

How to Make a Dynamite Speech



*Power your next
presentation with these
concise, proven
techniques of the world's
most powerful speakers.
Persuade.
Motivate.
Activate.*

By Earle Gray

The naked speaker

To read or not to read. That is the question that confronts those who would give a speech. Whether it is better to stand naked (figuratively speaking) in front of your audience, sans text, sans notes, sans podium. Or whether it's better to arm yourself with a lectern and a fully-prepared text.

Take a tip from the most renowned speaker of the 20th century. Winston Churchill never gave a speech without first painstakingly writing — and re-writing — his text. With one exception. And that exception was such a disaster that this Churchillian calamity made the front page of *The Times* of London.

But just because you write a complete text for your speech doesn't mean that when you present it, you actually have to read it.

Even presentations that aren't fully written must still be meticulously prepared. "The most crucial element of any presentation is the preparation and rehearsal of literally every detail," writes Peter Urs Bender, author of the best-selling *Secrets of Power Presentations* and *Leadership from Within*. After you have written, re-written, revised, edited, rehearsed and rehearsed your speech, when the time for delivery arrives you can:

- Present the text from memory, word for word — highly effective if you're an accomplished actor but otherwise fraught with danger.
- Retain a firm outline in your head and speak from that.
- Reduce the text to card-sized, hand-held cue notes.
- Read your prepared text, the surest way to present your message in the best possible words.

The best option depends on the circumstances of the speech, your preferences and abilities, the time available for preparation and rehearsal, and whether or not the speech is intended for later publication. It would be as foolish to read a prepared text for a wedding toast

as in most cases it would be not to read the text of the CEO's message to the annual meeting of shareholders, a key lecture at a university convocation, or an important speech to a Rotary Club.

Here's a simple guide. When what is to be said is vital, read it. When how it's said is more important, don't read it.

The first televised U.S. presidential debate, in 1960 between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy, is a classic example of how being more important than what. Many Americans can still remember that debate, or have heard about it, and know that Kennedy was the winner. But Nixon's opening statement, his response to questions, his summing up, were clearly more cogent, more forceful, and better expressed than Kennedy's. Those who heard the first debate on radio thought Nixon was the winner. The larger audience who saw it on television thought Kennedy was the winner — not because of what he said, but because he looked young, vigorous, and confident, while Nixon looked pale, nervous, and sweaty. It was a pivotal factor in Kennedy's narrow election victory.

But it was the message that was more important than image in the great speech that electrified the U.S. civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington to a crowd of 250,000 and a much larger television audience. No one remembers how King looked that day, but tens of millions of Americans know who said "I have a dream," and what that dream was.

King didn't read that speech word for word, but he did have a lec-



The unprepared speaker

tern and written text in front of him, which he scanned, page by page. In videotapes of other famous and passionate King speeches and sermons, he can be seen even more clearly reading his written texts.

Take another tip, from successful politicians and statesmen (or stateswomen). On the hustings during election campaigns, when speeches are short, when each is much like the one just before, when audience contact is vital, politicians today never read their texts. But as presidents and prime ministers, cabinet ministers, members of Congress or Parliament, when an important speech is to be delivered, it is nearly always read.

When Abraham Lincoln gave his Gettysberg address, when Franklin D. Roosevelt told Americans that they have “nothing to fear but fear itself,” when Martin Luther King Jr. made his “I have a dream” speech, when John F. Kennedy urged Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you,” when Churchill warned that an “iron curtain” had fallen across Europe, when Margaret Thatcher avowed Britain’s determination to defend the Falkland Islands, each spoke from texts they had so meticulously prepared. These texts were read, but not in a monotone as if they were reading from an encyclopedia. They were read with deliveries as dynamic as their texts. “We will fight as long as there is breath in our bodies,” Churchill growls in a war-time speech to the U.S. Congress. And thumps his chest with both fists.

Speaking naked

Notwithstanding these orators, there are many staunch advocates from the school of speaking naked. Entire books have been devoted to the art of speaking without a text. Sandy Linver, in her book *Speakeasy*, has this to say:

“The manuscript speech is the biggest barrier to audience contact a speaker can have. Unless it is delivered exceptionally well, a manuscript speech seriously damages a speaker’s credibility, prevents his personality from coming through, and destroys his natural rhythms of speech. How can a speaker expect to persuade an audience or make them believe he knows what he is talking about if he has to read everything he says... The credibility of a person who reads a speech rarely approaches the credibility of a person who talks it.”

Beyond doubt, standing on a stage with no barriers in front of you is a great way to establish more intimate contact with your audience — and in many situations is the only way to fly. But Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Franklin Roosevelt and other great speakers never heard of Sandy Linver; no one told them that the “manuscript speech” lacks credibility. And there are techniques that can enable you to deliver it “exceptionally well.”

The unprepared speaker

Grave danger lurks for he who speaks without first writing a text. Henry Brougham, Scottish jurist, politician, and an acclaimed speaker of his day, warned about the extemporaneous speaker, in a lecture delivered in 1820:

“...the loose and slovenly diction, the want of art in combining and disposing his ideas, the inability to bring out many of his thoughts, and the incompetency to present any of them in the most efficient form, would reduce the speaker to the level of an ordinary talker. His

diction is sure to be clumsy and incorrect — unlimited in quantity, but of no real value. Such a speaker is never in want of a word, and hardly ever has one that is worth hearing.”

Examples of Brougham’s extemporaneous speaker are in abundance.

Here’s Dr. Michael Spence, Harvard University dean of arts and science, in a speech — delivered without a text to the Canadian Club in Toronto: “... equality of educational opportunity became probably the leading criteria by which the success of educational policies and institutions were judged. Not the only criterion, but certainly probably the most important.” You can be sure that Dr. Spence “certainly probably” would never write like that.

Here, word-for-word, is Bob Rae when he was premier of Ontario, speaking to the Italian Cultural Society in Toronto:

“It was not before my habit before I was elected premier and much to the chagrin of the entire Ontario public service and my staff, it is still not my intention to speak from a text. They are terrified when the premier gets up to say something because they have no idea what I’m going to say; frequently neither does he.”

Later in the same speech, Rae had this to say:

“It’s fair to say that Quebec opinion, while it’s seized with many other things and daily opinion in Quebec is seized up with many varieties of issues and things as they are anywhere else in the country, the question of Quebec’s future and of its constitutional rights and how these rights were hit once in 1980, ’81 and hit again very hard in 1990, it is very different, I would suspect, than most of you.”

Now, is that perfectly clear?

Great speakers and writers alike take great pains in preparing what they have to say. Famed economist, diplomat and author John Kenneth Galbraith once said that when he wrote, he re-wrote, and re-wrote, and re-wrote, until by the fourth or fifth draft, he finally

achieved just the right note of spontaneity.

When Churchill spoke, “few knew... the infinite pain that went into each polished performance,” writes William Manchester in the second volume of his Churchill biography. Manchester describes the process:

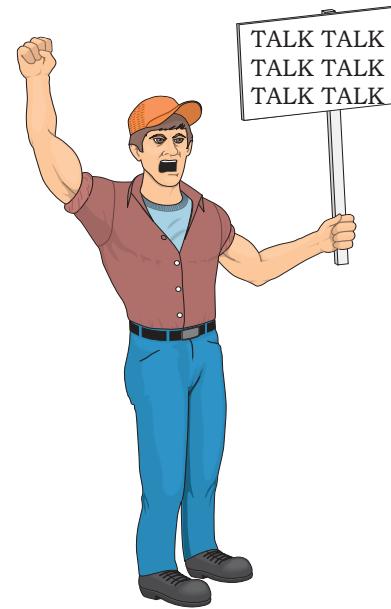
“In Parliament his wit and flash will sting, but members who know him well are aware that he has honed these barbs in advance, and only visitors in the Strangers’ Gallery are under the impression that his great perorations are extemporaneous...

“It is the product of toil, sweat and frequent tears. On the average he spends between six and eight hours preparing for a 40-minute speech. Frequently, as he dictates, passages which will stir his listeners, he weeps; his voice becomes thick with emotion, tears run down his cheek (and his secretary’s). Like any other professional writer, he takes his text through several drafts.”

Except once. The year is 1901. Churchill has already made his mark as a war hero, a journalist, a best-selling author, and now he is a member of Parliament. He rises in the House to give an important speech — a speech that had not been prepared with “infinite pain,” an extemporaneous speech. Halfway through he lost the thread of his argument, his memory went blank, he sat down, and the next day *The Times*’headline blared: “Mr. Churchill breaks down, dramatic scene in the House of Commons.” Manchester writes: “In the future he would seldom speak without a text.”

Not that he always read his texts. Sometimes they were kept hidden in his coat pocket when he spoke, a form of insurance.

Don't just state...



DEMONSTRATE!

Mark Twain, who gained fame as a lecturer before his books gained him even greater fame, did much the same thing in his first public lecture. In another speech, 40 years later on October 5, 1906, Twain recalled that first speech:

“I got to the theatre 45 minutes before the hour set for the lecture. My knees were shaking so that I didn’t know whether I could stand up. If there is an awful, horrible malady in the world, it is stage fright — and seasickness...

“At last I began. I had the manuscript tucked under a United States flag in front of me where I could get at it in case of need. But I managed to get started without it. I walked up and down... and talked and talked.”

Like Churchill, Twain always carefully prepared his “impromptu” speeches, whether he read them or not.

Dynamite texts for dynamite speeches

So, just how do you prepare the text for your dynamite speech?

Here are a few pointers, adapted and up-dated from a well-received speech that I delivered to an annual meeting of the Canadian Public Relations Society.

First, focus your entire speech on a single message. Just one idea. One-thought talks.

You might have 20 different points to make, but each one must contribute to the message. If it doesn't, it belongs in a different speech.

One speech that crossed my desk was given in Vancouver by a banker. He talked first about the outlook for the economy, and then about the controversy over bank charges. What thought was the audience suppose to take away from that speech? How was the PR department to market that to the news media? How could an editor wrap it up in a headline? He should have given two different speeches.

Another speaker from the same bank focused on the single message that Canadian bank customers pay less and get more for their money than bank customers in almost any other country, including the United States. Far, far more effective.

The prime minister goes to Washington to speak before a joint session of Congress. He talks about NORAD, NATO, the IMF agreement, acid rain, free trade, and a few other things. Pretty good stuff, well-expressed, but it loses impact because it's so scattered: a shotgun instead of a rifle. Half a dozen reporters covering this speech could come up with six different leads. For the greatest impact, design a speech that yields one logical, inevitable lead.

A prime minister might feel compelled to touch on many diverse items in a speech before a joint session of Congress. Even so, it would be preferable to embrace all these items in a unifying, single message. If you can't manage to tie all the strands together, you can't

weave a rope; all you'll have is frazzle. The result will be a speech that is soon forgotten.

Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands comes to Ottawa and speaks to the House and Senate. She has a clear, well-defined message. A responsible government can no longer be responsible only to the citizens of that country; it must be responsible to all humanity, and even to future generations. Queen Beatrix talked about the evolution of responsible government in Canada, about the Second World War, about environmental degradation, about poverty, and about injustice in the third world. But it all related directly to and amplified a simple message: governments must be responsible to all humanity. That is the single thought her listeners were left with. When a clear idea like that gets firmly planted inside a brain, it's apt to stay there forever.

So, a clear message is the most essential aspect of a memorable speech. And defining that message is the first and most crucial step in preparing the speech.

Unless the message can be defined in one sentence, the speech is probably going to be an enormous waste of time; a waste of time by the speaker, by the speechwriter (if one is used), and by the audience.

More than once, I've been called in to write a speech, and given a one-page outline that spells out all the major points and arguments and background, and purports to contain the message — or even messages. Typically I find that I read this document three or four times, and I'm still left wondering: what, precisely, is the message?

Preparing a speech should be the reverse process of writing a news story. With a news story, you start out with a great mass of words, and boil them down to a one-sentence lead. And when I was a cub reporter with the *Vancouver Sun*, the rule was that the lead could never be more than 25 words. In preparing a speech, you start with a one-sentence lead, your message, and blow it up to a great mass of words. And if you stick to your message, that is what you will have:

mass of words, instead of a mess of words.

Where a speechwriter is employed to help prepare a text, in the ideal world he will be called in only after the speaker has very clearly defined his message in a single, simple sentence. The writer would be told, "Technology does not destroy jobs, it creates wealth." Or, "labor and management must work together because we have a mutual interest in the success of this enterprise." Or, whatever. And the speechwriter takes it from there. He or she gathers all the evidence, all the testimony, all the examples, all the supporting arguments necessary to fully propound the message, and assembles it all with such wit and wisdom, such clarity and precision, such forceful expression, that all doubts and reservations are swept aside by a wave of unanimity and applause that overwhelms the speaker.

The writer, of course, must be in agreement with this central message. If he profoundly disagrees, then in all honesty and fairness he must advise the speaker to find another writer.

That's the ideal world. In the real world, the speechwriter is called in and told, "we have to give this speech next week on 'communications: the challenge for the 21st century'."

In the real world, the real challenge is to get the message defined. Hopefully, the speaker will help. He may or may not have taken the time to articulate it, but the message is probably somewhere there in the back of his mind. Your job is to dig it out, to ask questions, to work with the speaker until you have it nailed down. However you accomplish it, my urgent advice is, don't do anything until you have first got the message clearly defined in a single, simple sentence.



The golden rule

Okay, now you've got the message defined, one clear thought nailed down. What next?

Well, there is an old, classic formula for an essay or a speech. Tell them what you're going to say, say it, and then tell them what you've said.

I'd like to amend that a bit. First you state your message, then you demonstrate your message. I can't over-emphasize the importance of what I call the "demonstration" part. My golden rule is this: DON'T JUST STATE — DEMONSTRATE.

If I tell you that Harry Brown is a bad character, that doesn't tell you very much, it doesn't give you any real impression of Harry Brown, and it's not very convincing. But if I show you how Harry Brown cheated his grandmother out of all her retirement savings, I will have demonstrated just exactly what sort of bad character Harry Brown really is, and that will be pretty convincing.

That is what I refer to as demonstrating. Ninety percent of a good speech is demonstrating. You have to demonstrate not only the message, but every point that supports the message.

When you're gathering material to prepare the speech, especially when you're interviewing business people, time and time again you'll be fed general statements — the "Harry Brown is a bad guy" type of statement, without any supporting evidence, or examples, or demonstration. A general statement without any illustrative examples is like a pie shell without any filling — it's not very satisfying. When you are interviewing to gather material for a speech, often the most rewarding questions you can ask are when you ask for examples. If the vice-president in charge of manufacturing tells you that employee suggestions last year saved the company \$5 million — ask for examples of those dollar-saving ideas.

Let me give you a couple of examples. They are from a speech I referred to earlier, a speech by Matthew Barrett, when he was president of the Bank of Montreal. Mr. Barrett makes a very sweeping statement, that Canada has the best payments system in the world. Then he points out that when a cheque drawn on a bank branch located in Nova Scotia is deposited in Victoria, the funds start earning interest immediately. In the United States, it takes up to two weeks between a New York bank and a California bank before access to the funds is permitted or interest paid. Immediate access and interest in Canada; two weeks in the United States. I'd say that Mr. Barrett demonstrated his statement; at least he convinced me.

But then Mr. Barrett makes another general statement. He says that the service fees charged by Canadian banks are "considerably lower than those of U.S. banks." But what does that mean? Does it mean 5% less. Or 50% less? We don't know. The statement isn't demonstrated. I'm sure it's a perfectly valid and accurate statement, but it isn't very convincing, because it isn't demonstrated.

So much for examples.

Now we have a three-step process. First, define the message.

Second, state the message, right up front, at the start of the speech. Third, demonstrate the message.

Except that there is an alternative process — a two-step process. You skip step number two. You define the message, then you demonstrate the message, but you never actually state the message in so many words. The message is entirely implicit.

This is the technique of the novelist and other creative writers. In a novel, the characters don't wear white hats and black hats; they don't have labels marked good, bad, weak, strong, greedy, promiscuous, alcoholic, ambitious, whatever. These traits are almost never stated; they are almost always demonstrated.

But there's a big difference between a novelist and a speechwriter.

The novelist has probably 100,000 words or more to work with. The speaker has perhaps two or three thousand words to get the message across. Speakers don't have time to beat around the bush. I think that in most instances, the best approach is to state your message as explicitly, as clearly, as forcefully as possible, right near the start of your speech.

But there are exceptions. There are times when the message you have so carefully defined, should remain unstated. This applies to the "I am the best" type of speech. You may not want to tell an audience that your firm is the best in the world, that this product is the best that's ever been invented, that this company is an outstanding corporate citizen. That is the message you want your audience to conclude, without your ever having to say so.

Here's a perfect example, a wonderful little speech by Elaine Proulx of Shell Canada. In a straightforward narrative, Ms. Proulx tells how Shell's sponsorship of an exhibit of rare Indian and Inuit art objects at an Olympics Arts Festival became embroiled in land claims of the Lubicon Indian band; how, despite all the controversy, Shell stuck to its guns because it was convinced that what it was doing was right; and how the exercise was ultimately a tremendous success; how Shell, how native people, and how all of Canada benefitted. Nowhere does it say so, but the message I got was that Shell is a very responsible corporate citizen. Not only was the message clear, it was also convincing — far more convincing because it was never stated but simply demonstrated.

Which approach to follow — whether to state and then demonstrate, or whether to demonstrate and not state — is a judgment call that will depend, among other things, on the particular speech. But be warned that if you leave the message unstated, the demonstration will have to be all the more powerful.

Now, we're crafting a marketable speech, because we've focused

on a single messages, we have it powerfully demonstrated, and we've tossed out everything that's extraneous.

Tell a story

What else do we need? Of course, humor. But only when it helps convey the message, illustrates a point, adds re-enforcement. Otherwise toss it out. Few things are more pathetic than a feeble joke that's dragged in simply because the speaker feels obliged to be funny.

Instead of a joke, use quotes, aphorisms, epigrams, bon mots and other scintillating sayings that help convey your message.

Tell a story. Good stories stick in the mind when little else does. The sad fact is that if you give a speech today, by tomorrow your audience will have forgotten almost everything you said. But they will remember a good story — and if it illustrates your message, then they will remember that, too.

Here's what Kitty O. Locker has to say about story telling in her textbook, *Business and Administrative Communication*.

"Experiments with both high school teachers and quantitatively-trained MBA students show that these people are more likely to believe a point and more likely to be committed to it when points were made by examples, stories, and case studies... In another experiment, attitude changes lasted longer when the audience had read stories... Recent research suggests that stories are more persuasive because people remember them." That's why Jesus spoke in parables.

"Stories are my #1 most powerful speaking tool," says editor and



Speakers who tell jokes are often seen as jokers unless their jokes are very carefully chosen and well told. It's usually better to tell a funny anecdote that makes a point.

lecturer Rob Gilbert. Author and management authority Tom Peters claims that “The best leaders, almost without exception, are master users of stories and symbols.”

Here’s how U.S. businessman William Raduchel, writing in *Fast Company*, effectively illustrated the importance of honesty:

“My first boss (when I was a 16-year-old theatre doorman) taught me the basics of work: be honest. She hired new doormen at 45 cents an hour. But she’d always calculate their first paycheck at 50 cents an hour. If you reported the error, you kept the job and stayed at 50 cents. If you didn’t, you lost the job.”

If you want to speak about the importance of honesty, you’ll need anecdotes like that. Regardless of what your message is, you will almost certainly need good stories to make it compelling.

Christina Hoff Sommers, a professor of ethics and a W.H. Brady Fellow with the American Enterprise Institute, posed the question “Are we living in a moral stone age?” in a speech at Hillsdale College. She claims that today’s youth are morally confused because they “know little or nothing about the Western moral tradition.” She drove her point home with this anecdote:

“Tonight Show host Jay Leno... frequently does ‘man-on-the-street’ interviews, and one night he collared some young people to ask them questions about the Bible. ‘Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?’ he asked two college-age women. One replied, ‘Freedom of speech?’ Mr. Leno said to the other, ‘Complete this sentence: ‘Let he who is without sin...’’ Her response was, ‘have a good time?’ Mr. Leno then turned to a young man and asked, ‘Who, according to the Bible, was eaten by a whale?’ The confident answer was, ‘Pinocchio.’”

Confess now, whether you agree with Professor Sommers or not: didn’t that little story make an impact? You might have chuckled — all the better — but you certainly got her point, and you’ll probably remember it.

Paint word pictures

You also need strong analogies and metaphors that paint vivid pictures in the mind. Here's one from Halifax school principal Hetty Adams whose 14-year-old son was killed by another student in a schoolyard fight. Adams now teaches peacekeeping skills in the classroom. In a speech to the Lester B. Pearson Canadian International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Adams said that she was not simply "involved" in advocating peacekeeping, but deeply committed. To understand the difference, she asked her audience "to think about a plate of bacon and eggs. It's easy to appreciate that in creating the bacon and eggs, the hen was simply involved while the pig was definitely committed."

Use expressive language. Bernard Ostry, former chairman of TV Ontario, spoke about public funding of Canadian culture. It has, he said, produced some brilliant results, but also some failures. Quote: "We have scattered grants like birdseed, and some of it has been gobbled up by starlings and sparrows who could have survived just as well on horse manure."

A constant source of good, up-to-date quotes and anecdotes is the best friend a speaker can have.

Writing for the ear

Writing for speech and writing for print — there is a difference. Jerry Tarver, an American professor of speech communication at the University of Richmond, puts it this way: “When spoken words lack a proper beat, listeners smell the odor of the ink. They detect the intrusion of writing into the realm of speaking.”

A major difference, Tarver explains, is that it takes more words to communicate by speech than by print. The eye is faster than the ear, and the ear also demands a certain cadence, a touch of poetry.

Here’s an example of the difference. If you wrote for print about people “who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of cheques,” any editor worth his salt would soon cut that down to size. It would come out as “making deposits and drawing cheques.” But let me repeat the way that Franklin Roosevelt said it in a 1933 broadcast: he spoke of “the overwhelming majority who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of cheques.” More words than are needed to clearly express an idea — an anathema in print, but often a necessity in speech.

The fact that it takes more words and more careful structure, is all the more reason to focus your speech as tightly as possible on a single thought.

American political speechwriter Peggy Noonan, in a quote in Time magazine, said it so wonderfully well, that I can’t resist sharing it.

“Government is words. Thoughts are reduced to paper for speeches which become policy. Poetry has everything to do with speeches — cadence, rhythm, imagery, sweep, a knowledge that words are magic, that words, like children, have the power to make dance the dullest beanbag of a heart.”

And poetry is very focused — like a laser beam.

Forget title — use headline

Your title, like the speech itself, must also be focused.

If you want to market the speech beyond the immediate audience to which it is delivered — for broadcast or for an op ed piece — use a title that grabs immediate attention. Use a title that tells the story. Better yet, don't use a title at all. Instead, use a headline. Editors and publishers use headlines to sell newspapers and magazines. It works for them — and can work for you, too.

For the texts that we publish in *Canadian Speeches*, I almost never use the original titles. I want something I can put in the index on page one, so that in less than 10 seconds the reader has a good grasp of what every feature in the entire issue is all about.

Let me return to the speech by Mr. Barrett. It really is a very good speech — all except for the title: “Managing the opportunities: the communications challenge for retail banking.”

That's the typical type of label that passes for a title on nearly every conference agenda, everywhere. And there's probably a good reason. The agenda may be set and the title assigned six months ahead — long before the speaker has decided exactly what he's going to talk about. And with a title like “managing the opportunities,” he's free to say almost anything.

When we published Mr. Barrett's talk in *Canadian Speeches*, we threw out that say-nothing title, and used this: “Who says banks charge too much?” Doesn't that tell the story? Doesn't it fit the message? Doesn't it grab your interest?

If you want to market your speech, why not use a headline instead of a title? Of course, it may be different from what appears in print on the program. But does that matter? Does anybody really care about that?

Grammar. When preparing your text, always be punctilious in the

use of correct grammar — except when it sounds better not to. Grammatically, we should say, “the speaker’s main points were sparkingly clear.” But “sparkingly clear” may not trip too easily off the tip of the tongue. Perhaps “sparkle clear” would be better. This is why a certain brand of detergent was once said to get things “squeaky clean” and not — as a grammarian would have it — “squeakily clean.” The point is not that you should throw away your grammar books: their rules should never be lightly nor carelessly broken. But the final arbiters should be your tongue and your ears.

Let’s wrap this up with the third-part of that old three-part formula: tell them what you’re going to say, say it, and tell them what you’ve said. Here’s what I’ve said:

Define a single thought. Focus everything on demonstrating that thought. And never, never stand up without a prepared text.

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