



The Power of Humor in an Impromptu Speech

Level 4 Project



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The Power of Humor in an Impromptu Speech

About The Power of Humor in an Impromptu Speech

Humorous speeches require the participation of the audience. Being aware of and empathetic to the feelings and personalities of audience members is your best guide to delivering a successful humorous speech. This is especially true when you are called on to say a few words or give a speech unexpectedly.

You have already begun part of your preparation by building a collection of stories to help you construct a humorous speech. The other way you can prepare is by understanding as much as you can about your audience.

Resources

The following is a list of resources available in your digital project on Base Camp. Some of these resources, such as evaluations, are also available on the Resources section on Base Camp.

Project Checklist

Evaluation Resource

Impromptu Speech Topics

Introduction and Assignment

Introduction

Navigating an impromptu speech is a challenge for even the most experienced speaker, especially when you are expecting or hoping to make your audience laugh. The best way to succeed is to be prepared.

Your Assignment

Purpose: The purpose of this project is for you to develop your method for giving impromptu speeches and practice adapting rehearsed stories during a presentation.

Overview: Select topics from the Impromptu Speech Topics resource. The Toastmaster of the Day will choose one of your selected topics at random.

Your speech must last 2 to 3 minutes and include at least one anecdote that is related to the topic.

When the first speech is complete, give a second 2- to 3-minute speech on a new topic. Include a story related to the topic.

Throughout this project you will see icons in the margins next to the text. These icons indicate additional resources available online.



Video: Sign in to Base Camp to watch a video that supports this project.



Interactive Activity: Sign in to Base Camp to complete an interactive activity.



Resource: Sign in to Base Camp to view this resource online.



Weblink: Return to your digital project when you see this icon to link to a website or Base Camp location.

For all assignment details and requirements, review the Project Checklist.

Learning in The Power of Humor in an Impromptu Speech



Assess and Reflect

To assess and track your knowledge, complete the activity below by listing what you already know and what you wonder about the topic today. Add up to five items to each list. After you complete your project, you will have an opportunity to review your answers and add what you have learned.

Know

For example: I know how to connect with an audience using humor.

Wonder

For example: I wonder how I can adjust a speech to work for the demographics of my audience.

Competencies

The following is a list of competencies that you will learn and practice in this project.

- Adjust speech to audience demographics.
- Develop speech content for multiple possible topics/situations.
- Effectively engage an audience with humor.
- Respond effectively to an impromptu speaking situation.
- Understand how to use humor to connect with an audience.

The Impromptu Speech

Humor adds to any speech and can make a dry subject more engaging and entertaining. As you have worked to add humor to your speeches, hopefully you have also experienced the pleasure of laughter from an audience.

Humor in an impromptu speech—even something as serious as a eulogy—can bring heart and hope to a solemn or challenging situation. There are many times you may be invited to give an impromptu speech. Some speakers thrive on delivering unexpected speeches. Others face the experience with a burgeoning sense of panic. The most effective way of managing an impromptu speaking situation is to prepare.

Preparation for an impromptu speech is different than for a prepared speech, but it does have some of the same steps. You have already taken the most important step: keeping in mind well-organized and rehearsed stories or anecdotes. Remembering these stories will give you the tools you need to succeed when you give a speech with short or no notice.

Along with preparing a collection of stories, being cognizant of audience response throughout your speech will help you succeed.

Let Demographics Guide Your Story Selection

Awareness is the greatest asset for any speaker giving an impromptu speech. The first and probably most important place impromptu speakers need awareness is with the audience.

You may know your audience well if you are at a family event or work function. You may also be speaking at an event where you know very few audience members or none at all. Observing the varied groups that make up the audience will help you prepare for the possibility of contributing an impromptu speech.

There are questions to ask yourself before you are called on to speak at an event with a familiar audience.

What type of function?

There is an important difference between the stories you may relate to a casual family gathering or a large formal wedding, even though the members of your audience may be the same.

Who is present?

You may be attending an event with a few coworkers or a meeting that includes important clients. Taking a moment to consider the guest list, even when you know the attendees, will help you narrow your speech options in case you are invited to speak.

What is the overall tenor of the event?

Even at a very formal or serious event, such as a funeral or a board of directors meeting, humor may be exactly what the audience needs. You may be called upon because organizers know you can bring humor into a somber event, or you may have a sense that it is needed when you are asked to deliver an impromptu speech.

Audience demographics are a great tool to help you select your topic and the anecdotes you would like to share. Your understanding of the audience and event will help you create an impromptu speech that is both appropriate and effective.

When the audience is unfamiliar, there are different questions to answer.

Who organized this event?

Knowing the planners of the event will often give you information about who will be in attendance. For example, if you are attending an event organized as a fundraiser for a local zoo, it is likely that the members of the audience are concerned about animal welfare.

What does the audience have in common?

This information can also help you identify what members of the audience have in common. Knowing the organizers and surmising the likely audience demographics may help you identify the prepared stories or anecdotes you can successfully share if you are invited to share a few words.

Who is in the audience?

Learn as much as you can about the audience. Demographics run deeper than appearances; they can relate to religion, commitment to a cause or organization, or political point of view.

How formal is the event?

As with a wedding or a casual family event, the formality of the gathering will help you choose your topic and guide your story selection. Regardless of the formality, focusing on universal themes to bring humor to your speech is likely to be the most successful strategy.

Broadening Your Collection of Stories

The next step in preparing for impromptu speeches is to review the stories you like to use and think about different ways you can tell them.

Adjust the Story for Different Circumstances

If one of your favorite stories includes a flat tire on a rainy night, contemplate how you might adjust that story for different events or types of audiences.

Identify the Source of Humor

Identify the source of the humor in your story and consider how you can adjust the story around that universal idea to be appropriate for different types of audiences.

Consider Conservative Audiences

Decide how you might tell the story for a conservative audience, coworkers, or those attending a funeral or wedding. Remember that some stories will never be appropriate for a particular audience but are perfect for others.

Find a Way to Flex the Story

Push yourself to find a way you can deliver a favorite story no matter the circumstance. This type of flexibility will help you when you are asked to speak unexpectedly.



Make use of the Story Collection tool to organize files of stories by event, speech type, or audience demographic.

Identify generic stories you feel confident can work with most audiences and events, and those stories you would save for a speech that was only intended to entertain or create laughter.



Watch a video on Base Camp to learn more.

The Challenging Impromptu Speech

There are times when leaders, or those unexpectedly thrust into leadership positions, need to make impromptu speeches. Often, the circumstances of the speech are difficult. From an expected change with an unexpected outcome to the most catastrophic loss, having well-rehearsed stories and anecdotes can help you navigate the most challenging speeches.

Leadership

Leadership in this example can be traditional, such as a leader in a professional organization. It is also important to note that leaders rise in families, neighborhoods, and other collectives when there is a need.

In times of great stress, leaders who bring levity and hope into the situation can help a group transition from crisis to solution. The same guidelines you have learned for impromptu speeches apply to impromptu speeches in leadership and difficult situations.

Preparation

Preparation is not always writing a speech but may be having enough confidence from practicing different types of public speaking to step into a difficult situation.

The most important preparation you can make is to build a broad collection of stories—humorous stories as well as stories of strength and courage—that will support you when speaking in this type of challenging situation.

Empathy

Knowing the audience, empathizing with their level of concern, and even setting aside your own pain in a challenging situation will serve you well.

This is true whether or not a speaker is accustomed to speaking in a leadership role. Take a few minutes as you prepare for this speech and consider how you might use the same stories and skills in a difficult leadership situation. Think about a professional challenge if that is appropriate for your life circumstances, a personal crisis, or both.

Update

Once you have reviewed the challenges you might face, look again at your story collection. Be sure you have what you need to speak in any circumstance and remember to update your collection often with new experiences, jokes, transitions, or anything else that may help you when you have little or no time to prepare an important speech.

Preparing and Reflecting

Before Your Speech

One of the most important tools in your humor toolbox is your ability to empathize with others. Audiences, like individuals, can have a certain personality. Demographics will help you to an extent, but paying attention to audience response to other speakers and the event itself will bring you to a higher level of understanding.

Look for Cues

Look for cues around you. Notice when the audience laughs (or doesn't laugh) at other speeches. Be especially aware if audience members take offense to a particular type of content, or find it demeaning in some way.

Listen to Others

If there are other speakers, listen. You want your content to be fresh, not the fourth story in the last hour about the weather. Even if you believe your weather story is your funniest and best, it may not work for an audience that is already bored with anecdotes about the weather.

Understand the Mood of the Audience

There are also times when an audience may be in a laughing mood. They may find humor in everything. These audiences are wonderful for humorists, as long as the humorist expects the audience to laugh. If, however, you intend to use a story or share an anecdote that is touching or bittersweet, this audience may not respond as you would like or you may inadvertently bring down a positive, upbeat audience.

During Your Speech

The need for empathy is especially acute when you are in the middle of your speech. Just like you can take note of audience reaction to other speakers, awareness of the audience as you are delivering your impromptu speech will help you.

- If you see your audience losing interest or becoming uncomfortable, change something about your presentation.
- The most successful speakers have a high level of reciprocity with their audience.
- It's important to know when to change topics, adjust your story, or end a speech that has stopped benefiting the audience, even if you intended to speak longer.
- Especially with humor, your success is not in completing a speech, but in bringing a speech to the audience that engages, moves, or entertains.
- Awareness and empathy will guide you to recognize and adjust to the mood of your audience, and help you design a speech that is successful.

After Your Speech

Once your speech is complete, there are steps you can take to improve your future speeches.

Learn from Experience

Each speech is a learning experience. This is especially true of speeches that are unexpected or impromptu.

Reflect

Taking a few minutes to collect your thoughts and make some notes about the speech you gave, the stories you used, and the success of your presentation will help you when you prepare subsequent speeches.

Write it Down

Without being critical of your speech or your performance, make a few notes about what you think was the most favorable and what you would change if you were to do the speech again.

Include the Audience

Though it is unlikely you will give the exact same speech to a similar audience, knowing what worked will help you the next time you give a similar speech. Also make a few notes on the audience itself and how well you identified their needs and their subsequent responses.

Be Objective

As much as you can, be objective about how well you met the needs of the audience. You can assess this by remembering their engagement, their laughter or positive response to your humor, and the effect of your speech when it was done.

The most successful impromptu speeches contain well-prepared content. You can develop and practice stories so that when you are called on to give an impromptu speech at any event, you are poised and ready, capable of delivering a meaningful speech.

Review and Apply

Before you complete the assignment, take a moment to read through the questions you see here. If you are not able to answer them comfortably, review the project.

- How can you prepare for an impromptu speech?
- What adjustments can you make to your prepared anecdotes and stories to support different audience types?
- How does understanding the demographics of your audience help you succeed?
- What adjustments can you make to your prepared anecdotes and stories to support different types of events?

Complete Your Assignment



Project Checklist

Now that you have read through the project, plan and prepare your speech or report. First, review your assignment.

This project includes:

- Two 2- to 3-minute speeches

The following list includes tasks for this project. Please remember, your project is unique to you. You can use the checklist here or complete the digital version in your project on Base Camp.

Add stories and anecdotes to your Story Collection tool to prepare for your impromptu speeches.

Schedule your speech with the Vice President Education. Be sure to share the project description and the topic resource.

Practice adjusting your stories, anecdotes, and jokes based on the topic list.

The day before your speech, print or email the Impromptu Speech Topics resource to the Toastmaster of the Day so they are prepared to select your topics.

When all components of your assignment are finished, complete your self-reflection by adding what you have learned to the last column of the Know-Wonder-Learned activity.

Evaluation Criteria



Review the criteria for the evaluation in this project. Your evaluator will use the following scale:

5 – Exemplary 4 – Excels 3 – Accomplished 2 – Emerging 1 – Developing

Clarity

- 5 – Is an exemplary public speaker who is always understood
- 4 – Excels at communicating using the spoken word
- 3 – Spoken language is clear and is easily understood
- 2 – Spoken language is somewhat unclear or challenging to understand
- 1 – Spoken language is unclear or not easily understood

Vocal Variety

- 5 – Uses the tools of tone, speed, and volume to perfection
- 4 – Excels at using tone, speed, and volume as tools
- 3 – Uses tone, speed, and volume as tools
- 2 – Use of tone, speed, and volume requires further practice
- 1 – Ineffective use of tone, speed, and volume

Eye Contact

- 5 – Uses eye contact to convey emotion and elicit response
- 4 – Uses eye contact to gauge audience reaction and response
- 3 – Effectively uses eye contact to engage audience
- 2 – Eye contact with audience needs improvement
- 1 – Makes little or no eye contact with audience

Gestures

- 5 – Fully integrates physical gestures with content to deliver an exemplary speech
- 4 – Uses physical gestures as a tool to enhance speech
- 3 – Uses physical gestures effectively
- 2 – Uses somewhat distracting or limited gestures
- 1 – Uses very distracting gestures or no gestures

Audience Awareness

- 5 – Engages audience completely and anticipates audience needs
- 4 – Is fully aware of audience engagement/needs and responds effectively
- 3 – Demonstrates awareness of audience engagement and needs
- 2 – Audience engagement or awareness of audience requires further practice
- 1 – Makes little or no attempt to engage audience or meet audience needs

Comfort Level

- 5 – Appears completely self-assured with the audience
- 4 – Appears fully at ease with the audience
- 3 – Appears comfortable with the audience
- 2 – Appears uncomfortable with the audience
- 1 – Appears highly uncomfortable with the audience

Impromptu Speaking

- 5 – Appears comfortable, seamlessly presenting a speech with humor appropriate for the described situation
- 4 – Appears comfortable, presents a speech with humor appropriate for the described situation
- 3 – Presents a speech with humor appropriate for the described situations
- 2 – Struggles to address the described situation and/or has limited success including humor
- 1 – Fails to address the described situation and/or alienates the audience with inappropriate humor or no levity at all

Humor

- 5 – Anecdotes or stories fit perfectly with the impromptu topics, and humor engaged and entertained the audience
- 4 – Anecdotes or stories fit well with the impromptu topics and humor was well-received by the audience
- 3 – Anecdotes or stories supported the impromptu topics and humor was acknowledged by the audience
- 2 – Anecdotes and stories may or may not have supported the topics, and humor was present but less than engaging
- 1 – Speaker struggled to apply anecdotes or stories to the topic or they did not support the topic at all, and humor did little to engage the audience

Complete Your Project



Once you have delivered your speech and received your evaluation, take a minute to review what you recorded under “Know” and “Wonder” in the Assess and Reflect section at the start of this project. Then add what you have learned while working through this project. Add up to five items.

Learned

For example: I learned how I can develop multiple speeches to prepare for different settings and audience types where I might be called on to present.

Before You Move On

Review Your Learning

Review all the material in this project.

Deliver Your Speeches

Plan, practice, and deliver your speeches.

Receive Your Evaluation

Receive your evaluation and complete any other tasks required by your club.

Assess and Reflect

When all components of your assignment are finished, complete your self-reflection by adding what you have learned to the last column of the Know-Wonder-Learned activity.

Congratulations!

If you have completed every task, CONGRATULATIONS! You have completed your The Power of Humor in an Impromptu Speech project and you are ready to move on to your next project.



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