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DTM, 2025-2026
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Weave Your Stories
Into Your Speeches

Storytelling Tips
From Narrators

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The Stories We Tell

Storytelling is woven into the fabric of every culture. It's how we pass down our history, share cautionary tales, and celebrate moments of triumph. It's also at the heart of Toastmasters.

From the very first speech—the Ice Breaker (my favorite)—we begin by telling our stories. We open a window into who we are, offering our club members a chance to connect with, understand, and support us. These stories create bonds that go beyond speaking—they build community.

But there's another kind of story, just as powerful: the one we tell ourselves.

What we whisper to ourselves about who we are and what we're capable of has a profound impact. If we tell a story of fear, we stay small. But if we tell a story of possibility, we unlock courage. Suddenly, taking on a new role, starting a club, or entering a speech contest no longer feels out of reach.

When we speak of those who've gone before us—those who dared, who led, who struggled and overcame—we don't just honor them. We pass along wisdom. We light the path for others.

As Toastmasters, we carry the responsibility and the privilege of being storytellers of hope and potential. Our stories can spark action, shift mindsets, and ignite self-belief in someone who's waiting for just a little encouragement.

So here's my challenge to you and to myself:

The next time you look in the mirror, choose to tell yourself a story of strength and possibility. Tell yourself that you're ready for more, and believe it.

And the next time you speak with a fellow member, share a story that inspires them to believe they're ready too—ready to invite a guest, start a club, lead a team, or step up in ways they never imagined.

When we shape the stories we tell—about ourselves and each other—we shape what becomes possible.

Let's keep telling stories that matter. Stories that lift. Stories that lead. Because when we do, we become catalysts for growth—not just for ourselves, but for everyone around us.

Aletta Rochat, DTM
International President

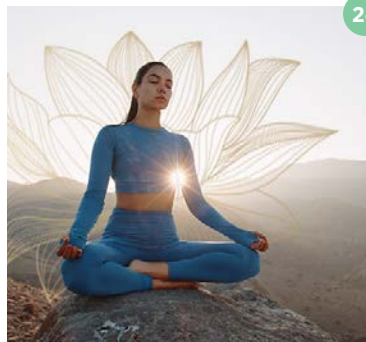
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Cover photo of Aletta Rochat by KOA Photography

Snapshot



Members of **Dowels Toastmasters Club** in Kandy, Sri Lanka, stop for a photo with the *Toastmaster* magazine during an outdoor meeting after hiking the Hanthana Mountain Range in Sri Lanka. The theme of the meeting was “Whispers of Hanthana.”

Traveling Toastmaster



Karen Aiken, DTM, of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, poses near the Itsukushima Shrine on the Itsukushima island in Hatsukaichi, Japan.



Mohan Morais of Colombo, Sri Lanka, visits Angkor Wat, a temple complex located in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Unlocking Talent

A club designed to lift up those with intellectual disabilities.

By Laura Mishkind



Members of Mawaheb Toastmasters Club

In December 2023, Arya Chitra chartered the Mawaheb Toastmasters Club in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Designed specifically for individuals with disabilities, such as Down syndrome and those on the Autism spectrum, the club has fostered a strong sense of community, built friendships, and improved members' confidence.

Chitra began working with youth and people with mental disabilities when she launched the Nikon Youth Program in 2015. The initiative offers a diverse range of educational opportunities for children of all ability levels interested in photography, optics, and imaging technology.

After years of involvement in this program, Chitra joined Toastmasters in 2020. "Once we shifted to in-person meetings [in 2022], I realized the need to create a dedicated communication club just for these incredible kids," she says. "Working closely with them, I saw firsthand how essential it was for them to develop strong communication skills." Chartering a Toastmasters club for those with intellectual disabilities became a dream Chitra was determined to make a reality.

To bring this dream to fruition, Chitra needed a space for members to meet. She turned to Wemmy de Maaker, who runs the Mawaheb Art Cafe—an art studio for adults with special needs. "Mawaheb" means "talents" in Arabic, and de Maaker had chosen that name for the studio as a reference to the various talents the programs help their student artists discover. The term was also the perfect fit for the club's name, and a nod to the inclusive environment and shared values of both groups.

Chitra's clear plan for the program and the

support of Past Area Director Abraham John and Neena Raina, a Toastmaster and mother of a club member, moved the charter process forward. "I envisioned this club as a place where they could develop not only communication skills but also leadership qualities, giving them the framework to grow and share their voices with the world," she says.

"I wanted to give [our members] a platform to express their voices."

—ARYA CHITRA

John, Raina, and Chitra collaborated with de Maaker and posted fliers in the community center and around town. They were able to use the cafe's social media accounts and existing support networks to connect with other people of determination—a term used in the UAE to refer to people with disabilities. "Since there are only a few dedicated centers for people of determination in our country, partnering with Mawaheb was essential for us," Chitra explains.

Once they were attracting members, Chitra, John, or Raina served as Toastmaster for the meetings. Chitra says, "This collaborative support from Neena and John has been essential in keeping the program and meetings aligned and moving forward.

"Aside from the Ah-Counter and

grammarian roles, we aim to run our meetings just like a regular Toastmasters session," she adds. "We encourage all members to participate actively in each role. For evaluations, we use a panel format where everyone gets the chance to give feedback to each speaker, fostering a collaborative learning environment."

Because every individual faces different challenges, the club's mentor-mentee program is tailored to meet the diverse needs of each member. At meetings, Toastmasters mentors sit with different mentees to provide support in skill development and role preparation. "This approach not only promotes diversity but also helps manage attachment, as we're mindful that strong bonds with specific mentors can create challenges if someone is absent," Chitra explains.

The Mawaheb club often invites a Toastmaster from another club to bring a new perspective as General Evaluator. Members are encouraged to offer feedback on meetings too, to help the club meet more members' needs. Chitra says, "This structure helps our members build confidence and communication skills in a familiar, supportive format.

"[Our members] have extraordinary stories to share, and I wanted to give them a platform to express their voices, combined with a skill set that empowers them to share their journeys—anywhere they choose to inspire," she explains.

"The connection we share is truly irreplaceable, and there's a certain magic in the perspective that people of determination bring to our lives."

Laura Mishkind is associate editor for the *Toastmaster* magazine.

Connecting Others Through Art

How one Toastmaster uses creativity and communication to promote inclusion.

By Mackenzie Eldred

Ebtehal Badawi (front row, second from left) with members of the Pittsburgh Builds Bridges initiative. Photo credit: Dominique Murray

Ebtehal Badawi always knew she wanted to be an artist and ultimately discovered that her true calling was art therapy, the process of using art to improve an individual's well-being. Today, she is an artist, writer, and photographer known for her uplifting artwork.

Badawi, who was born in Saudi Arabia, began taking classes in art and psychology after earning her bachelor's degree in biology and her master's degree in industrial hygiene. She moved to Pennsylvania in 2014 and became the director of the division of art wellness and community outreach at OSH 360, a health and safety consulting firm, six years later. She combines art and wellness in community programs to promote mental health, healing, and well-being.

Her work has been featured in art shows and universities across Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in local schools, where she created anti-bullying posters. Badawi also founded the Pittsburgh Builds Bridges initiative to bring people together to create art while fostering diversity, unity, and empathy.

Through her speeches on the [TEDx stage](#) and in the Bakery Square Toastmasters club, she has shared how art has the power to connect others.

Read ahead to learn how Badawi has used art and communication to build bridges.

What type of art do you do?

I create mixed media art, which combines various materials and techniques. My work is known for being colorful, vibrant, and uplifting. I blend elements of painting, photography, and sometimes even sculpture to evoke emotions and spark conversations about unity, belonging, and the power of creativity.

What themes or messages do you

share through your artwork?

I aim to communicate themes of connection, empathy, and building bridges—both literally and figuratively. My art focuses on creating spaces for dialogue and healing. I also use my work as a tool for social change, promoting anti-bullying messages and inclusivity, especially in schools.

What is the Pittsburgh Builds Bridges initiative?

Pittsburgh Builds Bridges is an initiative I founded to promote unity, diversity, and inclusion through community-based art projects. It brings people together to create murals and engage in art-making activities that help foster connection. The initiative has grown to involve thousands of participants from various backgrounds, all working together to share their stories and build a stronger, more connected community.

Why did you start Pittsburgh Builds Bridges?

The initiative was inspired by my son's experience with bullying when he was younger. Witnessing his struggle made me realize the urgent need to foster belonging, understanding, and empathy within our communities. I wanted to create a positive, creative platform that builds bridges instead of walls. This initiative became a way to create safe spaces for all people to connect, reflect, and engage with each other through art.

How have you seen your artwork build bridges?

During mural painting sessions, participants share stories, laugh together, and leave with a deeper appreciation for one another. One of

the most touching stories I've heard was from a friend who shared that her son had panic attacks when he was younger because his older brother was bullied. When he saw my artwork of building bridges, he felt a sense of belonging and, for the first time, felt that he could be part of something positive. His anxiety improved, and he has been doing better for the past two years.

How has Toastmasters helped fuel your dreams?

Toastmasters has been instrumental in helping me achieve my dream of traveling and speaking. I've developed skills in public speaking, leadership, and storytelling that allow me to connect with people across different cultures. I've always had a passion for speaking and storytelling, and Toastmasters provides a structured environment where I can grow and learn from others. It also provided me with the encouragement and mentorship I need to keep pushing myself toward my goals. This journey has made me more confident and prepared for the opportunity to speak and build bridges with communities around the world.

What else would you like to share about yourself?

I'm deeply passionate about using art as a tool for social change. As I continue to grow in my career as an artist, I'm also working toward becoming an art therapist, which will allow me to help others heal through creativity. I believe that art is not just about self-expression, but also about creating spaces where we can learn from one another, support each other, and build stronger, more compassionate communities.

Mackenzie Eldred is editorial coordinator for the Toastmaster magazine.

The Real Prize of Speech Contests

Discovering my full potential was a big win.

By Vannpech Keo



Looking back to when I first joined Toastmasters, I never imagined how far I could explore my own potential until I started participating in speech contests. The experiences I've gained along the way have been transformative. What seemed impossible became possible.

Several years ago, I relocated to Cambodia, from Thailand and Laos, and joined the Edniche Toastmasters Club in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. In November 2023, I attended my club's International Speech Contest. It was my first time attending a speech contest in person, though I didn't compete. I watched the contestants deliver their speeches with humor and confidence, and I told myself, *One day, I will do that too.*

The following year, I took the leap. My club held both the International Speech and Table Topics contests at a single event, and I competed in both. I was nervous, but something incredible happened—I started infusing humor into my speeches. My early presentations in Toastmasters had all been about self-love and mindfulness, and while they were heartfelt, they lacked the fun I hoped to bring to my speeches. At these contests, I had given myself a personal challenge: to not just deliver a meaningful message, but to also make the audience laugh.

I answered my Table Topics question with a playful yet reflective question of my own: "How do you expect to understand someone else's mind when you don't really understand your own?" It caught the audience's attention immediately. I heard some of them giggle.

From there, I shared my solution: reading. I recommended the book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, an insightful guide to understanding different perspectives, especially in relationships. It was my way of blending

wisdom with humor, making the topic both relatable and entertaining. I also incorporated humor into my speech for the International Speech Contest.

For the first time, I truly made the audience laugh. I didn't win any prizes, but I felt like I won something more valuable—personal growth and confidence in my abilities.

In late 2024, I joined the CAM-Meet Corner Toastmasters Club, also in Phnom Penh, and I competed in the club's International Speech and Table Topics contests. To my surprise, I won first place in Table Topics and second place in my club's International Speech Contest. That moment was a revelation—I realized that when I stayed true to myself and my style, I could perform better than I had ever expected.

Participating in Table Topics, I realized that it's not just about having the right answer—it's about trusting yourself to speak from the heart.

I progressed to the Area level of the Table Topics contest, where I again won first place. This time, I learned the power of authenticity in my responses. When I incorporated what I truly enjoyed into my speech, the audience connected with me on a deeper level. During the Area contest, I was asked, "If you had 1 million dollars, what would you do?"

I responded that I would donate all my

money to hospitals, knowing that I could help hundreds of patients who were suffering and waiting for treatment.

The answer reflects who I am. Working in a medical clinic, I witness firsthand the struggles patients face—their fight for survival, their hope for healing, and their need for support. It meant so much to use my voice to highlight something that matters.

My journey continued. At the Division level of the Table Topics contest, I won third place. I learned that self-confidence is key to contest success. Throughout each level of the contest, my confidence grew. With every round, I developed not only my speaking skills but also my ability to think quickly and respond with insightful ideas.

By participating in Table Topics, I realized that it's not just about having the right answer—it's about trusting yourself to speak from the heart, even in the most spontaneous moments.

Above all, the contests have shown me that the journey is about more than just winning. It's about constant improvement, learning from each experience, and being surrounded by people who truly care about our growth. Speech contests help you uncover strengths you might not have recognized before.

I learned the importance of stepping out of my comfort zone and embracing new challenges, and I encourage each of you to do something that stretches your boundaries. Participating in a speech contest would be a great first step.

Vannpech Keo is Public Relations Manager for Division C of District 97. She is also Vice President Education of the CAM-Meet Corner Toastmasters Club in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



Pushing Through Table Topics and Pathways

Solutions for your questions and queries.

By Bill Brown, DTM

This month, we discuss two important topics related to Toastmasters: Table Topics and the Pathways learning experience.

EDITOR'S NOTE: If you have a question for The Answer Man, email it to magazine@toastmasters.org for a chance to be featured in an upcoming column.

Questions are occasionally edited for clarity and brevity.

Just make something up and go with it.

Actually, I agree with him.



Illustration by
Jerry King

How can I answer a Table Topics question, even though I know very little about the topic?

—Wurile; Beijing, China

This is the real challenge of Table Topics, but there are several approaches you can take.

The first is to shift the question. Almost all clubs I have belonged to follow the informal Toastmasters rule that says, “If you don’t like the question, answer a different one.” That could be one that has previously been asked or you could make up your own.

Now some people say the real purpose of Table Topics is to get experience answering the question you are asked. I would contend, however, that the real purpose is to give you practice constructing a well-organized speech on the spur of the moment.

For example, Table Topics should mirror real life as much as possible. If you were in a meeting with your boss and were asked a question, you would probably know something about the topic. You would just need to know how to craft your response clearly on the spot.

There is another approach I employ when appropriate: Make something up. This is a great opportunity to work on your creativity skills.

I was once asked to discuss a television program I had never heard of. I took the title of the program, made an assumption of what it was about (I was way off base), and made something up.

You could also use this situation as an opportunity to work on your humor. In that same meeting, the word of the day was “cogent.” I started off my answer like this, “Let me ask you a question. If Kevin (another club member) and I were working on a project together and, by some stretch of the imagination, you could call us gentlemen, would that make us co-gents?” It caught them by surprise and brought the house down. Oh, and another benefit: It took up time, so I didn’t have to talk as much about the television show. Whew!

If I am struggling in my current path in the Pathways learning experience, what are some ways I can push through?

The key question is: Why are you struggling? Is it that you don’t like your path? Or the project? Do you have a hard time seeing how it relates to your goals or needs? Or maybe you have just lost momentum.

When I have slowed down in a path, it is usually because I am not that excited about the next project. It just sits there and stares at me, taunting me, laughing at me.

In order to motivate yourself, can you configure the project to fit something more to your liking? For example, one club member likes to write and deliver motivating stories. So as much as he can, he designs his projects around a story. Talk with your Vice President Education to see what you can work out.

If you don’t like your path, is there another path you might like better? Although, it’s important to recognize that there are a lot of commonalities between the paths.

And sometimes you just have to quit procrastinating and do it. After all, you never know what you might learn. Toastmasters isn’t designed to be easy. It is designed to challenge you to grow.

Lastly, if you have just lost momentum, consider why you joined Toastmasters in the first place. Maybe you have to get back to that.

I know there are some members who blitz through every project like it is nothing. That’s not me. But when I hit a wall, I just look for a way over it and keep on running. I hate roadblocks and the sooner I put them behind me, the better.

Bill Brown, DTM, is a speech delivery coach in Gillette, Wyoming. He is a member of Energy Capital Toastmasters in Gillette. Learn more at billbrownspeechcoach.com.

Theater of the Ear

Uncover storytelling tips from audio narrators.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.



“Like she was there in my living room.” That’s how Officer Dwayne Myers, played by Danny John-Jules in the hit British TV series *Death in Paradise*, described the delight of listening to a narrator read an audiobook. Officer Myers is not alone in embracing the medium. It’s estimated that more than half of the United States population alone has listened to audiobooks at some point in their lives, including 38% over the past year. And while the books themselves have to be interesting to capture listeners’ attention, the job requires much more than simply reading words off a page. The narrators help make the content sing.

People listen to audiobooks for all kinds of reasons: while driving, to compensate for poor eyesight, to combat insomnia, and more. Matthew Spiegel, a 91-year-old literature student of mine in Fort Lauderdale, has enjoyed audiobooks instead of reading for the past decade.

“The ear does more than the eyes do,” says Spiegel. “The voice emotes. If a narrator is good, the story really comes alive, and that makes all the difference. These people are amazing actors.”

Narrating for audiobooks is a form of voice acting. And while voice actors provide voice-overs for video games, animation, commercials, and other media, audiobook narrators specialize in recording stories for entire books. Besides acting skills, the job requires exceptional breath control, stamina, and reading ability to put across a story effectively.

Narrators learn to match the energy of the narrative—whether reading about a romantic rendezvous or an escaping criminal. That’s because despite the high technology involved in recording, the industry employs an age-old skill: storytelling.

Essential Storytelling Skills

Whether you engage with an audiobook, a podcast, or even a presentation onstage, you are listening to a story unfold through the speaker’s voice.

“All voice actors, whether they’re narrators or not, need good storytelling skills,” says Karen Merritt, a voice actor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Vice President Membership of the Elegant Speakers & Listeners (ESL) Toastmasters Club. “They need to identify the audience, grab the listeners’ attention right away, make a connection, and decide upon the perspective of the character.”

To make all this happen, narrators must first and foremost excel at vocal variety. If they read too quickly or don’t articulate well, for example, the story can be hard to follow. To evoke suspense, they might slow their pace. To create intimacy, they can speak closer to the microphone. And while the “heavy lifting” of evoking emotion must come from the text, their own emotional responses to the story inform their readings. For example, a narrator who feels sadness at the death of a character will convey that feeling through their voice.

Additionally, Merritt employs distinct character voices, varying qualities like volume, pitch, tone, rate of speech, and accent to distinguish one from another. She has worked on audiobooks, commercials, video games, and training videos, and often imagines her characters’ physical qualities to help her feel like she “knows” them. And to ensure that each voice is consistent and distinct, she keeps track of them on a spreadsheet.

If you lack a good ear for accents, however, don’t despair. According to the Pathways Level 3 project “Connect with Storytelling,” you don’t need to be an expert at creating characters. You

can often give the impression of a different speaker with just a slight variation in tone.

Surprisingly, many voice actors even incorporate body language and facial expressions in their performances. Merritt explains that although listeners don’t see it, the body affects the voice. Try saying hello without smiling and then with smiling, she says, and you will hear the difference. This also works for live storytelling, except in that case, audiences respond to what they see as well—be it a frown, a shrug, or moving to a different spot on the stage.

Storytelling in Toastmasters

Merritt credits Toastmasters for helping improve her storytelling and other voice acting skills. Former Toastmaster Thomas Miller, who specializes in non-fiction narration and is the host of four podcasts, does as well.

As the “Connect with Storytelling” project notes, “Stories have been spoken aloud and passed down from generation to generation in every civilization around the world.” It should come as no surprise then that the elective project appears in each of the six paths in the Pathways learning experience. This project teaches speakers how to apply storytelling techniques and descriptive skills to their presentations.



"Toastmasters improved my skills in every way," says Miller. "Including confidence." If narrators don't project confidence in their voices, they have a hard time engaging the audience. In addition, says Miller, Toastmasters helped him sound natural.

"A good audiobook narrator mustn't sound like they're reading," notes Miller, the former Club President of the Cloud Nine Toastmasters club in Aspen, Colorado, and TNT Toastmasters Club in Addison, Texas. "Instead, like any good actor, they must embody the material. What's more, I always have an image of a person I know when I'm narrating, and I'm reading the book to them. In other words, tell your audience a story, don't simply deliver it."

Toastmasters also helped Miller understand and adjust to the needs of his audience. Unlike with public speaking, he explains, people often listen to audiobooks through headphones or earbuds. Mastering that special environment is a big part of the job. That includes learning how to control "mouth noises" like clicks and pops, which he calls "the audiobook narrator's nemesis." Even live speakers must learn to rein in habits like lip-smacking.

"Public speaking is for a room or an auditorium," says Miller. "But audiobooks often go directly into the ear. They are more of a 'pillow-talk' kind of medium. That means the inflections have to be softer, perhaps even a little more deliberate. Getting into someone's head is an intimate experience. It's a sacred space."

Strategies to Become a Strong Storyteller

Breaking into any new field can be a challenge, but it's often worth the effort. To become a strong storyteller, try these strategies.

- Purchase or check out audiobooks from the library to study them for pacing, breath control, intonation, and other characteristics. You can also listen to podcasts, voice-overs, and other storytellers to learn what speaking skills the narrators use. (And don't forget those Toastmasters meetings!)
- Record yourself reading a book aloud. You may decide to invest in a good microphone or other equipment at this

stage. Then, analyze your performance to determine what you do well and how you can improve. Your Toastmasters mentor or fellow club members can also provide feedback.

- Consider taking a class or volunteering for podcasts or other projects until you feel confident. Speakers can also volunteer at local service organizations, libraries, and other venues to gain experience telling stories to a live audience.
- If you are interested in becoming a voice actor professionally, think about recording your performances to create a demo for prospective clients. Then get ready to promote yourself. Search career websites for casting calls as well as seeking out opportunities to freelance.

Merritt was already an actor, director, teaching artist, and mother before recording audiobooks. Prior to transitioning into the industry, she took the ACX Master Class to develop her skills. (ACX is a platform for narrators, authors, and publishers to connect to produce audiobooks.)

"This class sparked a major shift in my career, as I learned how to not only narrate, but also produce audiobooks from home, working around my sons' schedules," she says. "It was a lot of work, but I love it!"

Miller, meanwhile, majored in broadcasting and worked as a local news anchor while

still in college. He parlayed that experience into owning his own broadcast production business. When audiobooks became available to stream on smartphones, he attended a three-day event facilitated by leaders in the field. That, in conjunction with his professional background and experience in Toastmasters, was all he needed to launch his new career.

"The most important thing I learned," he says, "is that whatever I did, I needed to be Thomas Miller. I needed to develop my own style."

While Miller's approach is intimate and straightforward, yours may be particularly lively or even a little eccentric. That's because in all forms of storytelling, you are always ultimately yourself. The characters are in your listeners' heads.

Of course, there are many ways, and venues, in which to tell a story. Try to experiment with a number of them until you find your comfort zone. Once you become a confident storyteller, you'll fit into anyone's auditorium, car, or living room.

Caren Schnur Neile, Ph.D., is a performance storyteller, author, and storytelling coach. She has presented at three Toastmasters International conventions and is a frequent contributor to the *Toastmaster*. Reach her at cneile@fau.edu.

"All voice actors, whether they're narrators or not, need good storytelling skills."

—KAREN MERRITT



Photo courtesy of
WAOB® Audio Theatre

HOW TO WRITE A SPEECH WITH PURPOSE

Identify your goal to make the audience care.

By Kate McClare, DTM

Every speech has a purpose, and “getting through it” should not be yours. But if you haven’t taken the time to determine why you’re giving your speech, that may be all you can hope for. And your audience may wonder if they’ll make it to the end as well.

Determining what you want to accomplish is so critical that “Writing a Speech With Purpose” is the first project after the Ice Breaker in every Pathways path. It helps you connect with your audience, whether you want to inform, persuade, or entertain them. “Whatever your goal,” the Pathways project introduction advises, “the first step is to write a speech that has meaning, not only for you, but for every member of your audience.”

It’s not enough to care about your topic; you have to make the audience care about it, too. It’s all about reaching them, and defining your purpose will help you serve your listeners throughout the presentation. If you decide to persuade, you must present arguments that speak to the audience’s interests in order for them to believe you. If you decide to entertain, you must tell a story that resonates with them.

Your speech will have one of five purposes: to inform, persuade, entertain, inspire, or motivate. And yes, inspiring and motivating are indeed two different concepts. Inspiration is more emotional and internal; you might inspire someone to feel a general sense of purpose in reaching their goals. Motivation is more external and action-oriented, pushing the listener to take immediate steps toward a specific goal.

Write With Purpose

Follow these three steps to plan and write your speech:

1. Select a topic.

This must happen before you determine your speech’s purpose. If you decide first that you want to inspire an audience, for instance, you may find yourself forcing the topic into your preconceived purpose.

Instead, search your memory for experiences you want to share: funny stories, lessons you learned from a relationship, insights into an important issue. What is it about that topic that makes you want to talk about it? Figure out your “what” and then find the “why.”

2. Determine the purpose.

Decide why you want to share your topic with the audience and what you want them to do with your message—take action, learn information, laugh at a funny story? Before you begin writing the speech, Pathways recommends answering these three questions: *What is the most important thing I want to say? Why does it matter to the audience? What do I want people to hold in their hearts and minds long after my speech?*

3. Organize and write.

All speeches must be logically organized with an opening, body, and conclusion. Most experts recommend limiting your ideas to three main thoughts, with supporting points for each. But if you have a specific purpose, it’s even more important to scrutinize every statement and ensure it supports your intent.

Beyond the Lectern

The skills you learn in writing and delivering a speech with purpose will continue serving you after you come out from behind the lectern. From elevator pitches to impromptu comments in business meetings, you’ll know how to get to the point and hold your listeners’ attention, which is what it’s always about.

Kate McClare, DTM, is a professional writer and editor based in South Florida, where she is a member of Miami Advanced Toastmasters Club (CTM’s). She has been in Toastmasters since February 2011.

Keep the Purpose in Mind

- **Write a purpose statement and add the main points in a bulleted list.** The statement should concisely explain your goal. Treat the bullet points like a map that will guide you and the audience to the end result.
- **Consider creating the opening last.** Often, it’s only after you’ve written the whole speech that you discover the best way to introduce it.
- **Close with impact.** What do you want the audience to take away? Send them off with an intriguing fact, a memorable moment from your story, or a concrete direction to take action.
- **Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.** Don’t plan to “just wing it.” If you’re trying to inspire or motivate, you must speak with a finely crafted sense of urgency that can only come from practice. Persuasion usually requires emotion, and when you’re trying to entertain, you need a high-energy delivery. Vocal variety and body language can add immeasurably to informative presentations, which can often be dry and dull.

Hold Audience Attention Throughout Your Presentation

Tips for retaining and regaining your audience's focus.

By Joel Schwartzberg

In many ways, speeches are like movies. Exciting movies begin with a thrilling scene, just as effective speeches start with a compelling hook. Audiences walk away from a film thinking about the ending, much like they do when a speaker concludes by reinforcing the key takeaway.

But what about the content-heavy middle of a presentation? It doesn't have the luxury of an intriguing opening or thought-provoking ending to support and sustain audience interest.

Fortunately, just like in movies, a little editing can help an audience stay engaged or, if necessary, re-engage. You can get and hold their attention with two key tactics: 1) Break up patterns of potentially numbing sameness; 2) Keep things simple.

To prevent your audience from getting overwhelmed or confused, keep simplicity, conciseness, and focus in mind.

Breaking the Pattern

"Just as we normally tune out the feel of our shirt, the gentle hum of a ceiling fan, and the comforting scent of our morning coffee, we tune out speakers who become too predictable," Brad Phillips, CEO at Throughline Group, a public speaking and media training firm, notes in a post on his [company's website](#). "[But] just as we evolved the capacity to tune out static, we developed a keen ability to detect change and movement in the environment."

"Think of studying in a hushed library when your focus is abruptly diverted by a man's

loud voice cutting through the air ... When the established 'pattern' ends, we take note. And if we, as presenters, regularly break *our* patterns, we can go a long way toward helping our audiences remain interested and absorb our information," Phillips adds.

Sprinkle a few of the following pattern breaks into your presentation to keep the audience alert and primed for incoming points.

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Present a relevant and riveting story or case study.
- Show a visually stunning slide—or a completely blank one—to illustrate a point.
- Share a personal anecdote.
- Make a relevant joke.
- Vary your voice, volume, or pitch.
- Incorporate breakout discussions, exercises, or polls in a virtual meeting.
- Speak to different sections of the audience or walk to a different part of the room.
- Play a short video or audio file.
- Demonstrate a prop or object.
- Write or draw on a whiteboard or easel.
- Highlight a response posted in a virtual meeting chat.

Keep It Simple

Sometimes, the middle of a speech loses its stickiness because the information is too complex. To prevent your audience from getting overwhelmed or confused, keep simplicity, conciseness, and sharp focus in mind.

"As the expert, you should not attempt to tell [audiences] everything you know. Rather, you should ask the question, 'What is most helpful for this audience to know' and then share only that information," presentation coach Brian Krogh, who works with many biotech and pharmacological clients, advises in a [2024 article](#).

Simplicity is especially important on visual slides. You can make those slide points more quickly comprehensible by:

- Using simple language and references a layperson can comprehend
- Limiting the amount of data you present on each slide (even if this means creating more slides)
- Emphasizing a single point on each slide (which gives your audience time to process it)
- Writing slide titles featuring points or headlines (which reinforces your points), not merely topics or content categories

Michael Alley, who teaches engineering communication at Pennsylvania State University and wrote *The Craft of Scientific Presentations*, developed what is called the assertion-evidence approach to keep audiences attentive during slide-heavy scientific research presentations. It involves using a one-sentence assertion at the top of each slide, with visual evidence below it, such as charts, photographs, or videos.

This "assertion-evidence" approach is a good guide for keeping the middle slides more focused and memorable in any presentation.

You're now at the end of this article, but take a moment to review its middle. Did the bullets, subheads, short paragraphs, and expert quotes break up what could have otherwise been a numbing wall of words?

If you agree that it did, then you know how to prevent your entire speech from getting muddy in the middle.

Joel Schwartzberg is a presentation coach; executive communication specialist; and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team and Get to the Point! Simplify, Sharpen, and Sell Your Message. Follow him on LinkedIn.*





Meet

Aletta Rochat, DTM,
2025–2026 International President

South African speech coach makes history.

By Paul Sterman

What to wear? That question was very much on the mind of Aletta Rochat, DTM, in the months leading up to the 2024 World Championship of Public Speaking®. This wasn't about fashionista tendencies or shopping for a knockout dress to wow the crowd. No, it was about clothing as a point of cultural pride.

As Toastmasters International President-Elect at the time, it was Rochat's role to chair the championship event. Born in South Africa, the longtime resident of Cape Town wanted to wear an outfit representing her African identity. She took photos of clothing options and sought feedback from leaders in her District. They responded with passionate opinions about cultural attire and aesthetic design.

The search turned into a Toastmasters team effort. One member sent her elaborate beadwork to wear.

When the championship round began, in Anaheim, California, there was a regal-looking Rochat onstage, attired in an intricately designed black-and-white dress and equally stylish headdress.

This past August, at the 2025 Toastmasters International Convention, Rochat was installed as the organization's 2025–2026 International President—the first member from Africa to hold that position. She once again showed her cultural pride through her attire, bringing a bit of African inspiration into many of her outfits.

"It's very exciting," she says. "You know, when you come from Africa, Africa is often a place that's overlooked and underestimated by people. So what's amazing to me is that my becoming President is deeply meaningful to the Toastmasters here—not because it's me, but because of what it represents for Africa."

Aletta Rochat chaired the 2024 World Championship of Public Speaking wearing South African-themed attire.





The Rochat family, from left: Rory, Aletta, Trevor, Nicole, and Cate, along with the family pets.

Nourishing the Soul

Rochat has always been a people person, whether enjoying her Toastmasters friends, discussing literature in a book group, or training with other women in her Cape Town running club. Such social interaction, she says, “feeds my soul.”

Since joining Toastmasters 17 years ago, she has seized the many opportunities the program offers, leadership experience being one. As she has assumed one leadership role after another, she has built confidence and found fulfillment helping others.

“Each step of the way I’ve learned to expand my capacity to deliver whatever needs to be delivered,” says Rochat, a member of Cape Town Toastmasters.

“You see yourself grow, you see other people grow. You get to make a contribution, and all that is very meaningful to me. And it’s so much fun, really.”

Rochat works as a coach—both one-on-one and with groups—helping people hone their executive presence. Her first client, years ago, was someone who wanted to be confident delivering a speech at his 50th birthday but was too busy to join a Toastmasters club.

“I just love doing this work, because people will come to me and part of it will be about their presentation skills, part of it will be about their leadership skills, part of it will be them just

thinking strategically. So it’s all wrapped into one.”

Her career, she says, “wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for Toastmasters.”

Her Early Journey

When she was growing up, Rochat’s father worked in the mining business, so the family had to relocate often for his work, moving from South Africa to Zambia, then to Toronto, Tasmania, and back to South Africa. She constantly needed to connect with new people in different countries in order to make friends.

“I think that’s where my love of communication started,” she says. “It was almost like a survival skill in the beginning.”

She became a leader in school, and at 17, participated in a Rotary International Youth Exchange program, moving from South Africa to live with host families in North Bay, Ontario, Canada, for a year.

“It was a big adjustment but such an incredible adventure. I made lifelong friends, learned so much about myself, and grew in confidence and independence in ways I never expected.”

Rochat developed a career in marketing management before later focusing full time on raising her children. She and her husband of 35 years, Rory, have three children, now all adults: Nicole, 33; Cate, 31; and Trevor, 26. Her husband runs his own business, a retail fuel operation based in Cape Town.

Looking for a communication-related creative outlet, Rochat discovered Toastmasters in 2008, finding a club located near her home. “I joke that I went to my first meeting to run away from my kids,” she says with a smile. “I had been a stay-at-home mom for a number of years, and I was looking for something that was just for me—nothing to do with being a wife or a mom.”



Aletta Rochat speaks at a District conference in 2015.



Rochat, an avid runner, shown completing the Two Oceans Half Marathon in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2025.

“Each step of the way I’ve learned to expand my capacity to deliver whatever needs to be delivered.”

—ALETTA ROCHAT, DTM



Photos, clockwise: Rochat talks to a member of District 59 in Eindhoven, the Netherlands; with members of District 74 (Southern Africa); Rochat and her husband, Rory, at an International Convention; the Rochat children: Nicole, Trevor, and Cate.

She was already a confident communicator but the leadership journey opened a new path of personal growth. Rochat says leadership is all about relationships and recognizing others.

"I often say that the most underrated leadership tool, in my opinion, is validation. So if you want to build a team that thrives, keep on validating them in person," she says. "Send them a voice note, thank them for doing whatever, and thank the ones who ask you the hard questions, because they're also helping you."

She tries to help members "see the potential in themselves" and she offers tips wherever she can. "I try to just find very practical ways of making it easier to be a leader."

When Rochat served as [Region 11 Advisor](#), from 2016 to 2018, she held virtual meetings with District leaders, gave advice on overcoming challenges, and presented a webinar on "What Leaders Learn From Speech Contests."

Family Support

As a dedicated leader, Rochat has spent a great deal of time on her Toastmasters activities through the years. "I have to give a huge thank-you to my husband, who isn't a Toastmaster but has always just realized that this is my thing and has been so supportive," she says, "especially when it's been me spending time away from home, and especially when the kids were still in school."

She adds that her children are excited about her becoming International President. "They tease me a lot about it as well. My daughter will say, 'You're the queen of Toastmasters!'"

"Or I'll leave her a voicemail and she'll say to me, 'Mom, you're using your Toastmasters voice. Just use your normal voice.'"

Her daughters are particularly proud "in terms of me being a woman rising up in leadership," she notes.

(Rochat is the 10th woman in Toastmasters' history to serve as International President. She's also the [third woman in a row](#) to be elected to the role, following Radhi Spear, DTM, and Morag Mathieson, DTM.)

Outside of Toastmasters, Rochat is an avid hiker and runner who raves about Cape Town's beautiful greenbelts, vineyards, beaches, and mountain ranges. She has run a number of half-marathons—13.1 miles (21.09 kilometers)—and she is scheduled to run her 10th Two Oceans Half Marathon in Cape Town in 2026.

South Africa, of course, was the homeland of Nelson Mandela, one of the great leaders, and orators, in history. Rochat calls him "a nation builder," citing examples of his willingness and ability to reach out to people, even opponents.

"He was incredibly skilled at communicating with words and communicating with actions that brought people together. And I think that's something that I wish all of us could do more of. He was very inspiring."



Photos above, clockwise from left: Aletta Rochat with Past International Director Elizabeth Nostedt; with members at a District 74 event; with 2021 World Champion of Public Speaking Verity Price and Past International Director Frank Tsuru; with Past International President Pat Johnson.

A New Chapter

Rochat is excited about meeting new Toastmasters around the world as International President. She wants to help the organization build back its membership numbers post-COVID, and believes existing members need to think of sharing—as opposed to selling—what Toastmasters offers to individuals.

“You’re inviting people to share an opportunity. And then you’re looking after them once they’re there, and that seems doable to most everybody.”

“Sharing and serving. If we all do that, then we will start building more clubs and growing our organization again,” she says.

Rochat adds that she feels very lucky to have discovered Toastmasters and to continue reaping its many benefits, namely growing, learning, and connecting with others.

“You know, I’m in my 60s and my biggest fear of growing old is having my world shrink—and Toastmasters is the opposite of that. It just keeps me engaged, keeps growing my world, and that to me is so stimulating.”

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Sitting with her dog, Bella
Photo credit: KOA Photography

Leading Lights in South Africa

Three women are changing the perception of public speakers on their continent.

By Paul Sterman



From left, Aletta Rochat, Charlotte Kemp, and Verity Price
Photo credit: KOA Photography

Three longtime Toastmasters, including new International President Aletta Rochat, DTM, are blazing trails and bringing attention to the public speaking talent in Africa.

The three women, all friends in Cape Town, South Africa, have distinguished themselves with singular accomplishments. Rochat is the first Toastmasters International President from Africa; Verity Price, DTM, AS, was the first Toastmaster from that continent to win the World Championship of Public Speaking®; and Charlotte Kemp was the first person from Africa to head up the Global Speakers Federation, which she led from 2022 to 2024. The organization serves as a central hub for professional speaking associations around the world.

Rochat and Price are longtime Toastmasters, and while Kemp doesn't currently belong to a club, she was a member for nearly 10 years and served in numerous leadership roles.

Rochat, Price, and Kemp all say they hope their breakthrough successes will inspire other Toastmasters in Africa. Rochat remembers how exciting it was when Price won the [World Championship](#) in 2021 and how “exceptionally proud of her we were.”

Her friend's triumph, she adds, was a “way of showing people that it's possible that somebody from Africa can do it”—win the top speaking prize. And now she herself has achieved a first as well.

“Like Verity and I both say, we might be the first [from Africa], but we won't be the last.”

Price agrees. “I think it's an important thing—that you just need to see someone doing something ahead of you that makes you go, ‘Well, I can do this.’

“That's why I'm so excited to see Aletta take the helm [of Toastmasters] and hopefully inspire future leaders coming up behind her to see that this position can be held from people living on our continent.”

Kemp speaks passionately about the misperceptions people have of public speakers in Africa. She recalls an experience from several years ago that she says was a defining moment for her. Kemp went to a high-profile conference where all the attention was given to speakers from the United States—even though the conference was in Tanzania. Ultimately, the American keynoter withdrew at the last minute, reportedly because they felt the conference wasn't a prominent enough platform.

“What we were seeing is that in Africa, [event organizers] were saying, ‘Oh, yeah, we've got people here, but it's the people from

outside of Africa who have the real wisdom.’ And this is a lie about Africa that I'm really dedicated to overturning,” says Kemp, also a past president of the Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa.

When she became president of the Global Speakers Federation, she traveled to other countries and spoke often about Africa. “I got to talk about and demonstrate the incredible speakers we have here and the work that is being done, the wisdom that is here, the insight that is here.”

Rochat is reflective of that kind of talent, say Price and Kemp, who praise her poise and her leadership presence.

“She just has a kind of gravitas,” says Kemp, a 2009–2011 Toastmasters Area Governor. “It just feels like she is always professional and polished and under control. She never seems fazed by anything.”

Price, a member of the ToastED Toastmasters club in Cape Town, echoes Kemp's assessment. “Aletta just has this extraordinary graciousness in how she connects with people, whether she's onstage or just one-on-one,” Price says. “She listens, she's attentive, she asks reaching questions, she allows people to think. She is the epitome of grace.”

“I've known her since she was our District Governor [2013–2014], and I've watched her consistently lead and serve and support. I just can't think of a better person to be at the helm of Toastmasters.”

“I got to talk about and demonstrate the incredible speakers we have [in Africa] and the work that is being done, the wisdom that is here, the insight that is here.”

—CHARLOTTE KEMP

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Weaving Stories Into Your Speeches

Learn how to find and incorporate stories to make your speech sparkle.

By Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS

I was sitting in the audience at my first-ever Toastmasters District conference, held at the breathtaking Fairmont Le Chateau Montebello near Ottawa, Canada. The venue was stunning, with its rustic charm and roaring log fire, but what truly lit up the room that day was Darren LaCroix, AS.

He had our full attention from the moment he began. Not because he wowed us with facts or figures, but because he told a story. A vulnerable, personal story about bombing onstage, the sting of failure, and how he worked with a coach to rewrite and refine his message—again and again—until he delivered the winning speech that would change his life, becoming the 2001 World Champion of Public Speaking.

It wasn't just inspirational. It was instructional. Through his story, LaCroix showed us that storytelling is a skill we can develop—and that the right story, told the right way, can transform not just a speech but an audience.

That moment planted a seed. Since then, I've learned that when you master storytelling, you elevate your speaking to a new level. You make your message unforgettable.

Why Stories Work

Stories are hardwired into the human experience. In fact, storytelling has been around for as long as humans. Stories predate writing, and they have always been the way knowledge is passed down. They're how we make sense of the world. They give life to abstract concepts and transform lessons into experiences.

Neuroscience shows that when we hear facts, only the language centers of our brain are

activated. But when we hear stories, multiple areas light up—including those responsible for emotions, sensory processing, and memory.

That's why stories stick.

Good stories transport us. They help us feel, not just think. They allow us to internalize messages more deeply. Marketers use storytelling because it works: Stories build connection, trust, and emotional buy-in. Every bestselling novel and blockbuster movie is, at its core, a compelling story.

Why Stories Matter in Speaking

Audiences today crave engagement. While inspiration and information are important, the number one thing people want in a presentation is to be entertained. Stories meet that need.

When you study effective speeches, you'll see how storytelling is inevitably woven in. Nearly all of the most-watched TED Talks begin with a story, or as [mine](#) did, have a story immediately after an opening question.

Think of International Speech Contest speeches—virtually all of them are based around either one key story, or a number of linked stories. Luisa Montalvo, the 2024 [World Champion of Public Speaking](#), captivated the world with her heartfelt story about the 37 strangers who came together to save her life after a devastating car accident. Her vivid imagery and emotional storytelling held the audience spellbound, delivering a powerful message about connection, gratitude, and resilience.

Vince Ford, this year's District 112 International Speech Contest winner, opened

with a vivid scene—skiing on glistening snow with his daughter. It drew the audience in and set the stage for the emotional journey that followed, where he shared her health challenges. His opening story captured the audience, and the vulnerability of what he shared made the speech truly memorable.

Stories don't need to be dramatic. Everyday moments, told well, can move a room. At a recent Division-level International Speech Contest, the speaker shared a humorous yet touching story of a baking disaster with their grandmother. What started as a lighthearted tale of flour explosions and burnt cookies turned into a poignant reflection on the lessons we learn from those we love—and how mistakes often lead to the sweetest memories.

Great speakers know that stories are more than just embellishments. They are the message. When done well, they make your content relatable, your lessons memorable, and your speech truly impactful.

Story Types

One myth I often hear is, "I don't have any good stories." The truth? You do.

Stories come in all forms:

- **Personal anecdotes:** Your own experiences are the richest source of authentic, relatable stories.
- **Historical stories:** Drawing from history can add credibility and depth.
- **Metaphorical or fables:** Classic parables and analogies help simplify complex ideas.
- **Client or business stories:** Perfect for work presentations or persuasive pitches.
- **Fictional scenarios:** Useful for hypothetical

training or future-focused topics. The beauty is that one story can often serve multiple purposes. A single moment can illustrate the importance of integrity, the power of apology, and the danger of assumptions—all depending on how you frame it.

Finding and Collecting Stories

To become a master storyteller, build a story bank. Stories are everywhere: at work, on the way to the supermarket, during family dinners, when you meet a stranger, during celebrations, when you're on holiday, while doing your favorite pastime, and in moments of joy, frustration, or reflection.

Once you start paying attention, you'll start to find stories more easily. Start jotting down moments in a notebook or digital file. Label each story with the key lesson (or lessons) it could illustrate. You might use hashtags or bold headings to quickly search for story themes like #resilience, #leadership, or #communication. You'll find some stories apply to multiple themes. That's a good thing. Reuse them with different framing to suit your message.

Set aside time each week to reflect on the stories you found. Even a 10-minute habit of jotting ideas down can build a rich library of material over time.

Where to Use Stories in a Speech

Stories can be used throughout a presentation. Here's how:

- **Open with a story.** It builds rapport and draws your audience in from the first moment.
- **Reinforce points mid-speech.** A story can illuminate your idea and make it come alive. You might have one story per key point, or several anecdotes that each reinforce the same central message.
- **Close with a story.** Ending on a story, or looping back to one you started with, leaves a lasting emotional impression.

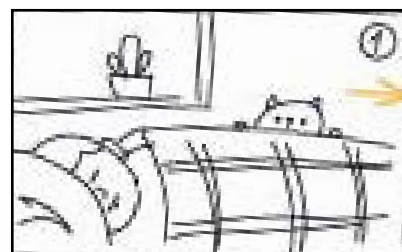
It's worth noting: Not every story belongs in every speech. Don't tell a story just because you like it. Always ask, "Does this support my message?" If the answer is no, save it for another time.

Stories build connection, trust, and emotional buy-in.

One of the most powerful techniques is the loop-back, where you reference a story told at the beginning of the speech.

In my 2024 Accredited Speaker presentation, I shared a deeply personal story—how our family home was devastated by flooding. After presenting three resilience strategies, I looped back to the flood story again. I jumped forward to the moment when my husband grabbed my hand as we walked away from our damaged home and said, "This is going to be an amazing resilience-building exercise for the kids."

This closed the loop on my story and led into relating my story to the audience—reassuring them that no matter what storms they face, they too can stand strong. Loops like this help create a satisfying ending and give your message a deeper resonance.





Share
your
story.

Tips for Telling Powerful Stories

Once you've chosen a story, make it come alive with these tips:

- 1. Set the scene.** Help listeners see and feel where we are. Use rich detail. Instead of "I walked into a small room," try "I stepped into the run-down shack. Wallpaper hung from the walls in strips, the mildew smell was overpowering, and a bone-chilling breeze blew through the broken windows."
- 2. Use sensory cues.** Engage as many senses as possible. The smell of fresh-baked cookies. The crunch of fall leaves underfoot. The chatter of birds nesting at dusk. This helps the audience feel they are in the story.
- 3. Use dialogue and character dynamics.** Let us see and hear the characters. What's their gait, facial expression, and tone of voice? Show us the power dynamics through tone and action.
- 4. Keep only essential details.** Ask yourself, *Does this detail support the story?* If not, cut it. Verity Price, DTM, AS, the 2021 World Champion of Public Speaking, once said, "You can ruin a good story with the facts," referring to irrelevant or distracting information. She refined her winning speech through 32 versions, paring her stories down to the essentials.

For example, she chose to omit the fact that her family left Zimbabwe during a time of civil war. Instead, she simply shared that her father suddenly lost his job and home—

keeping the focus on the emotional core of the story. When you include unnecessary facts, you risk leaving your audience with unanswered questions that pull their attention away. Less is often more.

- 5. Practice out loud.** Rehearse in front of a mirror or in an empty room. Work on your pacing. Match your gestures and expressions to the tone of your story. If relevant, act out moments to bring them to life—without overdoing it.
- 6. Feel the emotion.** Get comfortable with the emotion in the story. Feel it fully—and your audience will too.

Storytelling is a skill we can develop—and the right story, told the right way, can transform not just a speech but an audience.

- 7. Create holograms.** Practice where you'll tell each story within your speaking space. For example, if you share the joy of winning a contest from stage left, you can later gesture back to that spot to reconnect the audience to that emotion. Tell each story in a different

physical location—especially when they carry contrasting emotional tones. Don't layer grandma's funeral over the wedding proposal.

- 8. Link it clearly.** Include a phrase like, "The reason I share this story is ..." This signals to your audience that it's not just for entertainment. It ties the emotion to the lesson.

The next time you're preparing a speech or a presentation, challenge yourself to add a story, or stories, to illustrate one of your points. Try putting the story in different places, experiment with different openings, add some dialogue, play with your pacing, volume, and pauses.

Storytelling is a skill you can learn and sharpen. Be on the lookout for good examples and pay attention to what makes them so good. After all, eight years later, I'm still reflecting on Darren LaCroix's speech at the District 61 Conference!

Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS, is an award-winning wellbeing specialist, New Zealand's Keynote Speaker of the Year and Educator of the Year 2023, TEDx speaker, author of *Thriving Leaders*, *Thriving Teams*, and host of the Thrive TV Show. She is a sought-after speaker who helps organizations create a positive, energized team culture where people thrive. Visit laurenparsonswellbeing.com.

Quick Storytelling Checklist



Is your story vivid and specific?



Does it clearly support your message?



Is it relatable?



Have you practiced the delivery with gestures?



Have you prepared to fully feel and express the emotion?

When done well, stories can make your content relatable, your lessons memorable, and your speech truly impactful.



MINDFULNESS PRACTICES FOR IMPROVED SPEAKING

Harness the mental tools that boost your public speaking.

By Elizabeth Danziger

Do you ever wish there was a magic tool you could use to manage anxiety, increase resilience, create a sense of calm, and boost your chances of succeeding at everything you do?

Fortunately, that tool exists inside you: the combination of your mind and imagination. Meditation and visualization are powerful practices that can transform your public speaking experience. They help you tap into the quiet power of your mind to calm your nerves, focus your energy, and achieve the success you're capable of.

When I was in college, I was trying to process the trauma of a childhood loss. My mind was scattered, and I was at the whim of my emotions. When I heard there was a Zen center at the top of the mountain next to my college in Claremont, California, my curiosity was piqued. I visited and found that I had a lot of difficulty sitting still and focusing on my breathing. Taking this as a challenge, I resolved to keep meditating until I could think of my childhood trauma without having a strong emotional reaction, and until I could succeed at calming my mind.

The practice itself was simple: sit still, breathe deeply, and count from one to 10. If a wandering thought snagged my attention, I would start again at one. I was amazed at how long it took me to get to 10 without being distracted. Almost 40 years later, I still meditate nearly every morning. It sets the tone for a calm, productive day and now, I can reach 10 with ease.

For centuries, meditation and visualization have been used to cultivate clarity, focus, and inner peace. Today, science affirms their benefits in enhancing creativity and reducing anxiety, especially in public speaking.

The Science of Meditation

The first step to confident speaking is managing anxiety. A study reported in *Neuroscience News* found that regular meditation decreases cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone, and reduces the risk of stress-related diseases.

Similarly, a study in the *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* showed that eight weeks of mindful meditation significantly reduced symptoms of social anxiety. Participants displayed decreased activation in the amygdala—the brain's fear center—when facing social stressors. If fear of public speaking holds you back, meditation is your ticket to serenity.

Meditation is frequently categorized as a mindfulness practice. Mindfulness involves focusing on the present moment without judgement.



“Before winning the World Championship, I spent more time in mental preparation—meditation and visualization—than in physical practice. Your speech happens twice: first in your mind, then onstage.”

—CRAIG VALENTINE

In his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, explains, “The best way to capture moments is to pay attention. This is how we cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing.”

Many speakers find that simply focusing on the moment at hand—not worrying about the future or dwelling on the past—melts their performance anxiety.

How to Meditate

Meditation can be practiced in many ways. The goal is to quiet the mind and enhance concentration. To try meditating, follow these steps:

1. Find a quiet space, sit comfortably, close your eyes, and take slow, deep breaths.
2. Let your thoughts drift by like clouds; don't hang onto them.
3. Set a timer for five to 15 minutes.
4. Count your breaths or watch the breath entering and leaving your body. If you prefer a guided meditation, use an app like Headspace or Calm or search the internet for other options.

Emily Fletcher, author of *Stress Less, Accomplish More*, writes that meditation allows us to access a state of restful alertness, where the mind is calm yet sharp and focused. This balance is crucial for delivering a compelling speech.

With regular practice, you'll find it easier to calm your nerves before stepping onto the stage.

Visualization: Creating Success in Your Mind

After my first book was published, I did a flurry of media appearances and public speaking engagements. Then, after years away, I was asked to speak in front of 40 people. I was terrified.

My doctor, a master of aikido (a Japanese martial art that emphasizes meditation), gave me an exercise. He held out his arm and asked me to push down on it. It was easy. Then, he extended it again, but this time, it was rock solid. “The first time, I only thought about my arm,” he explained. “The second time, I imagined it as a firehose of energy. That made my body strong.”

He advised me to visualize my speech: “What's the worst that could happen?” I imagined stumbling over my words or forgetting my lines. He reassured me: “Even if that happens, your life will go on. Your family—and your dog—will still love you.” Somehow that thought reassured me: This speech would not be the end of my life, no matter how it turned out. This realization freed me to create a powerful mental image of myself striding across the stage and connecting with my audience.

That's what visualization is: vividly imagining success so you feel it as reality. Athletes, pilots, and performers use this technique to enhance performance. Michael Phelps, American swimmer and winner of 23 Olympic gold medals, mentally rehearsed every race. He pictured exactly how the race would go, including the smell in the air, the taste of the water, the sounds he'd hear, and what he'd see on the clock.

Public speakers can also apply visualization. Here's how to use it before a speech:

1. Find a quiet space. Take three deep breaths to center yourself.
2. Set the scene. Close your eyes and picture the venue. See the audience engaged, smiling, and nodding as you speak.
3. Rehearse mentally. Visualize yourself delivering a smooth, confident speech. Feel the energy, hear the applause, and embrace your confidence.
4. Prepare for challenges. Imagine handling technical glitches, skeptical audiences, or tough questions with ease.

Practical Tips for Meditation Beginners

- Start small. Begin with short sessions and gradually increase your practice.
- Be consistent. Daily practice builds confidence and reduces anxiety.
- Use guided resources. Apps like Headspace or Calm can help you get started.
- Incorporate movement. If sitting still is difficult, try walking meditation or yoga.

Visualization primes your brain for success, reinforcing positive associations and reducing fear of the unknown. Research suggests it activates the same neural pathways as actual performance, improving confidence and focus. A study in the University of Dayton journal *Basic Communication Course Annual* found that visualization significantly reduced anxiety and increased the effectiveness of speakers.

Craig Valentine, 1999 World Champion of Public Speaking, credits much of his success to these techniques: “Before winning the World Championship, I spent more time in mental preparation—meditation and visualization—than in physical practice. Your speech happens twice: first in your mind, then onstage.”

Combining Meditation and Visualization

Meditation and visualization work best when used together. Meditation keeps you calm and present, while visualization mentally prepares you for success.

These techniques help inside and outside of Toastmasters. Meditation aids impromptu speaking, while visualization prepares you for structured speeches. Both practices can also enhance your performance in job interviews, negotiations, and other conversations.

For Toastmasters looking to advance from competent to compelling speakers, meditation and visualization offer a competitive edge. By mastering not just external delivery but mental preparation, speakers can achieve greater confidence, presence, and audience connection.

Elizabeth Danziger is founder of *Worktalk Communications Consulting*, an author of four books, and a columnist on *Inc.com*. You can reach her at lizd@worktalk.com.



Pondering Proverbial Wisdom

Pithy sayings stand the test of time.

By Paul Sterman

Stop me if you've heard these before:
Don't count your chickens before they hatch.
Actions speak louder than words.
Don't bite the hand that feeds you.
Rome wasn't built in a day.

They might sound a little corny and clichéd at times, but I love proverbs. Usually bearing some kind of life lesson, they are short sayings that reflect big truths. Truths that are, for the most part, timeless.

Many of these are so deeply ingrained in our culture they've become part of our everyday lexicon. They can be a potent communication tool when you want to make a point, whether in a speech or a conversation.

In the 18th century—when nuggets of moral or practical wisdom were especially popular—Benjamin Franklin published *Poor Richard's Almanack*. The compendium included what have become some classic adages: *haste makes waste*, *lost time is never found again*, and *a penny saved is two pence clear (now known as the snappier a penny saved is a penny earned)*.

Punchy but Perplexing

Most proverbs are easy to decipher, but some I've heard my whole life and still don't know what they mean.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. What is a gift horse and why would we be looking in its mouth?

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Who throws out bathwater? And, more to the point: **Who throws out a baby?!!**

He who hesitates is lost. Really? What if you're just pausing for directions? Not lost, just confirming the GPS is correct.

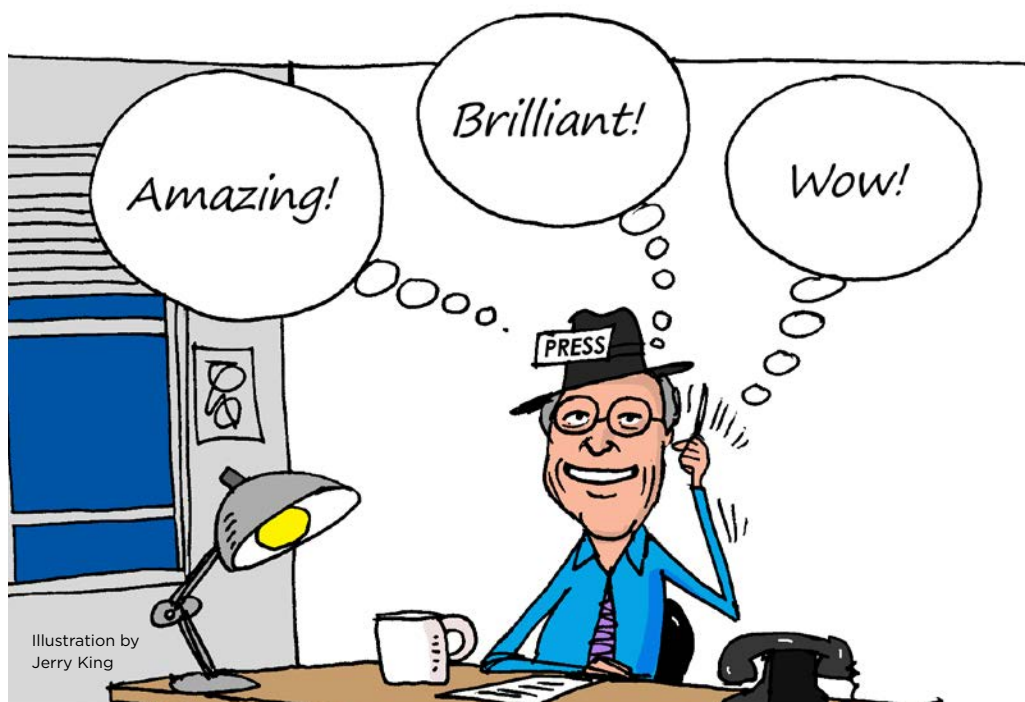


Illustration by
Jerry King

The pen is mightier than the sword.
 Is it, though?

A couple of years ago, a colleague and I were discussing whether to make a particular grammatical change to a sentence, and she said, "It's not a hill I would die on." I'd never heard that one before! It basically means "this isn't *that* important." But with more poetic phrasing. Suddenly a stance on the serial comma evoked hills and battles and generals making last stands.

Proverbs are fun because of their figurative meaning. The literal statement is symbolic of something larger. For example, maybe you mow your lawn better than your next-door neighbor, but if he's got a boat in his driveway, you might find the grass looking a lot greener on his side of the fence.

Likewise, when you say *every cloud has a silver lining*, you're probably not studying meteorological signs, but rather, pondering how to stay positive amid disappointment.

Proverbs tend to exist alongside their not-too-distant cousin, the aphorism. The two are similarly constructed, but the former are considered more reflective of general folk wisdom, while the latter are typically attributed to a single individual (William Shakespeare, for example).

Gretchen Rubin, a popular author, podcaster, and blogger, is such a fan of aphorisms that she wrote a couple hundred of them to distill life lessons in her latest book, *Secrets of Adulthood: Simple Truths for Our Complex Lives*. Aphorisms, she notes, stretch your self-awareness.

"Because we must decide whether we agree or disagree, aphorisms provoke our reflection," she wrote in a blog post.

Proverbs can be a potent communication tool when you want to make a point, whether in a speech or a conversation.

The Bard's Big Message

Shakespeare had a genius for pithy sayings with sharp insights. Many of the playwright's poetic phrases have now become commonplace.

All the world's a stage. To thine own self be true.
Brevity is the soul of wit. (A good one for any public speaker to remember.)

Ben Franklin, William Shakespeare, and ... Yogi Berra? Yes indeed. Berra was a star baseball player for the New York Yankees in the 1950s, and as a talker, he was in a category of his own. Berra had a gift for saying things that made no sense, but, well, kind of did.

A few of Yogi's greatest hits:

It's déjà vu all over again. *The future ain't what it used to be.* *Baseball is 90% mental; the other half is physical.*

Perhaps best to end this column with the sagest of Yogi's sayings.

When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

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CLIENT SPOTLIGHT - BO BENNETT, DTM

You might know Bo as the creator of FreeToastHost, the host of the Toastmasters Podcast, or the Founder of eBookIt.com. Or perhaps you never heard of the guy. Either way, you will enjoy his latest book, *Some Really Personal, Yet Entertaining Stories From My Life That You Will Enjoy and May Even Find Inspiring*.

What is a "normal childhood?" Does it include almost being murdered by your sister with an ax? Speeding around town in the back of a station wagon because your mom is chasing an "alien spaceship"? Being busted by the police for intent to light a pond on fire? Tackling your mom to the ground and wrestling a knife out of her hand because she was trying to kill your dad? While my stories may be unique, readers will be able to relate to the broader themes that are part of a normal childhood such as sibling rivalry, eccentric parents, doing stupid things, and frequently preventing one's parents from literally murdering each other.

Although some of the subject matter is not something one would generally laugh at, you have my permission to laugh. Social rules don't apply here; my rules do. It works for me, and who knows, after reading the stories from my past, you might be inspired to see your own screwed up past in a more humorous light.

Some Really Personal, Yet Entertaining Stories From My Life That You Will Enjoy and May Even Find Inspiring by Bo Bennett is available in ebook, paperback, and audio, at

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