



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

How to Write a Great Commencement Speech (and Why You Must)

A speechwriter's guide to giving graduates and their families the inspiration (and the fun) they deserve on graduation day.

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FOREWORD

So you need to write a commencement speech. It feels like a crush: Coming up with the insight and wisdom that graduates hold close to their hearts as they enter the world. But actually, it's going to be a rush. In fact, it will be one of your best speeches ever.

I know this because it's how I feel before and after writing every commencement speech, even after crafting well over a dozen.

Some view commencement speeches as loathsome—verbal tripe force-fed to graduates too hungover to pay attention and parents too relieved about getting their kid through college to care.

To be sure, many deserve that kind of scorn. But not all. The finest stand among the most quoted, best remembered and most beloved of all speeches.

Such is Steve Jobs' "Three stories from my life" [address](#) at Stanford in 2005 (YouTube views: 28 million). Ditto David Foster Wallace's "This is water" [speech](#) to Kenyon College that same year.

Less well-known, but equally treasured, are George Saunders' [2013 speech](#) at Syracuse ("Err in the direction of kindness"); John Waters' [2015 speech](#) at RISD ("Today may be the end of your juvenile delinquency, but it should also be the first day of your new adult disobedience."); and Chimamanda Ngzoi Adichie's [2015 address](#) at Wellesley: ("Your standardized ideologies will not always fit your life. Because life is messy.")

You're probably not writing for a celebrity. No matter. Ordinary citizens also deliver speeches that bring graduates and their families to their feet every spring.

You should shoot for nothing less.

Because for every hungover, barely-made-it grad nodding off in that sea of mortar boards, there's a bright-eyed young man who is the first in his family to graduate. And for every set of parents in the stands gleefully planning their empty nester cruise, there's a grandmother who scraped her pennies together to pay her granddaughter's tuition watching through tears as she crosses the stage.

These people are your audience, not those who look down at commencement from a place of privilege. They deserve your very best, and I hope this primer will help you give it them—and have some fun in the bargain.

FIVE QUALITIES OF SOARING COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES

Stock speeches come preloaded with expectations: Ribbon-cuttings dutifully extol the new hospital or park and stump speeches always lay out a candidate's vision.

Commencement speeches labor under no such freight.

Or at least only a very light load.

Every commencement speech should 1) acknowledge the importance of the day 2) celebrate the graduates' achievement 3) give credit to the families and 4) express thanks and pride in the university.

Presuming speakers meet those minimal requirements, they're free to talk about whatever they want.

This represents a stunning opportunity in the right hands and a deadly pitfall in the wrong ones. How can you soar rather than sink?

Great commencement speeches vary wildly in their subject and theme but share five common characteristics:

- **Impart personal wisdom based on a candid account of life experiences**
- **Relay a simple, socially sharable message**
- **Consider the present times**
- **Advise and inspire through example rather than exhortation**
- **Convey joy, fun and celebration**

Let's unpack these one at a time.

Impart personal wisdom based on a candid account of life experiences

Unlike that blowhard uncle at Thanksgiving dinner, your speaker was invited to speak at commencement. This means he or she did something in life that made someone important think your speaker had something to say.

Don't disappoint them.

The best commencement speakers tell arrestingly candid stories about their lives that serve as the foundation for their own original wisdom for graduates.

What kind of stories? While speakers may incline to the dramatic, it need not confine them. To the contrary, small, intensely personal stories may prove

more powerful, since they reflect shared experiences.

George Saunders' speech at Syracuse hits the highest note in this scale.

After some wicked humor (See below: **Convey joy, fun and celebration**), Saunders tells a childhood story about a shy new girl who joined his seventh-grade class. He and his classmates either ignored her or teased her about her habit of chewing on a strand of her hair. He recalls how the insults made her look as if "she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear" and seeing her hanging out alone in her front yard "as if afraid to leave it."

One day the girl's family moves and he never sees her again. Forty two years later, he says, he's still thinking about her and how badly she was treated.

"What I regret most in my life," he says, "are failures of kindness."

The story becomes Sanders' foundation for his advice to graduates to "try to be kinder" as they pursue their lives and ambitions. Based on his precisely rendered and devastating miniature memory, the speech is real. It's haunting. And in Saunders' masterful hands, it offers original wisdom, in contrast to the pat variety served up by so many other commencement speakers.

The 2005 Jobs speech follows a similar path. He gets straight to the personal scale of his stories in his famous opener: "Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories."

In a speech as simple and beautiful as Apple's designs, he shares experiences distinguished not by how extraordinary they are, but rather by their ordinariness.

Jobs says he took a class on calligraphy at Reed College before dropping out. Much later, what he learned in that class helped him design the fonts for the path-breaking Macintosh. Thus his simple advice: "You have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future."

Among the commencement speeches by the president for whom I write, the most successful took the same tack of moving from simple lived experience to personal wisdom. The president set up it with a direct challenge to the most tired commencement clichés:

If you've been to other commencements, you know that too many speakers dispense advice you've heard before to ... learn from your failures ... listen to your inner voice ... and follow your passion and dreams.

But what if your failures just seem like failures? What if, when you listen to your inner voice, you don't hear anything? What if ... despite having just spent years

earning your valuable UF degree ... you're still not quite sure about your passion ... or your dreams keep changing?

He then shared stories about his own uncertainties in his life, starting with changing his major, moving on to rethinking a couple of career decisions, and finally his zig-zagging path to university president.

In his experience, he concluded, uncertainty is not only OK but “has been the best part of my life’s path.”

Again, your speaker was invited because someone believed they have something important to share. You might discover this gem in the most dramatic events of their life. But it’s just as likely to be present in their own, often ordinary seeming experiences and the personal wisdom they gained.

TIPS

- As early as possible in the speechwriting process, ask your speaker to reflect on life experiences and personal wisdom.
- Stress to the speaker that the ordinary can equal the extraordinary.
- Seek fresh rather than pat wisdom, but if that’s not forthcoming, know that the right personal experience can breathe new life into old lessons.

Relay a simple, socially sharable message

Speechwriters know they can improve any speech by distilling it into a single tweetable statement (140 characters please!)

This rings especially true for commencement speeches, which have to overcome so many distractions—not the least of which is antsy graduates all too aware that this nettlesome speaker is all that separates them from their diplomas.

This requires speakers to be crystal clear about the point of their remarks very early in their speech. It also benefits from attention not just to the message, but to the medium—namely, in our times, social media.

Rather than hoping graduates and family members will ignore their phones (they won’t), speakers can embrace them—by encouraging audiences to interact with their speech before, during or after commencement.

For a speech centering on the impact of technology, my president has live-tweeted the audience and had them live-tweet back to him—with some tweets appearing (in close to real time) on the stadium big screens.

For a speech on friendship, a couple of weeks before commencement, he tweeted out a request to students for pictures and stories about their “UFBFFs.” He received hundreds of responses and shared the highlights in his speech.

Social media gives speakers an amazing power to engage in a conversation with their audience from the podium. Savvy commencement speechwriters will run with, rather than from, this power.

TIPS

- Stay current on the latest social media platforms (interview college students to learn about and use the platform du jour.)
- Begin planning social media activities early, since they will require close coordination with the university’s AV and production staff.
- Consider ways to use social media to lengthen the life and expand the reach of the speech (university relations staff can help).

Consider the present times

Today’s graduates have earned their college degrees, and that’s a timeless achievement. But they also happen to be heading out into the world in these particular times, with their unique news, politics and culture, and with fears and hopes specific to their class and generation.

Good commencement speakers usually find a way to account for this context, folding it in to their argument, and perhaps even giving it center stage.

Serving in public life as they do, politicians diligently check off this box. For example, when Sen. John McCain [told](#) Liberty University graduates in 2006 that Americans should argue vigorously but remember “we are not enemies,” he grounded his argument on the bitter controversy over the then-ongoing Iraq War, which he had supported.

“Americans should argue about this war. They should argue about it. It has cost the lives of nearly 2,500 of the best of us,” McCain said.

Speakers in other realms also fortify their speeches with nods to the present. So John Waters, in his caustic and delightful speech at RISD, pokes plenty of fun at his creative life compared to the one the graduates will encounter.

Gay is not enough anymore. It’s a good start, but I don’t want my memoirs to be in the gay section near true crime at the back of the bookstore next to the bathrooms. No! I want it up front with the best-sellers. And don’t heterosexual kids actually receive more prejudice in art schools today than the gay ones? Things are a-changing.

It's a confusing time.

The point: Good commencement speakers may talk about themselves, but they keep the graduates at center stage. Part of this means proving that the speaker understands their times and challenges.

TIPS

- Stay current with the news, politics and culture, especially where it intersects with college or 20-something life
- Check into and consider discussing recent news and events at the university where your speaker will appear
- The student newspaper is a good resource, but social media posts may point more precisely to 'what everyone is talking about'

Advise and inspire through example not exhortation

This gets us to the perhaps the most misunderstood requirement for commencement speeches: That they offer the graduates advice and that most- horrible word, "inspiration," for their lives ahead.

Too many speakers seek to fill the first requirement by larding their speeches with exhortations. To satisfy the second, they reach for the soaring but bland language that drives literary audiences to tears: 'You will define the future,' 'Live the life you have imagined,' etc. etc. etc.

Remember that the graduates have spent the last four, five or six years being lectured to. They will not enjoy enduring this experience one more time at their commencement. You won't inspire them through exhortation or verbal airs, but rather through showing rather than telling.

So when Dolly Parton describes in her delightful [2009 speech](#) to University of Tennessee graduates how people laughed out loud at her when she said at her own high school commencement that she planned to move to Nashville to become a star, it's a lot more effective than commanding them to "Believe in your dreams."

And when *Girl with a Pearl Earring* novelist Tracy Chevalier [explained](#) to Oberlin graduates in 2013 how Vermeer routinely painted objects into his paintings, and then painted over them, to make the remaining images more significant, it was much more memorable than simply saying "less is more."

And when J.K. Rowling [told](#) Harvard graduates in 2008 that she was motivated to get serious about writing her Harry Potter novels by the implosion of her

marriage, single parenthood and poverty, it meant a lot more than pulling out the old saw that “Failure can be good for you.”

To be sure, Parton, Chevalier, Rowling and many other great speakers give explicit advice (and, unfortunately, even some old saws). But the power of that advice arises from their own, lived experiences rather than their exhortation, and from their truth-telling rather than their puffery-puffing.

TIPS

- Show rather than tell
- Tell stories, don't give sermons
- Avoid clichés and platitudes or at least tailor them to your purpose

And finally ... convey joy, fun and celebration

With their gowns, processions, platform ceremonies and cringe-worthy traditions like singing the alma mater, commencements wallow in formality. Lesser speakers let this weigh them down, making only cursory attempts at humor before sinking into serious speechifying quicksand.

Don't get pulled under with them.

Nothing so delights the audience at a commencement as seeing the speaker puncture its pomp with jokes, props, on-stage antics, or all three.

The “best of” in this category in recent years surely goes to Stephen Colbert, [speaking](#) in full hooded regalia at Wake Forest in 2015:

“Good morning. Oh, what a day. What a lovely day. It's a pleasure to be addressing the Wake Forest graduating Class of 2015. I want to start by thanking the administration and the Trustees for inviting me to speak. I want to thank them for giving me an honorary Doctorate of Humanities. I'm a huge fan of humans. And I have to thank them for this thing around my neck. There's nothing you want on a chilly day like today than a nice scarf.

I especially want to thank the University president, Nathan O. Hatch, known to you as Nate Dawg, Natty O, the Hatchet, Hatch Adam, Sen. Orrin Hatch, Angel Dust. And I only made a couple of those up.

Of course, we mustn't forget the parents, who, to get you students to this day, have sacrificed so many things, primarily money. I'm sure there are other things they've sacrificed, but I'm gonna guess that money's the one they bring up most often.

Most importantly, congratulations to you, the Class of 2015. You did it.

And you look amazing. Although it's a little embarrassing you all showed up in the same outfit. Really. Even all the accessories are the same. Everyone has a black and gold tassel. Or, is it blue and white? Grandparents, just know this was the issue that divided a generation. You had the Vietnam War. Your grandchildren had an ambiguously colored Tumblr post."

Colbert is Colbert, so he's devilishly funny. But he's also clearly enjoying slicing and dicing the bloated turkey that is this particular academic ritual. You can practically feel the audience tucking into his speech.

Bono had a similarly mirth-filled opener in his [2004 address](#) to University of Pennsylvania grads, combining lacerating commencement rituals (he was given an honorary Doctor of Laws degree) with mocking himself—another useful needle for letting the air out of a notoriously windy event.

Here's Bono just after his opener:

I guess it was at that point when your Trustees decided to give me their highest honor. Doctor of Laws, wow! I know it's an honor, and it really is an honor, but are you sure? Doctor of Law, all I can think about is the laws I've broken. Laws of nature, laws of physics, laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and on a memorable night in the late seventies, I think it was Newton's law of motion... sickness. No, it's true, my resume reads like a rap sheet. I have to come clean; I've broken a lot of laws, and the ones I haven't I've certainly thought about. I have sinned in thought, word, and deed. God forgive me. Actually God forgave me, but why would you? I'm here getting a doctorate, getting respectable, getting in the good graces of the powers that be, I hope it sends you students a powerful message: Crime does pay.

So I humbly accept the honor, keeping in mind the words of a British playwright, John Mortimer it was, 'No brilliance is needed in the law. Nothing but common sense and relatively clean fingernails.' Well at best I've got one of the two of those."

My president has lightened the mood by yanking his iPhone out of his pocket to ask Siri questions. (She gave some wildly un-Siri-like responses over the AV, thanks to some behind-the-scenes technical trickery.) At a different speech, he

began speaking, only to have the entire platform party pull out and start playing with fidget spinners. He's even been interrupted in a newly rebuilt university arena by two hard-hatted workers who proceeded to "complete" the arena, ending with high fives with the president.

With some gentle irreverence and creativity, you can delight your audience by

rattling the commencement ritual. Remember: Despite all the ostentation, commencements are a celebration—and celebrations are supposed to be fun.

Tips

- Mine the college's traditions, reputation and recent news for jokes
- Familiarize yourself with its ceremony (videos help) for comedic potential
- Pull in the latest fads or products for laughs (memes, fidget spinners, Pokemon Go: Whatever's hot right now)

CONCLUSION

One of the most familiar tropes of commencement speeches, repeated in various forms by countless speakers, is that they don't remember who spoke at their own commencement or what they had to say.

While youth, exuberance and alcohol deserve some blame, the sad truth is that many commencement speeches simply don't deserve to be remembered.

This needs to change.

For all the stuffiness and anachronistic academic absurdity of commencement, it stands as perhaps our most important secular ceremony. Commencement marks a significant achievement in life, celebrates those who accomplished it and signals the final passage from youth to adulthood.

Whether graduating from big public universities or tiny private ones, Ivy Leagues or community colleges, graduates and their families deserve speakers who recognize this moment, have some fun with it, and send graduates off with speeches that delight, move—and yes, perhaps even inspire.

I hope you'll join me in doing all you can to give them that small but precious graduation gift.

If we succeed, we may live long enough to hear a statement never yet uttered by a commencement speaker: That she hopes her speech is as meaningful to these graduates as the one she heard (*and you wrote*) at her own commencement.

WRITING A GREAT COMMENCEMENT SPEECH: DOS, DON'TS AND FURTHER RESOURCES

DOS

- Appreciate this moment
- Celebrate graduates and their achievement
- Credit parents and family members
- Convey optimism
- Deflate the formality with humor
- Be funny (especially self-deprecating)
- Connect graduates to current times
- Tell personal stories (but keep the focus on the graduates!)
- Acknowledge graduates' uncertainty about the next phase
- Embrace rather than resist social media

DON'TS

- Trot out clichéd themes like “follow your passion”
- Talk about yourself without connecting to graduates
- Dishonor or overlook the students' accomplishment
- Convey pessimism
- Make the speech a platform for a political pronouncement
- Lard the speech with facts and statistics (it's not a lecture!)
- Be heavy handed with advice and wisdom (especially not that kind!)
- Speak for more than 20 minutes

Further resources

- NPR catalog of more than 350 of “The Best Commencement Speeches, Ever” <https://apps.npr.org/commencement/>
- Brain Pickings list of “The Greatest Commencement Addresses of All Time,” <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/05/20/the-best-commencement-addresses-of-all-time/>
- Graduation Wisdom (compendium of commencement speeches and quotes) <http://www.graduationwisdom.com/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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