

KATARZYNA WIŚNIEWSKA

# ENGLISH FOR SPEECHES AND PRESENTATIONS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Wystąpienia publiczne  
i prezentacje w języku angielskim



POZIOM B2-C1

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PART

# 1 PREPARATION

*Embrace the challenge and enjoy it!*

**“It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare  
a good impromptu speech.”**

– Mark Twain

Good preparation lays the groundwork for any great public speaking performance, whether it is a sales pitch or a keynote address. Still, the process of preparing a well-organized and captivating speech may seem like a daunting task to many. And though there is no single recipe for preparing a successful public address, there are many proven strategies that can ease the burden and help you avoid the all-too-common pitfalls.



## General Purpose

### *First things first*

First of all, it is essential to understand the general purpose of your presentation or speech and adjust your preparation accordingly. Most speeches will either be to **inform**, **persuade**, or **entertain**. Each of these goals places specific responsibilities on the speaker and determines their choice of language. After all, a speaker delivering an **informative** speech should not only share knowledge, but also make sure the audience will absorb and retain the information given – for example, understanding how a vaccine works, what a new technology offers, or why tsunamis occur. A common mistake of those new to public speaking is to blur the line between sharing knowledge and persuading.

**Persuasive** speakers use information to reinforce, question or change people’s beliefs, habits, or actions. Their address will usually involve a call to action such as “visit our website”, “buy our product” or “vote for us”. Unlike informative speakers, persuasive speakers combine logical appeal with pathos, or appeal to emotion, so that their audience walks away with more than just facts. Their goal is to make them walk away with an opinion.

The **entertaining** speaker tries to make the members of an audience relax and enjoy themselves. They may still provide information and attempt to persuade, but that is not their primary goal. Rather, their speech is focused on the occasion of the address, be it a business gathering, banquet or a wedding reception. Simply speaking, their mission is to make sure the attendees have a good time.

Once you have determined your general purpose, you will be able to focus on your specific objectives: what it is exactly that you want your audience to know, feel, or do after you have finished speaking. Keeping this in mind will make it easier for you to stay on track when organizing and delivering your speech.

#### Interesting fact

Aristotle divided modes of persuasion into three categories of appeal: **Ethos**, **Pathos**, and **Logos**. Logos is the logical argument; Pathos is a tool of persuasion that creates an emotional response, while Ethos establishes authority and credibility. A good speech includes all three types of appeal. How well a speaker argues their point matters. So does their ability to engage the listener's imagination and emotions. And yet interestingly, it is a speaker's ability to apply Ethos that determines whether an audience is willing to consider their argument in the first place. To put it simply, they won't believe you unless they trust you.

## An important ingredient

### *Make a gift worth giving*

Above all, you need to know what you want to say and why you want to say it. Your topic may be very broad, for example: education, science, public health or finances. By narrowing it down, you will focus on one idea which you will later develop in your speech. Both your topic and your central idea, or message, should be relevant to you and your listeners. Ideally, it is a message that you are genuinely passionate about and that you believe is worth sharing. As TED curator Chris Anderson

admits, “There’s no single formula for a great talk, but there is a secret ingredient that all the best ones have in common.” In his book *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*, Anderson points out, “Your number one task as a speaker is to transfer into your listeners’ minds an extraordinary gift – a strange and beautiful object that we call an **idea**.”

Your main idea should be explainable through a simple proverb or sentence, or even a single word, such as “collaboration” or “courage”. As executive speech coach Patricia Fripp notes:

Every presentation is built around a premise, a central theme, a big idea. If you had one sentence – what would you say? If you cannot explain it simply, you might not understand. Your audience won’t get it. If I say: what is your presentation about, one sentence? ‘I’ll give you two.’ ‘I’ll give you three.’ If you answer in a paragraph, it won’t be clear enough.

– Patricia Fripp, *Create Your Keynote*, published  
on 28 May 2013

Consider these examples of central themes:

### *Example 1*

In her commencement speech at Harvard University, novelist J.K. Rowling encouraged graduates to do the following: appreciate the value of failing and recognize the importance of imagination. This is how she introduced her main points:

“On this wonderful day when we are gathered together to celebrate your academic success, I have decided to talk

to you about the **benefits of failure**. And as you stand on the threshold of what is sometimes called ‘real life’, I want to extol the crucial **importance of imagination**.”

Throughout her speech, Rowling comes back to these two themes and shares personal lessons with the young graduates of Harvard. Let’s look at the ones on failure:

“**So why do I talk about the benefits of failure?** Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged.”

“You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. **It is impossible to live without failing at something**, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default.”

“**Failure taught me things** about myself that I could have learned no other way.”

– J.K. Rowling, Harvard University, 5 June 2008

### *Example 2*

When addressing the 114th graduating class at the prestigious Stanford University, Steve Jobs was clear from the start about the key message he wanted to share: love what you do.

Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to **love what you do**. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it.

– Steve Jobs, Stanford University, 12 June 2005

In the following sections we will look at the various ways of introducing your important message.

### Remember!

As you develop your central idea, try summarizing your speech in one sentence, using simple, specific, and direct language.

### Common mistakes

#### **Diving into the topic without a clear message**

Nearly everyone has at least once walked away from a presentation or speech asking themselves, “What was that all about?” A speech that has no point (or has too many) and lacks clarity eventually leads to confusion. If you begin to wander off-topic and stray too far from your main point, you will easily lose your audience's focus and interest.

#### **Lack of an original idea or genuine content**

That's when the audience has heard it all before and listening to the presenter feels like a waste of time. Your audience is giving you their time and attention, so make sure you have something worthwhile to say. Crafting a winning talk is a process that takes time and energy. It is easy to feel like every-

thing has already been said about your topic. Make sure that you have your key message clear, that it is of some value to your audience, and that you know how to communicate it effectively.

## Consider the audience

### *Horses for courses*

Always keep the audience as your primary focus. When preparing your speech, consider the knowledge your listeners already have about your topic, and factors such as:

- demographics (age, gender, education level, position)
- needs
- expectations
- environment (attitudes, cultural differences)
- possible objections (How might they resist your ideas?)
- possible questions (including questions you hope your audience won't ask)

When talking to professionals in your field, you won't need to define basic terms. However, when facing groups who have no special knowledge of the subject, make sure you explain the key terms, buzzwords and acronyms, or use non-professional alternatives. Also, remember not to overload your audience with too much information to digest at once. Finally, know your audience – there is a difference between delivering a presentation to the technical members of staff and the non-technical members, even when the presentation is at the same company.

Additionally, if you reuse an old presentation or speech, you may need to spend some time tailoring it for your new audience. You may need to edit some of your slides, simplify the language, add more detail, or customize your stories. Shape your speech so that it is well-suited to your intended audience, and your listeners will be on board with you from start to finish.

### *Spark their curiosity*

How to choose an idea? Chip Heath and Dan Heath, authors of *Made to Stick*, explore the anatomy of winning ideas and develop a list of principles that make ideas stick and help you get your point across. These include: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions and stories. The Heath brothers also stress the importance of engaging people’s **curiosity** by “systematically ‘**opening gaps**’ in their knowledge – and then filling those **gaps**.”

Our tendency is to tell people the facts. First, though, they must realize that they need these facts. The trick to convincing people that they need our message (...) is to first **highlight some specific knowledge that they’re missing**.

– Chip Heath and Dan Heath (2007)

To make communications more effective, a shift in our thinking is needed from: “What information do I need to convey?” to “What questions do I want my audience to ask?”

### *Reinforce your message*

Once you have your main idea in place, you need to make sure you “sell it well”. To do this, you will need to reinforce your

theme with stories, anecdotes, interesting facts, quotations, etc. In presentations, you may need to go through relevant figures, statistics, charts or surveys.

Like all great speakers, you will also need to refer back to your main idea again and again as you progress in your speech or presentation. Forbes contributor Jeff Schmitt ([forbes.com](http://forbes.com)) may have had a point when he wrote:

“In writing a speech, you have two objectives: Making a good impression and leaving your audience with two or three takeaways. The rest is just entertainment.”

– Jeff Schmitt, 16 July 2013

#### Interesting Fact

When planning the content of your speech, it is essential not to fall into the trap of “**the curse of knowledge**”: the more familiar you are with something, the harder it is to put yourself in the shoes of someone who is not. For example, experienced drivers may often find it difficult to relate to novice drivers. So is the case with experts in any field. As the Heath brothers explain:

Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our **knowledge** has “**cursed**” us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.

– Chip Heath and Dan Heath (2007)

Do not let the curse of knowledge limit your presentation. Imagine not knowing what you already know and build your



presentation in a way that will take into account the potential gaps in your audience's knowledge and their actual needs.

### *Consider cultural differences*

Before promoting your idea, you will need to consider potential cultural differences that may surface as you address a multicultural audience. A certain level of explicitness (or precision) may be expected when addressing a particular audience, which could have a tremendous impact on the structure and order of the information to be presented. In her workshop on strategies for non-native English presenters, speaker and executive coach Deborah Grayson Riegel gives an interesting account of a typically explicit American style:

Americans tend to be **explicit**. (...) The expectation is that you are going to say what you need to say directly; that you are not to make people do the work of inferring from other contexts what it is that you mean.

Riegel also comments on the way you should ideally present your key idea to a typical American business audience:

American business audiences, in general, process **deductively**. (...) You want to be mindful that you want to start with your headline or your key message up top. And then you will support it with your stories, statistics, and facts. It is not our style to wonder what your point is going to be. We are too impatient for that.

– Deborah Grayson Riegel, 6 August 2019

When addressing a multicultural audience, it is generally worthwhile to research the following information:

- language
- values and attitudes
- communication styles (including various levels of directness and nonverbal behaviours, such as physical contact and personal space)
- body language (especially eye contact, gestures and mannerisms)
- stereotypes (including those your audience might have about your own culture)
- local general knowledge

#### Common mistake

#### Too much jargon

A presentation filled with buzzwords like “salience”, “leverage” or “synergy” instead of their simpler equivalents, or acronyms including KPIs, ROIs, or OTs may not be as appealing as you might think. Too much jargon used in a presentation may hinder effective communication. Clearly, giving a talk on a highly specialized topic differs from writing an article on the very same subject. Use an audience-friendly approach and cut out any technical terms, mysterious acronyms or buzzwords that may puzzle your listeners.

#### Remember!

Consider your audience’s needs, knowledge, and expectations. Anticipate and show sensitivity to cultural differences that may create tensions or misunderstandings during a public speaking event.

**Jeśli występowanie publiczne lub prezentacje w języku angielskim są nieodłączną częścią twojej pracy albo po prostu interesujesz się sztuką występów publicznych, a przy okazji chcesz poprawić swój angielski – ta książka jest właśnie dla Ciebie.**

Zebrane w niej fakty, ciekawostki, porady oraz solidna dawka wiedzy językowej pozwolą ci rozwinąć umiejętność prezentowania w języku angielskim, a przy okazji zrozumieć mechanizmy oddziaływania na odbiorców występów. Analiza fragmentów przemówień znanych mówców, a także szeroki wachlarz technik oraz gotowych wyrażen językowych sprawią, że do kolejnego przemówienia czy prezentacji podejdziesz z większą świadomością, wiedzą i pewnością siebie.

Książka, napisana w całości w języku angielskim, podzielona jest na trzy części, z których każda odnosi się do innego aspektu przemówień, od przygotowania struktury prezentacji lub mowy do technik oddziaływania i perswazji stosowanych przez skutecznych mówców. Autorka zawarła w niej ponadczasowe, inspirowane cytaty z wypowiedzi ekspertów w dziedzinie przemówień i emisji głosu, autorów, znanych mówców i pisarzy – od Dale'a Carnegie po Simona Sinka czy Chrisa Andersona, kuratora TED Talks. W książce znajdziesz także praktyczne wskazówki dotyczące najważniejszych aspektów przemawiania, od tych typowo językowych, np. związanych z użyciem figur retorycznych, po te związane z pracą głosem lub językiem ciała.

*English for Speeches and Presentations. A Practical Guide* to wsparcie dla osób posługujących się językiem angielskim w przemówieniach i prezentacjach na polu zawodowym, naukowym lub prywatnym, które chcą podnieść swoje kompetencje zawodowe i umiejętności językowe, a także uniknąć typowych błędów, popełnianych przez mniej doświadczonych mówców.

