



Commencement Speech Guidelines

The Harvard Extension School Commencement Speaker Prize competition is open to all graduates. The speech committee will review submissions received by the last Monday in April and invite the finalists in for a speech audition, ordinarily held on the following Tuesday at 3 pm in person or via Skype. The prize recipient will receive \$1,000 and have the honor of delivering the prize-winning speech at the Harvard Extension School diploma awarding ceremony to an audience of fellow graduates, faculty, administrators, and guests.

In addition, ALB and ALM graduates are also eligible to compete for the Harvard University Commencement Parts Speaker Prize and deliver the prize-winning speech at the morning Commencement exercise in Harvard Yard to an audience of 30,000+. The application process begins February 1 and ends March 31. The University offers an Orators' Workshop in February (*Applicants are encouraged to attend this workshop even if they are only considering the Harvard Extension School speech competition*). For more information on the Commencement Parts Speaker Prize and the workshop, visit www.commencement.harvard.edu.

If you are interested in participating in either or both competitions, you should seriously approach the task of preparing a speech by starting early (e.g., December). Starting early is imperative. The months before Commencement are filled with final exam preparation or final thesis changes, leaving little time for extracurricular writing. In addition, speech writing is not an easy or natural task; it has a style all its own. The guidelines supply pertinent information about this particular writing form and break down the writing tasks into manageable sections.

We encourage your participation and we hope you find the guidelines helpful. Good luck.

Suggestions for Students

There is no formula that can sum up what makes a successful Commencement speech, but it is possible to describe some of the qualities of such a speech, and also to specify some approaches that are generally to be avoided.

Content. A successful Commencement speech needs to convey a message that is specific to the speaker and that also has significance for a wide audience. It is natural to look to your own experience for inspiration, but while your life story or that of your family may have great meaning for you, it will not automatically resonate with an audience consisting largely of strangers. Similarly, experiences you have shared with the other Harvard Extension School students will be familiar to you and them, but may need to be explained if they are not to mystify others. Finally, a Commencement speech does not have to consist of personal reminiscences. It can also articulate a thesis or argue in favor of a position, especially one that the speaker regards as unfairly neglected or unpopular.

Originality. Some spark of originality is essential, but since genuinely new ideas are rare, originality is often achieved by approaching a familiar thought from an unexpected direction or expressing it in a way that feels freshly created. The original element may be a vivid image or metaphor that stimulates the audience's imagination and keeps their attention.

Titles. The title of your speech will appear in the Commencement program distributed to everyone in attendance. A title that gets the audience's attention will make them more eager to listen to your speech; on the other hand, titles such as "The Value of a Harvard Education" or "Serving a Wider World" will tend to make the audience lose interest before you say a word.

Clichés. Clichés are expressions that are so often used as to sound trite (e.g., "Rome wasn't built in a day"); examples with a university setting would include "ivy-covered walls" and "the groves of Academe." Such expressions represent the opposite of original writing.

Quotations. An apt quotation can enliven a speech or help put across a point effectively. Too many quotations in a short speech, however, give the impression that the persons quoted, rather than the speaker, are doing most of the work. Furthermore, some quotations are so familiar as to constitute clichés (see above); for example, "we have nothing to fear but fear itself" (FDR) or "ask not what your country can do for you" etc. (JFK). Other often-quoted persons include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Winston Churchill; in general it is best to avoid quoting such figures unless you have uncovered one of their little-known gems.

Humor. Wit is a component of many successful Commencement speeches, but your role as a speaker is not merely to entertain, but also to prompt thought and reflection. Humor is most likely to be effective when it is inclusive; sarcasm and negative forms of humor will tend to alienate your audience rather than amuse them.

Practice. Read your speech aloud. You'll be able to hear awkward wording or moments when your sentiments don't ring true. Read it to others and ask them to comment on the content, too. Get feedback and rewrite the parts that need polishing.

Length. Your speech should be about 5 minutes in length. Keep in mind that you must read slowly and articulate your words clearly since you will be using a microphone. This means you must write concisely about your topic. Rewrite the speech to keep it within the acceptable time limit.

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Write a Rough Draft.

(Parts of the following outline are taken from *B's and A's in 30 Days*, Eric Jensen, Barrons, New York, 1997.)

Introduction (10% of speech)

- Grab the reader's interest with an unusual story, pertinent statistic, provocative question, or quotation. Do not make obvious statements that refer to what the essay is about, do not make apologies or use clichés. Avoid the following words/phrases, as suggested by the Harvard Commencement Office: crisis, crucial, realm, high calling, challenge, opportunity, dawn of a new day, on this planet, critical, decision, and incumbent upon.
- Introduce the topic. Be sure to cover the point of view you will take.

Background (20% of speech)

- Give a brief history of the topic, relaying only the most interesting and important aspects. Stick to the point.
- Explain any key events, terminology, or people.

Main Body (40% of speech)

- State important information and key arguments. Limit arguments to three or fewer.
- Use accurate, strong, passionate language.
- Present arguments in order from strongest to weakest, least controversial to most controversial, or some other standard order (e.g., chronological).

Strengthen your position (20% of speech)

- State other theories or viewpoints.
- Assess their weaknesses or strengths.
- Build a case to further strengthen your ideas.

Conclusion (10% of speech)

- Restate your theme or opinion.
- Do not introduce new ideas.
- Be clear and concise and conclude with a positive statement.