

After-Dinner Speaking: Using Humor Effectively

16.3

List and explain strategies for creating humor in a speech.

If you are a human being or even a reasonably alert shrub, chances are that sooner or later a club or organization will ask you to give a speech. The United States is infested with clubs and organizations, constantly engaging in a variety of worthwhile group activities such as (1) eating lunch; (2) eating dinner; (3) eating breakfast; and of course (4) holding banquets. The result is that there is a constant demand for post-meal speakers, because otherwise all you'd hear would be the sounds of digestion.²⁹

With typically irreverent wit, columnist Dave Barry thus begins his observations of the activity known as after-dinner speaking. Certainly he is right about one thing: the popularity of mealtime meetings and banquets with business and professional organizations and service clubs. And such a meeting inevitably requires a humorous after-dinner speech.

Interestingly, not only is the after-dinner speech not always after *dinner* (as Barry points out, the meal is just as likely to be breakfast or lunch), but it is also not always after anything. The after-dinner speech may be delivered before the meal or even between courses.

Former First Lady Barbara Bush preferred to schedule speeches first and dinner later during state dinners. In another variation, Librarian of Congress James Billington, at a dinner in honor of philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, served up one speech between each course, "so that one had to earn the next course by listening to the speech preceding it."³⁰ Regardless of the variation, the after-dinner speech is something of an institution, one with which a public speaker should be prepared to cope.

After-dinner speeches may present information or persuade, but their primary purpose is to entertain—arguably the most inherently audience-centered of the three general purposes for speaking discussed in Chapter 6. We summarize several strategies for entertaining audiences with humor in Table 16.1 and discuss them in detail next.



Watch at MyCommunicationLab
Video: "After Dinner Speech"



Read at MyCommunicationLab
Learning From Great Speakers:
Dave Barry

Humorous Topics

Because humor is listener-centered, the central question for the after-dinner speaker seeking a topic must be this: What do audiences find funny?

after-dinner speech

A humorous presentation, usually delivered in conjunction with a mealtime meeting or banquet

TABLE 16.1 STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING HUMOR IN AFTER-DINNER SPEECHES

Humorous Topics	Inherently funny subjects or humorous treatments of more serious subjects
Humorous Stories	Funny anecdotes
Humorous Verbal Strategies	
Play on words	An intentional error such as puns, spoonerisms, and malapropisms
Hyperbole	Exaggeration
Understatement	Downplaying a fact or event
Verbal irony	Saying just the opposite of what one means
Wit	An unexpected turn at the end of a fact or incident
Humorous Nonverbal Strategies	Physical or vocal elements such as posture, gesture, pauses, and intonation



The Comedy Gym in Austin, Texas, a school for aspiring stand-up comedians, advocates that speakers start with “themselves, their lives, what makes them laugh.”³¹ Audiences almost always enjoy hearing a speaker poke fun at himself or herself. Comedy writer John Macks points out that self-deprecating humor is “an instant way to establish a rapport with an audience.”³²

Even serious subjects can lend themselves to humorous presentations. One speechwriter notes that humor can help a speaker achieve rapport with the audience and can help the audience remember the speaker’s message:

If you can find a way to make a point with humor, you’ve improved the odds of making your message stick. For example, say you’re expecting a tax increase, and you want to let your audience know. You might say, “Well, Congress has finally decided how to divide up the pie; trouble is, *we’re* the pie.”³³

Increased taxes, not an inherently humorous topic, can still be treated humorously. So can other serious topics. Earlier in this chapter we discussed the use of humor in eulogies. Gun control, the U.S. health care industry, and capitalism—subjects tackled by Michael Moore in the documentary films *Bowling for Columbine*, *Sicko*, and *Capitalism: A Love Story*—are serious topics made more palatable to listeners by the use of humor. For example, in *Sicko*,

a scrolling text of the pre-existing medical conditions that insurance companies use to reject prospective applicants is set to the *Star Wars* theme against an outer-space backdrop.³⁴

Although Moore’s medium is film rather than speech, the same principle applies: Many serious subjects can be treated with humor.

Are any subjects inappropriate for an after-dinner speech? A few years ago, comedian Robin Williams appeared on a late-night television talk show to discuss a film in which Williams played a Protestant minister. Spinning off from that character, Williams launched into a comic treatment of pedophilia among Catholic priests that provoked outrage from Catholic organizations.

While Williams’s comic routines often push the boundaries of propriety and taste, audience-centered public speakers should exercise greater restraint. Because it is the audience that “gives attempts at humor their success or failure,”³⁵ topics that might create a great deal of emotional noise (such as grief or anger) for particular audiences would not be good topics for humorous speeches to those groups. A humorous treatment of childhood cancer would most likely only distress an audience of parents who had lost children to that disease.

Humorous Stories

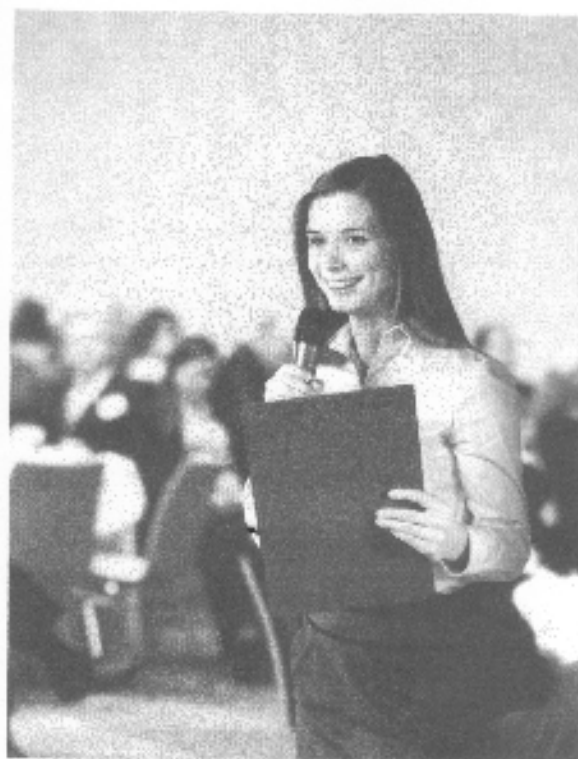
Humorous stories should be simple. Complicated stories and jokes are rarely perceived by audiences as funny. Jay Leno claims that

Jokes work best when they’re easy to understand.”³⁶

Co-writers Michael Blastland and David Spiegelhalter agree, adding,

If nothing happens in a story, it is not usually a story, it’s a joke.³⁷

Successful after-dinner speakers also need a broad repertoire of jokes, humorous anecdotes, and one-liners; one says that she gathers approximately 25 to 30 in preparation for writing a speech.³⁸ She explains,



The purpose of most after-dinner speeches is to entertain the audience. What humorous strategies can this speaker use?

Photo: pejsisaw/Totata

This will be reduced to the best and most appropriate 6 or 7, but one needs as much material as possible to begin with.

Finally, it is important to know your anecdotes very well. Nothing deflates a humorous story more than getting halfway through one and saying, "Oh, and I forgot to tell you. . . ." Rehearse your jokes. Only if you know the material can you hope to deliver it with the intonation and timing that will make it funny.

Humorous Verbal Strategies

A funny story or a one-liner may rely on any of the following verbal strategies for humorous effect.

Pun Most of us are familiar with the **pun**, which relies on double meanings to create humor. For example, an old joke in which an exasperated speaker tries to explain the meaning of "hide" by shouting, "Hide! Hide! A cow's outside!" provokes the response, "I'm not afraid of cows." The joke relies on two meanings of the word *hide*: to conceal oneself and the skin (*outside*) or an animal.

Spoonerism Another play on words is the **spoonerism**, named for William Spooner, a professor at Oxford University in the 1930s who frequently used it (inadvertently, in his case). A spoonerism occurs when someone switches the initial sounds of words in a single phrase: "sublic peaking" instead of "public speaking," for example. In one joke that relies on a spoonerism, the Chatanooga Choo-choo becomes the "cat who chewed the new shoes." Many parodies and satires employ spoonerisms to avoid charges of libel or copyright infringement; a spoonerism might be employed to name a boy wizard "Perry Hotter."

Malapropism Named for the unfortunate character Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's eighteenth-century play *The School for Scandal*, a **malapropism** is the mistaken use of a word that sounds much like the intended word: "destruction" for "instruction," for example.

Hyperbole Exaggeration, or **hyperbole**, is often funny. In an after-dinner speech on "The Alphabet and Simplified Spelling," Mark Twain claimed,

Simplified spelling brought about sun-spots, the San Francisco earthquake, and the recent business depression, which we would never have had if spelling had been left all alone.³⁹

Of course, spelling could not have caused such catastrophes, so by using hyperbole, Twain makes his point in a humorous way.

Understatement The opposite of hyperbole, **understatement** involves downplaying a fact or event. Microsoft founder and Harvard dropout Bill Gates downplayed his meteoric success by telling a graduating class at one Ivy League university,

I did the best of everyone who failed.⁴⁰

Verbal Irony A speaker who employs **verbal irony** says just the opposite of what he or she really means. Student Chris O'Keefe opens his speech on reading Shakespeare with this statement:

At a certain point in my life, I came to the realization that I wanted to spend my life's effort to become a great playwright.⁴¹

pun

The use of double meanings to create humor

spoonerism

A phrase in which the initial sounds of words are switched

malapropism

The mistaken use of a word that sounds much like the intended word

hyperbole

Exaggeration

understatement

Downplaying a fact or event

verbal irony

Saying the opposite of what one means

Chris reveals the verbal irony of the statement when he continues,

It has been about an hour and a half now and the feeling is still going strong.

Wit One of the most frequently used verbal strategies for achieving humor is the use of **wit**: relating an incident that takes an unexpected turn at the end. Research suggests that witty humor may enhance a speaker's credibility.⁴² Accepting the 2007 Oscar for Best Actress, Helen Mirren paid tribute to the monarch she had portrayed on screen in *The Queen*,

For 50 years and more, Elizabeth Windsor has maintained her dignity, her sense of duty and her hairstyle.⁴³

The wit occurs in the final phrase "her hairstyle," which catches off-guard the audience anticipating another majestic attribute.

Humorous Nonverbal Strategies

After-dinner speakers often create humor through such nonverbal cues as posture, gesture, and voice. Well-timed pauses are especially crucial delivery cues for after-dinner speakers to master. One experienced after-dinner speaker advocates

a slight pause before the punch line, then pause while the audience is laughing.⁴⁴

It is true that some people seem to be "naturally" funny. If you are not one of them—if, for example, you struggle to get a laugh from even the funniest joke—you may still be able to use the strategies outlined above to prepare and deliver an after-dinner speech that is lighthearted and clever, if not uproariously funny. Such a speech can still be a success.

wit

Relating an incident that takes an unexpected turn at the end