

* Commencement Addresses

Cartoonist Garry Trudeau has said that the **commencement address** was invented

largely in the belief that outgoing college students should never be released into the world until they have been properly sedated.²⁰

Unfortunately, most commencement speeches of the past probably deserved Trudeau's assessment. Commencement speakers often seemed oblivious to their audience on an occasion that demands and deserves audience-centeredness. In contrast, however, more recent commencement speeches have been described as

much more personal, infused with self-deprecating humor, raunchy asides and references to the speaker's own humble or distant origins.²¹

An audience-centered commencement address must fulfill two important functions.

Praise the Graduates First, the commencement speaker should praise the graduating class. Because the audience includes the families and friends of the graduates, the commencement speaker can gain their goodwill (as well as that of the graduates themselves) by pointing out the significance of the graduates' accomplishments. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg congratulated the 2013 graduating class of Stanford University with this tribute:

There's no question that the Class of 2013 is . . . "The greatest class in the history of Stanford!"²²

Focus on the Future Second, the audience-centered commencement speaker should turn graduates toward the future. A commencement address is not the proper forum in which to bemoan the world's inevitable destruction or the certain gloomy economic future of today's graduates. Rather, commencement speakers should suggest bright new goals and try to inspire the graduates to reach for them, as oceanographer Sylvia Earle did with these words:

You can hold the world in your hands on your desktop, your laptop. You can Google-earth. You can dive into the ocean in ways that no one who preceded this time could do it. You, literally, hold the world in your hands.²³

Commencement speakers who want to be audience-centered can pick up additional tips from former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly S. Fiorina, who consulted by email with the graduating class of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before her commencement address to them. She discovered that students wanted a speech based on life experience, not theory, and advice on how to make the decisions they needed to make in life. And, Fiorina adds, "On one point there was complete unanimity: Please don't run over your time."²⁴

Commemorative Addresses

A **commemorative address**, a speech delivered during ceremonies held to celebrate some past event, is likely to include a tribute to the person or persons involved. For example, a speech given on the Fourth of July both commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence and pays tribute to those who signed it. Your town's sesquicentennial celebrates both the founding and the founders of the town. And if you were asked to speak at the reception for your grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, you would probably relate the stories they've told you



Watch at MyCommunicationLab
Video: "Commencement Address"



commencement address

A speech delivered at a graduation or commencement ceremony

commemorative address

A speech delivered during ceremonies held in memory of some past event and/or the person or persons involved