

**ONCE YOU GET
PEOPLE LAUGHING,
THEY'RE LISTENING
AND YOU CAN TELL THEM
ALMOST ANYTHING.
—Herbert Gardner**

Unit 1—Lesson 1

Opening

THE SELECTIONS

For no special reason, you'll be reading four commencement speeches with this lesson. I didn't plan it that way; it's just how it worked out. Also included are a eulogy, a sermon, an inspirational speech, and a media speech. Read the following speeches for this chapter:

- “Henry Lee Remembers George Washington,” p. 185
- “Calvinist Jonathan Edwards Promises Hellfire and Damnation to the Sinful,” p. 473
- “Branch Rickey Discovers the Quality That Makes a Ballplayer Great,” p. 545
- “Vice-President Spiro Agnew Castigates the Media,” p. 805
- “Governor Mario Cuomo Speaks over the Heads of the Graduates to the Parents,” p. 1104
- “Labor’s Lane Kirkland Rejects the Labels ‘Liberal’ and ‘Conservative,’” p. 1109
- “General Colin Powell Urges African-American Students to Reject Racial Hatred,” p. 1118
- “Brain-Scientist Philanthropist David J. Mahoney Envisions Active Lives Lived to One Hundred Years,” p. 1125





LESSON PREVIEW

Humor, anecdotes, quotes, and questions are just some of the methods we'll look at for starting your speech in a way that makes your audience sit up and listen.

WHILE YOU READ

The lesson for these speeches is on your opening. We'll examine techniques of opening a speech that grab an audience's attention and set the right tone. Just as people can throw aside your paper, article, or story after the first paragraph, they can tune out after the first thirty seconds of your speech. Prevent that from happening by grabbing them right from the beginning.

Here are some questions to keep at the back of your mind while reading these speeches:

- Do you get a strong sense at the beginning of each speech as to the speech's topic?
- Does the speech's opening make you want to read further and, if so, how? At what point, precisely, does this happen?
- Does the tone of the speech's opening mesh well with the tone of the speech as a whole?



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

HENRY LEE (P. 185)

1. Who is the subject of this speech?
2. As close as you're able, write (from memory) the opening phrase (for which Safire says this speech is most remembered).

JONATHAN EDWARDS (P. 473)

1. To what does Edwards compare his listeners in his opening line?
2. What reaction is Edwards probably hoping to provoke in his listeners?
 - a. To love their neighbor
 - b. To be baptized
 - c. To fear the Lord
 - d. To give their money to the poor

BRANCH RICKEY (P. 545)

1. Rickey includes several lines of dialogue in his anecdote. Which of these quotes expresses the theme of this speech?
 - a. "Interference, interference!"
 - b. "He made his own breaks."
 - c. "See what luck did for us today."
 - d. "He is a great player."

SPIRO AGNEW (P. 805)

1. What speech by whom prompted this speech?
2. What is Agnew's central complaint?
3. What does Agnew say are the differences between the network news organizations and newspapers?

MARIO CUOMO (P. 1104)

1. What does Cuomo say will be the most important thing in the lives of the graduates?
2. What does Cuomo refer to as "the whole answer, the whole truth"?

LANE KIRKLAND (P. 1109)

1. What two labels does Kirkland say he has been "afflicted by"?

[Continued]

COLIN POWELL (P. 1118)

1. Which amendment (to the Constitution) does Powell discuss?
2. Name at least two of the people or groups that Powell uses to illustrate his theme of overcoming prejudice and hatred.

DAVID J. MAHONEY (P. 1125)

1. Name at least one specific medical advance that Mahoney expects to happen in this century that will help extend life expectancy.
2. What does Mahoney tell his audience they need to plan for?
3. Name at least one area of life that Mahoney discusses in his plan.

LITERARY LESSON: OPENING YOUR SPEECH

We're going to examine the following methods for opening a speech: anecdote, humor, quotes, shock, praise, unusual or striking information, a local note, and questions. In addition to examples from the speeches you've just read, I'll give examples from a speech you might write: **A COMMENCEMENT SPEECH AS THE VALEDICTORIAN OF YOUR GRADUATING CLASS.**



Anecdote

An anecdote is simply a story. People love stories, which is why we read them, watch them on TV and in movie theaters, and tell our own stories to our friends and family. An anecdote is often an excellent way to begin a speech and can work for speeches of all types and occasions.

Branch Rickey uses a story of Ty Cobb stealing one base after another until he scores to begin a short but effective speech on desire and achievement. The anecdote works well on many levels. First, it is interesting to the audience and makes them want to hear more. (Even if it was not that interesting to you, remember that Rickey's audience was the Executives Club of Chicago in 1926—a group of businessmen who would have enjoyed a good story about a baseball legend.) It also matches the tone of the rest of the speech—Rickey makes a serious point but with a light touch.

Most important, the story relates to the theme of the speech. It is not merely an attention-getting device. Cobb's impressive base-running not only demonstrates Cobb's own desire to be a great ball-player but also serves as an excellent metaphor for the pursuit of any achievement. Desire and achievement are important but abstract ideas; Cobb's base-running and scoring are concrete images the listener can picture.

The lesson here? If you're going to give a speech on an abstract idea, it's worth trying to think of a story that transforms that abstract idea into concrete form. The story can be something that happened to you (as Rickey's was), something historical, or even something invented (although these are often weaker than true stories, and it is disrespectful at least and dishonest at worst to try to pass off a fictional tale as a true one).

Now, imagine that for your valedictorian speech you want to speak on the theme of using what you've learned in high school (or college) in your future life. Here is an anecdotal opening that could work nicely (we're assuming this story actually happened to you):



When I was a sophomore, I took geometry. Like most students, I didn't really see the point, other than to meet the credit requirements and help prepare for the SAT. When will I ever use this? I thought to myself every night over homework, though I was careful never to complain to the teacher about it. Then one day, I came

out to the garage to find my father holding his head in his hands and whimpering. My mother had asked him to build her some storage shelves to fit under the staircase. Her demands were very specific, and of course very complex—this was no simple shelving unit. As he told me about it, and I looked at his initial crude sketches, everything fell into place. I suddenly knew how to use all these formulae and theorems. I sketched things out for him, told him how much he'd have to buy of what, and even offered to help. That's when I learned the most important reason for taking geometry—impressing my dad. Turns out, there are similar reasons (and even some better ones) for all the classes we've taken, and so much we can do with what we've learned.

Humor

Governor Cuomo's speech starts with a small joke:

Commencement speakers should think of themselves as the body at an old-fashioned Irish wake. They need you in order to have a party, but nobody expects you to say very much.

Unlike Rickey's anecdote, this joke doesn't tie tightly into the speech, but it does catch the audience's attention and reassures them that he won't be rambling on for hours.

There is nothing wrong with this. The key difference here is that Rickey's anecdote is several paragraphs long, so it had better tie tightly into the theme of his speech. Otherwise he has wasted his audience's time. If all you are going to do with your opening story is get your audience's attention, then you had better do that quickly. Cuomo does that with a joke that is only a few lines long.

Humor can be an excellent seasoning to sprinkle throughout a speech, though only if the topic and occasion are appropriate. Commencement addresses, weddings, parties—speeches and toasts at these occasions are perfect places for humor. Sometimes sermons, political speeches, and even eulogies have a place for humor. For example, a gently humorous story about a departed loved-one can help mourners focus on the loved-one's happy, productive life rather than on their loss.

Humor is, however, difficult to judge. Before inserting humor in a final speech, try it out on family members and friends. Ask them if they think it is appropriate and, equally important, if it is even funny. While successful humor can help an audience relax and put them on your side, humor that falls flat merely makes your audience uncomfortable, something you never want.

The anecdote above could also be considered a humorous opening for your valedictorian speech. But you could also start with something simpler:



As graduates, we now enter the world with many questions. The graduate with a science degree asks, "Why does it work?" The graduate with an engineering degree asks, "How does it work?" The graduate with an accounting degree asks, "How much will it cost?"

And I, as a graduate with a liberal-arts degree, will ask, "Do you want fries with that?"

Quotes

While you always want your speeches to rely heavily if not entirely on your own words, quotes from other sources can add interest and depth to your speech. Quotes can be great jumping off points for the beginning of your speech.

While quotes from the Bible or Shakespeare are always great, you need not limit yourself to such high-falutin' sources. Lane Kirkland begins his speech with a quote from a movie, and not a fancy foreign or art-house film, but a homey western.

How to find quotes? There are a few ways. First, keep your eyes and ears open when you're reading, watching movies, etc. When you come across a quote that strikes you, write it down, including its source. Keep a file of these. Secondly, there are many books of quotes out there, some general and some specific to certain topics. When you are faced with writing a speech, start perusing these books for a suitable quote. (I scour them for the quotes to these Guides.)

You need not always take a quote at face value. For example, a speaker might use a scientific quote and apply it to a social concept or choose a biblical quote, meant as a spiritual guide, and use it in a speech on economics. This is fine, but make clear to your audience what the original context was. It is dishonest to lead your audience to believe that the original speaker was talking about your topic if the person was not. Also, always give the source for your quotes; never try to pass them off as your own words.

As with humor, you can choose a quote that merely grabs attention and relates to your speech in a surface way, or you can choose one that addresses the heart of your speech. The latter is preferable when possible, because it is then fulfilling a deeper function.

There are many quotes that could fit a commencement speech; here is just one:

Mark Twain once said, "Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education."



Shock

Jonathan Edwards' sermon starts on a shocking note:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours.

This sentence fulfills all three functions of an introduction: It sets the stern tone of the sermon, announces the sermon's theme of God's wrath and the listeners' danger, and grabs attention by shocking the audience.

Of course, Edwards' theme itself is shocking, but Edwards didn't just rely on his theme but also used specific words to contribute to this shocking beginning and the tone of the entire speech. Before reading on, can you pick out some of these words and phrases?

The words and phrases Edwards uses include *pit of hell*, *spider*, *loathsome insect*, *abhors*, *dreadfully provoked*, *wrath*, *burns*, *fire*, *abominable*, *hateful*, *venomous*, and *serpent*. These words create a strong visual image in the listener's mind, which is always a much better way of creating shock (and other emotions) than merely relying on abstract ideas.

You should use shock judiciously. Once you have shocked the audience it is difficult to retreat to humor or a lighter tone. While shock can be appropriate for a sermon, political speech, or a call to action, it wouldn't normally be used in more social or intimate situations like a wedding toast. Also, shock carries a danger with it of turning some of your audience against you. If too frightened or repulsed, people will shut you out rather than wanting to follow where you're going.

Shock technique would be one of the less appropriate techniques for opening a valedictorian speech, though you might be able to get away with it better in a college speech than one for high-school:



Every day, over 10,000 people, world-wide, die. Today, between the time you got out of bed and the time you put your head on your pillow, thousands of people will be dead. Since I began this speech, one person somewhere in the world has died. But in this statistic I'm not including deaths from accidents, wars, suicide, or diseases of any kind.

This doesn't include death from heart disease, cancer, aids, malaria, or tuberculosis. These deaths are only people who starved to death. Death from hunger. It's this statistic that led me to be an agriculture major, and I'm sure all of you out there are just as eager to change the world as I am through what you've learned these past four years.

Praise

While shock is not used for wedding or funeral speeches, praise certainly can be. Henry Lee’s funeral oration for George Washington begins with some especially eloquent praise for our first president:

First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life; pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding, his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting.

Lee does not need to tell his audience that Washington was the first president of this new nation, but neither does he want to ignore the fact entirely. Beginning with a series of firsts, he alludes to this fact rather than stating it baldly. This way, rather than merely repeating well-known information, Lee offers heart-felt praise for a great man—praise that echoes his greatest achievement.

When choosing to praise someone, be generous but accurate, heartfelt but not sappy. Embrace adjectives, but avoid adverbs. Notice that Lee does not say Washington was *very* humane or *extremely* dignified; the adjectives can hold their own.

Praise does not have to be limited to one person—it can be used for a group of people or an institution, as you might do with your valedictorian speech:



I have learned many things in my four years here: calculus and botany, English literature and German philosophy, ancient history and three years of French. For this, I have many wonderful and dedicated professors to thank. But what I have to thank them—and this whole college—for most is the understanding that I need to take this knowledge into the world and make it a better place.

Unusual or Striking Information

Starting with unusual or striking information is similar to starting on a shocking note, but whereas shock is emotional, this is intellectual. Here, you tell the audience about some new technical development, obscure historical fact, etc., that jolts them to attention.

Because it is an intellectual rather than emotional ploy, this technique is safer and works in a larger variety of speeches than the shock technique. But, as with all the other techniques, the information needs to relate in some way to the speech, either to the topic or on a more surface level. Mahoney’s entire speech relates to his opening information. However, as with quotes, you may find a tidbit of information that isn’t precisely what you want to speak about, but which you can relate to the topic of your speech in some way.



The adult literacy rate in the U.S. is about 95–96%, as a conservative estimate. That may sound good; after all, 95% is an A. But what that means is that four to

five of every 100 people in this country cannot read or write at a functional level. Look around you—you can easily see 100 people; imagine that five of them can't read or write. They are trapped in a world of mysterious symbols and messages—some of those messages vital, even life-saving. These people are the reason I majored in English and got a teaching degree.

Starting on a Local Note

This can be a particularly useful technique for political speeches and for commencement addresses. These are speeches frequently connected to place—a voting district or university, for example. Your audience will have a huge investment in that place, and hearing it addressed will catch their interest.

Powell makes it clear early on that his speech is going to, in part, concern a controversy at the university where he is speaking. Not all commencement addresses discuss the college or university they're given at—you've read others in this lesson that don't. But if there is a way to bring something local into your speech that relates to a topic you want to discuss, this can be an excellent hook. Powell's real theme here is tolerance, but he uses a local situation as his springboard.

You can do the same thing with your valedictorian speech, focusing your introduction on your school, town, or region:



Here in the Northwest, we have so many advantages. The weather is beautiful, we have no natural disasters that visit year after year, we enjoy mountains, seashore, and forests. The rest of the world is not as fortunate, however. Diseases that have been eradicated in this country for generations still kill hundreds of thousands world-wide. That's why I was a pre-med student and why I'm going to medical school this fall.

A Question

This is perhaps the opening technique most frequently employed by novice writers, hence the most abused; but it can work well so should not be shunned merely for this reason. The idea is simple—you ask your audience questions which you plan on answering, or at least addressing, in your speech.

Agnew uses questions to introduce his topic, but he does not fall into some of the common errors of question use. First, rather than depending solely on a series of questions, he gives the questions context. He points out why television news is important, thus letting us know that his questions are important. His questions aren't vague or abstract. Also, he's inclusive in his questions. These questions aren't important to just a select few, but he asks whether "we" are demanding enough of television news.

A question can also be used to start your valedictorian speech:

How many times did you hear this when you told someone your major: What are you going to do with that? Well, today I'm going to show you how to answer that question.



Conclusion

The first thing your audience hears from you is your opening. Let them know where they're going, give an indication of how you're getting them there, and most important, make them want to come along with for the ride. No matter how beautifully written the body of your speech or how important your message, if you've lost your audience in the first two minutes, they won't hear it. Write an opening that will make them turn off their cell phones and lean forward in their seats to catch your every word.



WRITING EXERCISES

1. Choose any speech in the textbook other than the ones used in this lesson and write a paper evaluating its opening. Consider such questions as the following: What type of opening does the speaker use? How effective is the opening? How well does the opening tie in with the rest of the speech?
2. Imagine that you have to write a sermon on giving to the poor. Write three openings for this sermon choosing three different methods (anecdote, shock, humor, etc.). In addition, write a paragraph explaining which opening you prefer and why.
3. Write a toast (for a wedding, retirement, anniversary, etc.) or a eulogy. Begin your speech with praise or an anecdote. Choose either someone you know personally or someone famous you admire as the subject of your speech.
4. Find five quotes that you like from at least three different sources (e.g., not all quotes from the Bible, from Shakespeare, etc.). For each quote, write a paragraph summarizing a speech that could be written using the quote as an opening. Include information on the topic of the speech, the tone, and why the quote would be a good opening.
5. Write a speech of any type on any topic using an anecdote of something that actually happened to you in your opening. Be sure to tie the anecdote into the theme of the speech; don't just use it as an attention grabber.