

## HUMOROUSLY **SPEAKING**

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**WHERE LEADERS  
ARE MADE**

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# HOW TO USE THIS SERIES

Each of the advanced manuals in this series assumes you already know the basics of speech – organization, voice, gestures, etc. – but not necessarily that your skills are fully developed. Refer to your **Competent Communication** manual if you need to review some of the principles of speech.

These advanced manuals are designed around four principles:

- ▶ The projects increase in difficulty within each manual, beginning with an overview of the subject and then becoming more specialized as you progress.
- ▶ Each subject incorporates what you have learned from the preceding ones, and it is assumed you will use these techniques whether or not they are specifically referred to in that section.
- ▶ The projects supply more information than you need to complete each particular assignment. This will give you ideas for future talks.
- ▶ It is the speech preparation and delivery that teach you, not just reading the project in the manual.

## BE SURE TO

- ▶ Read each project at least twice for full understanding.
- ▶ Make notes in the margin as you read.
- ▶ Underline key passages.
- ▶ Repeat projects as necessary until you are satisfied with your mastery of a subject.
- ▶ Ask for an evaluation discussion or panel whenever you wish, especially if few of your club members have completed the *Competent Communication* manual.
- ▶ Credit up to two speeches per manual given outside a Toastmasters club if:
  - 1) your vice president education agrees in advance
  - 2) a Toastmasters evaluator is present, completes the written project evaluation, gives a verbal evaluation
  - 3) you meet all project objectives.
- ▶ Have your vice president education sign the Project Completion Record in this manual after you complete each project.
- ▶ Apply for Advanced Communicator Bronze, Advanced Communicator Silver, or Advanced Communicator Gold recognition when you have completed the appropriate manuals and met the other requirements listed in the back of this manual.

# INTRODUCTION

Most everyone enjoys reading humorous stories and listening to comedians on radio and television and in person. Of course, everyone loves the clown – the friend or co-worker who has the natural ability to make people laugh with his jokes and antics. And most people enjoy listening to public speakers and seminar leaders who use humor in their presentations.

Yet many novice speakers are afraid of using humor in their own presentations. “I’m not a comedian,” some say. “I can’t tell a joke.” Others are afraid their attempts at humor will fail and they will be left standing embarrassed, humiliated, and alone in front of the crowd.

But humor has many benefits for speakers. Humor can:

- ▶ **Help establish a bond with your audience.** Humor is a good ice breaker. It shows, especially if you are in a position of authority over your audience, that you are indeed human and don’t take yourself or the occasion too seriously.
- ▶ **Win over a hostile audience.** Occasionally speakers are required to address audiences who the speakers know will not be receptive to their message. Perhaps the topic is controversial or maybe the audience has been required to attend the presentation by an employer. Or the speaker is delivering bad news. In these situations, a speaker’s use of humor can add levity to the event and help defuse hostility.
- ▶ **Keep the audience interested.** People pay more attention to a speaker who uses humor. Humor keeps a presentation from becoming boring.
- ▶ **Emphasize or illustrate a point.** Humor makes an impression. An audience is more likely to remember your message if you use humor to illustrate it.
- ▶ **Help people remember you.** People remember witty and amusing people.

The purpose of this manual is not to make you a comedian. Its purpose is simply to help you use humor in the speeches you normally give to attract and retain the audience’s interest and make points more effectively. You are not required or even expected to write your own jokes and humorous stories, although you may do so if you wish. Instead, you will develop your own humor file and learn to adapt funny material found in books, cartoons, and other places to your own presentations.

In Project 1, you’ll use a short humorous story to open your speech. In Project 2, you’ll not only open with a short humorous story, you will use one to reemphasize your main point while closing your speech. Project 3 requires you to use jokes to emphasize your presentation’s main points, while Project 4 teaches you to tell an opening joke and string together several jokes in your speech. Project 5 allows you to use your creativity to tell a long humorous story. The Appendix offers information on what to do when your humor isn’t well received and how to make jokes when unexpected events happen during your speech.

You can learn how to use humor in your presentations. Like other speaking skills, it requires study and practice.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

A humorous story at the beginning of your presentation will attract listeners' attention and relax them, gently leading them into your speech. An opening humorous story should be relevant to your speech topic, simple, readily identifiable as humor, and appropriate for your audience. Most stories are composed of five parts: the set-up, the pause, the punch line, the punch word, and another pause. Deliver the story confidently and make sure your body language doesn't give away the story.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- ▶ Prepare a speech that opens with a humorous story.
- ▶ Personalize the story.
- ▶ Deliver the story smoothly and effectively.

**Time:** Five to seven minutes

## WARM UP YOUR AUDIENCE

Remember the speeches you presented while completing the *Competent Communication* manual? One of the lessons you learned was that the opening of your speech must immediately catch your audience's attention. It must arouse the audience's interest in you and your topic and lead into the speech subject.

Humor is an excellent way to begin your speech. As you stand before the audience after being introduced, the audience may be concerned, tense, and even nervous. Listeners are wondering if they will like you, if you will have something interesting to say, and if they will agree with what you say. Saying something funny right at the beginning of your talk will help them decide in your favor and make a positive first impression. You will attract listeners' attention and relax them, gently leading them into your presentation.

Most humor falls into one of two categories: jokes and stories. A joke is brief – usually a conversation between two people. It has no beginning, middle, and end, and offers little background information or detail.

*The other day my neighbor said to me, "You know, I have half a mind to go into politics." "Well," I told him, "That's more than most politicians."*

A story is longer than a joke and includes more background information. A story has a punch line, too.

*A young illiterate man applied for a job as a janitor. When the personnel manager discovered the young man couldn't read or write, he didn't hire him. Desperate for work, the young man borrowed some money from his uncle and started selling fruit on a busy street corner. His business grew, and he soon owned a chain of markets and became very rich.*

*One day he went to the bank to deposit some money. As he signed an "x" on the deposit slip, the bank manager said, "You have done so well with no education. Just think what you could have done if you had gone to school!" "Oh," replied the man, "I'd be a janitor."*

While comedians rely on a continuous stream of jokes, speakers generally use stories to amuse audiences. That is why this project will focus on stories, although many of the principles discussed also apply to jokes. (You will learn more about jokes in Project 3.)

One of the reasons many novice speakers are terrified to use humor is that they think they must write it themselves. This isn't necessarily true. Of course, if you have

the talent you should definitely do so. If you don't, however, you can do what most speakers do: borrow it. You will find a wealth of humor material in the following:

- ▶ **Books.** Book stores and libraries usually offer joke books containing amusing stories, many grouped by topic. (Toastmasters International has books on humor available for purchase at [www.toastmasters.org/shop](http://www.toastmasters.org/shop).) Humorous stories also can be found in biographies.
- ▶ **Newsletters.** Comedy newsletters usually offer topical material on a variety of subjects.
- ▶ **Magazines and Newspapers.** Often you will find stories about unusual or absurd events or situations that can be adapted to your needs. Cartoons and comic strips also are good sources.
- ▶ **Radio, Television, Movies, Tapes, CDs.** Talk shows, comedy programs, and even movies can provide humorous stories. Some professional speakers and comedians have humor tapes or CDs available.
- ▶ **Internet.** The World Wide Web has many humor sites.
- ▶ **Daily life.** Pay attention to the world around you. You may see or experience situations on buses, airplanes, at work, in stores, and in other public places that would make good, amusing stories for your presentations. Your family also is a good resource. What child in innocence hasn't said or done something funny?

**If you plan to make humor a regular part of your speeches, creating your own humor file is a necessity**

If you plan to make humor a regular part of your speeches, creating your own humor file is a necessity. (In fact, all of the projects in this manual require you to keep and use a humor file.) Keep a pen and paper with you at all times. When you hear amusing jokes and stories, immediately write them down. Clip jokes and stories from newspapers and magazines. File everything according to subject on index cards or, if possible, keep them in your computer's data base. Soon you will have a personal library of humor at your fingertips.

## SELECTING AN OPENER FOR YOUR SPEECH

Select an opening humorous story carefully. As you select a story, remember it must be:

- ▶ **Relevant to your speech topic.** Your opening should be tied into the subject of your presentation. If the purpose of your speech is to offer travel tips to senior citizens, your opening story should be about travel – not about your son's soccer team. The story on the previous page would be good as an opener for a motivational talk about overcoming obstacles.
- ▶ **Simple.** Your audience may become confused or, worse, bored by a long, complicated story. Keep your story short and simple. When a story contains references or words unfamiliar to your listeners, your attempt at humor is doomed.
- ▶ **Readily identifiable as humor.** Your audience may miss obscure or subtle humor.
- ▶ **Appropriate.** Select a humorous story or anecdote in the same way you select a speech topic. Consider the following about your audience:

**Age range.** Will you be speaking to young people? Retired people? An older audience has had different experiences from those of college students and will find different things amusing. Telling a funny story about a retirement party may be amusing to an audience of sixty-five-year-olds, but an audience of teenagers is unlikely to find it entertaining or interesting.

**Male/female ratio.** Occasionally your audience will be primarily or exclusively composed of one sex, or be of mixed sexes. Select your story or anecdote accordingly. Your story about an experience

you had in the men's locker room at the gym may be fine for an audience of male athletes, but probably would not be found humorous by the attendees at the Business and Professional Women's luncheon.

**Occupation.** Sometimes you may be asked to speak to a group which has a particular occupation in common, perhaps a group of lawyers, accountants, or sales people. A story or anecdote about that particular occupation may be appropriate and could even include special words or terms used by those in that field. But avoid using such specialized jargon with audiences who may not be familiar with it.

**Political orientation.** If your story or anecdote concerns a topic of controversy for some, you will alienate those listeners from the start. You should be aware of your audience's general attitude about issues and try not to offend anyone.

**Education.** Are your listeners school dropouts? College graduates? Ph.D.'s? Their education will affect the words and content of your presentation and the stories you tell.

Your opening story should take no more than 10 percent of your total speech time. For example, if your total speech time is seven minutes, your opening story should take no longer than one minute to tell.

Avoid offensive stories, including those using foul language or that involve sex, ethnicity, religion, or racism. You risk offending someone and lowering your credibility and image. No speaker became successful by using off-color material in presentations. Toastmasters International's founder, Dr. Ralph C. Smedley, once wrote:

*The world is so well stocked with keen, clean fun that there is no excuse for playing in the mud to get a laugh. You can write it down as an axiom that someone may be offended by an off-color joke, but that no person is likely to take offense at a clean one.*

It is important to remember, too, that "offensive" is subjective. Moral standards vary from country to country, city to city, and person to person. What one person considers humorous, another may find offensive. But if you have done your audience analysis, you will have a good idea about your listeners' tastes.

Whatever story or anecdote you choose, make sure it is funny to you. Don't use one simply because someone else thought it was funny and suggested you use it. If you tell a story or anecdote you are not comfortable with or don't find amusing, it will show.

Be careful about using stories that are currently circulating. If you recently have heard the same story several times from different people, chances are other people have, too.

Don't tell a story just as it is written. Often written stories sound awkward when told orally. If this is the case with the one you have selected, rewrite it in your own words. And don't be afraid to embellish on it – perhaps adding some details. By telling it in your own words, you will be more sincere and believable. When you sound as though the story actually happened (even though it may not have), your listeners will be more interested.

Whenever possible, put yourself in the story. Audiences like to hear about the speaker's personal experiences – real or fabricated. Tell stories as though they happened to you. Use words like "I," "last week," "my husband," "my wife." Refer to local people and places. Instead of saying, "A salesclerk was talking to a woman . . ." personalize it by saying, "I was in Bell's clothing store yesterday and heard one of the salespeople . . ."

Stories that make fun of yourself can be successful, since listeners like speakers who don't take themselves too seriously. You can tell stories about your lack of hair, your poor tennis game, or

your diet and people will be amused. But be wary of “putting down” someone else’s thinning hair, athletic ability, or eating habits. If your story or anecdote makes fun of someone, some place, some organization, or an event listeners admire, you could alienate your audience.

## TELLING IT

You may have the funniest story in the world, but if you tell it poorly, it will fail. Omitting important parts or bungling the punch line are the most common errors speakers make. You may find it easier to remember a story and avoid these mistakes if you understand most stories are composed of five parts: the set-up, the pause, the punch line, the punch word, and another pause.

The **set-up** is the information the listener needs to find the joke funny. It leads the listeners down a path to an unexpected destination. In the janitor story, the information about the young man’s job search is the set up.

The **pause** occurs just before you deliver the punch line to the joke. By pausing, you create tension in the audience. The pause also signals your audience that you are about to say something important.

The **punch line** is the phrase or sentence that creates the humor. It’s the unexpected destination at the end of the path. The punch line is a surprise twist and the payoff to the entire story. It’s what makes people laugh. In the janitor story, the punch line is “Oh,” replied the young man, “I’d be a janitor.”

The **punch word** is the one word in the punch line which creates the humor. “Janitor” is the punch word in the above story.

The **pause** at the end of the story gives the audience an opportunity to absorb the punch line, see the humor, and respond.

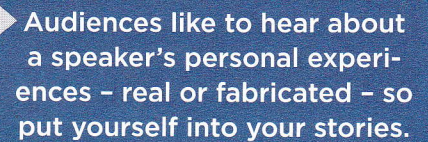
Nothing is more frustrating than listening to a story or joke, only to have the speaker forget the punch line. By memorizing the punch line you will lessen the chance of this happening. In fact, some speakers first memorize the punch line, then the rest of the story. Pay special attention to the punch word. The punch word should come at the end of the punch line for maximum effectiveness.

Also frustrating is when the speaker rushes through the story, leaving listeners struggling to keep up. Speak slow enough so your listeners can understand. Be sure to speak clearly and loudly. Mumbling the set-up or punch line has ruined many speakers’ stories.

The pause at the end is critical. Speakers can become so nervous that they immediately rush into their speech after telling a story. Even if listeners found the story amusing they had no time to laugh without interrupting the speaker. When you finish the story, stop and wait for a response. Give your audience a chance to laugh or smile before continuing with your speech.

## MORE TIPS

1. **Rehearse.** Your story’s success depends on your ability to deliver it smoothly. Practice telling your story. Repeat it over and over. Tell it to your friends, family, and co-workers. After a while it may no longer seem funny to you. But if you thought the story was funny when you first heard it, most likely your listeners will, too – no matter how tired of it you may be.
2. **Don’t laugh at your own story.** That’s like applauding yourself. Besides, if listeners don’t think the story is funny, your laughter won’t change their minds.
3. **Don’t tell them it’s coming.** “Now here’s a funny story. . .” or “Have you heard this great one about . . .” are opening lines that will kill any story. The audience may be determined to prove you



Audiences like to hear about a speaker’s personal experiences – real or fabricated – so put yourself into your stories.



wrong. In addition, a humorous story's success depends on the element of surprise. By telling listeners in advance that you are going to surprise them, you've eliminated the surprise. Make sure your body language doesn't give away the story, too. When you suddenly give a wide smile just before you deliver the punch line, the audience will know something is about to happen and the surprise is diminished.

4. **Be confident.** When you show you believe in yourself and your presentation, your audience will, too. Don't look at the floor while you say the punch line. Make eye contact with listeners as you tell the story.

### WHEN YOUR HUMOR MISSES

No story is guaranteed to succeed. Stories do fail. Sometimes the storyteller stumbles in the delivery or selects a story that is inappropriate for the audience. Or the audience is tired and inattentive. Or

the sound system fails at a critical point, ruining the story's tension. Perhaps someone in the audience blurts out the punch line.

Every speaker has delivered an unsuccessful story or joke. But the good speakers are those who recover quickly and smoothly. Fortunately, this is easy to do if your opening story fails to amuse. After you have delivered the punch line and paused, scan your audience. If faces remain deadpan – you don't see a smile or chuckle from anyone – your humorous story wasn't. Resume your presentation as

though nothing happened. Pretend the story was supposed to be serious. Most likely your audience accepted it as serious and won't notice.

### YOUR ASSIGNMENT

For this project, you will prepare and present a five- to seven-minute speech that begins with a humorous story. You may choose any speech topic you wish; however, your opening humorous story should tie into the subject. Although you may base your story on an actual personal experience, you may wish instead to use one from your humor file. Be sure to personalize the story. Rehearse until you can deliver the story smoothly and effortlessly, paying careful attention to pauses, the punch line, and the punch word.

**If your opening story fails to amuse, resume your presentation as though the story was supposed to be serious. Your audience will likely accept that it was.**

## EVALUATION GUIDE FOR **WARM UP YOUR AUDIENCE**

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Note to the Evaluator:** The purpose of this project is for the speaker to present a five- to seven-minute speech that begins with a humorous story. The story must be related to the speech topic and appropriate for the audience. The story may be based on an actual personal experience the speaker has had or on a story from another source. The speaker is to personalize the story. In addition to your oral evaluation, please give written responses to the questions below.

- ▶ How well did the opening story relate to the speech topic?
  
- ▶ Was the story appropriate for the audience?
  
- ▶ Was the story amusing to you?
  
- ▶ Did the story attract and keep your attention?
  
- ▶ How did the speaker's delivery of the story help or hinder the story's impact on you?
  
- ▶ How could the speaker improve the story's delivery? Comment on the setup, delivery, and pause.
  
- ▶ How comfortable and confident did the speaker appear to be while telling the story?
  
- ▶ Was the speech body organized clearly and logically?
  
- ▶ What could the speaker do to improve the speech?

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

Closing your presentation with a humorous story ensures the audience remembers you, lets you reaffirm your message, signals the audience that your speech is over, and lets you exit with flair. The story must reemphasize the main point of your speech. Remember, humor must be unexpected. A successful humorous story leads listeners in one direction, then at the last minute fools them by suddenly changing direction.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- ▶ Prepare a serious speech that opens and closes with humorous stories
- ▶ Prepare a closing story that reemphasizes the speech's main point
- ▶ Deliver the stories smoothly and effectively.

**Time:** Five to seven minutes

# LEAVE THEM WITH A SMILE

Another lesson you learned in the *Competent Communication* manual is that your speech closing is important. The audience remembers best what it hears last. Your closing must be memorable, reinforcing your main idea and leaving your listeners with a lasting impression. Using humor in your closing is an excellent way to accomplish these goals.

If you want people to remember you and what you said, the old saying “always leave them laughing” is good advice. Using humor in your closing:

- ▶ **Ensures the audience will remember you.** People like someone who makes them laugh. Closing with a humorous story leaves them with a lasting positive impression of you – even if you made a few mistakes in the rest of your presentation.
- ▶ **Lets you reaffirm your message.** A closing humorous story gives you the opportunity to reemphasize your main point in a manner listeners will remember long after they leave.
- ▶ **Signals the audience that your speech is over.** A humorous story ends your presentation cleanly and crisply.
- ▶ **Lets you exit with flair.** You end your speech on a “high note,” leaving your audience smiling.

## DEVELOPING A STORY

Choosing a closing story can be even more difficult than selecting an opening story. Not only must the story be appropriate to the audience and tie into your topic, as described in Project 1, it must reemphasize the main point of the presentation.

Since the story should reemphasize the main point of your presentation, you may have to rework an existing one from your humor file or create a story yourself.

In order to rework or create an original story, an understanding of a story's construction is essential. In Project 1, you learned about the parts of a story: the set-up, pause, punch line, punch word, and the ending pause.

Now you will learn in more detail about how a humorous story is constructed. Melvin Helitzer, in his book *Comedy Writing Secrets*, lists six elements of humor:

- |           |              |
|-----------|--------------|
| target    | exaggeration |
| hostility | emotion      |
| realism   | surprise     |

**A closing story must be appropriate to the audience, tie into your topic, and reemphasize your main point.**

**Target.** Every story is directed at someone or something, and the someone or something is being ridiculed. Targets can be people, places, ideas, or objects.

**Hostility.** The humor comes from making fun of the target in either a subtle or obvious way.

**Realism.** Most humorous stories are based on truth.

**Exaggeration.** The speaker expands on the subject, greatly distorting it.

**Emotion.** The speaker must emotionally involve the audience by making the story come alive. Vocal variety, enthusiasm, and body language all contribute to attracting and keeping the audience's interest.

**Surprise.** Humor must be unexpected. As discussed in Project 1, a successful humorous story leads listeners in one direction, then at the last minute fools them by suddenly changing direction.

Now consider this story:

*As a commuter train was pulling out of the station, a young man clutching his briefcase leaped through the door. He stood puffing but victorious, mopping the sweat from his forehead, as the train gathered momentum. An older man on the train watched him with disdain. "You young people don't keep yourselves in shape," he said scornfully. "Why, when I was your age, I could carry a cup of coffee in one hand and run half a mile to catch the 7:45 in the nick of time and still be as fresh as a daisy."*

*"You don't understand," panted the young man. "I missed this train at the last station!"*

The story has a target: Older people. The story has hostility: The story exploits the assumptions some older people make about younger people – that young people are lazy and unable or unwilling to exert themselves. The story has realism. It is possible that the incident could happen and that an older person may say that to a younger person. The story has exaggeration.

No doubt the older gentleman overstated his own capabilities as a younger man. The story has emotion. The older gentleman was somewhat hostile, making fun of the younger man's abilities and apparent lack of stamina. The story has surprise. The unexpected twist occurs with the last two words.

If your speech is about how we judge and make assumptions without knowing the facts, you could close with the above story by saying,

*...When we make decisions based on assumptions, we could be making a mistake. Things are not always as we think. I realized this myself one morning when I took the train into the city. A young man...*

## YOUR ASSIGNMENT

For this project, you will prepare and present a five- to seven-minute speech that begins and ends with a humorous story. Choose any speech topic you wish, but your speech should contain a serious message. The opening humorous story should tie into the subject and the closing humorous story should reemphasize the main point of your speech. Although you may base your stories on actual personal experiences, you also have the option to use stories from other sources. Be sure to personalize the stories. Rehearse until you can deliver the stories smoothly and effortlessly, paying careful attention to the set-up, the pause before the punch line, the punch line, the punch word, and the ending pause.

**The opening humorous story should tie into the subject and the closing humorous story should reemphasize the main point of the speech.**



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

After your audience listens to your speech for a few minutes, their attention may begin to wane. Using humor throughout your presentation will bring their attention back to you. You can use humor to reinforce your point, provide comic relief, provide a break, and to refocus attention. Insert humor in your speech wherever the speech lends itself to it. After telling the story or joke, move smoothly back into your speech by changing the tone of your voice, delivery rate, or facial expression to indicate a mood shift.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- ▶ Prepare a speech that opens and closes with humorous stories.
- ▶ Include jokes in the speech body to illustrate points or maintain audience interest.
- ▶ Deliver the jokes and stories smoothly and effectively.

**Time:** Five to seven minutes

# MAKE THEM LAUGH

Using humorous openings and closings are two ways to enliven your presentations and make them memorable. Another way is to include humor throughout the speech.

If your opening humorous story was successful, you had the audience's attention as you moved into your presentation. However, after a few minutes, listeners' attention begins to wane. You need to say something periodically that will quickly bring their attention back to you. Humor is the most effective way to do this.

Using humor during your presentation can:

- ▶ **Reinforce your point.** If your speech is properly constructed, it will address no more than three main points. Illustrating each of these points with humor will help listeners to remember each point.
- ▶ **Provide comic relief.** Many serious or controversial speech subjects can be made more enjoyable with humor.
- ▶ **Provide a break.** Even if they are interested in your speech, most people will have difficulty concentrating on and assimilating anything you say for long periods. A joke provides listeners with a rest break – an opportunity to relax for a moment – before continuing their attentiveness.
- ▶ **Refocus attention.** A joke brings listeners' attention back to you if their minds have wandered. Hearing everyone else laugh at a joke makes an inattentive listener think he has missed something good, so he had better pay attention or he may miss something else, too.

**Use humor throughout your presentation to keep your audience's attention on you.**

## HUMOR IN THE MIDDLE

In Projects 1 and 2, you learned about and practiced using stories in your speech openings and closings. Stories can be effective throughout your speech, too. Suppose your speech is about the importance of a positive attitude. One of the points you want to make is that problems are often opportunities, not obstacles.

You could illustrate it with the following story:

*Several years ago I worked for a large shoe manufacturer. We were working really hard to expand overseas sales. So we sent two of our sales representatives to Australia to see if they could get some new business selling shoes to the aborigines. Both sales reps noticed that none of the natives wore shoes. The first one immediately sent an email home, saying, "Returning on next plane. No business here. Natives don't wear*

shoes." The other salesman also sent an email: "Quick, send thousands of shoes, all sizes. Natives not wearing any."

## TYPES OF JOKES

In Project 1 you learned a little bit about jokes. A joke is brief. Unlike a humorous story, it has no beginning, middle, and end and offers little background information or detail.

There are several different types of jokes.

**Exaggeration.** An exaggeration joke involves an extreme stretch of the imagination. Such things as size, numbers, proportions, facts, feelings, events, and experiences are so greatly overstated or magnified they become absurd.

*The movie was so bad, people were lined up to get out.*

**Incongruity.** Two generally accepted ideas are associated irrationally.

*One professional speaker offers this advice to novices: "Be accurate, be brief, and be seated."*

**Reverse.** The audience is tricked by a switch in viewpoint.

*My wife sent her friend a playpen when the woman had her third child. We got back a nice thank you letter. "The pen is just what we needed," she wrote. "I sit in it every afternoon and the kids can't get near me."*

**Definition.** A definition joke defines a word humorously. It is similar to an exaggeration joke because it also distorts an aspect of the subject.

*Experience is what you have left after everything else is gone.*

*A consultant is someone who is called in at the last minute to share the blame.*

*An optimist is one who thinks this is the best of all possible worlds, and a pessimist is one who is afraid he is right.*

**Combination.** A combination joke takes characteristics from two different items and puts them together.

*What do you get when you cross a mink with a gorilla? A mink coat – but the sleeves are always too long.*

**Play on words.** Such jokes are based on the fact that some words have more than one meaning. Plays on words also include clichés – widely known expressions.

*One hospital in town is taking some unusual measures to cut costs. For instance, now they have patients make their own beds. When you check in they give you a tool box and some wood.*

**Understatement.** You deliberately represent something as less than it actually is.

*During his travels he blogged extensively about the weather, once describing a torrential rain as a bit of moisture.*

**Implication.** These jokes make a point but without directly stating it. The listener herself has to make the connection.

*Grand Canyon Guide: "It took millions of years to carve this."  
Tourist: "Oh, was it a government project?"*

## WHERE TO USE IT

There is no set formula (for example, once every five minutes) for inserting humor in your speech. Humor should be inserted wherever the speech lends itself to it. Once you've drafted your speech, review it carefully and ask yourself: What points could be illustrated with a joke or funny story? Are any spots tedious or complicated? For example, do you quote a lot of statistics? Explain a complex theory? Inserting some humor in these spots may help the audience digest the information. Look through your humor file for an appropriate joke or story. If you can't find one on that specific subject, look for ones you could adapt.

Suppose your speech is about retirement planning. One of the first points you make is about Social Security, the United States system where employees pay into a fund maintained by the government. Upon retirement, employees receive benefits from the fund to support them. You decide a joke would help to illustrate your point. Looking through your humor file, you find this joke:

*Nowadays the thing to put aside for your retirement age is all thoughts of retirement.*

You could incorporate this joke in your speech in this manner:

*... All of your working life, part of every one of your paychecks has gone to Social Security. The government promised this money would eventually be returned to you when you retired, to support you in your old age. But recent reports say Social Security will be bankrupt before you are old enough to get back any of the money you've paid into it. Now the thing to put aside for your retirement is all thoughts of retirement!*

*If you want to live comfortably when you retire, you must have your own retirement plan...*

As discussed in Project 1, do not tell your audience a joke is coming. Your joke's success depends on surprise. After you've told the joke, pause to allow the audience to laugh, then move smoothly back into your speech. Don't say, "Seriously, folks..." or "Let's get back to the main point" or similar things as you continue with your speech. Instead, change the tone of your voice, your rate of delivery, or your facial expression to indicate a mood shift.

## YOUR ASSIGNMENT

For this project, you will prepare and present a five- to seven-minute speech that begins and ends with humorous stories and has several jokes throughout the speech body. You may choose any speech topic you wish. Your opening humorous story should tie into the subject. The jokes should emphasize points and/or break up tedious or complex parts of the speech. The closing humorous story should reemphasize the main point of your speech. You may base your stories and jokes on actual personal experiences or use stories and jokes from other sources. Rehearse until you can deliver the stories and jokes smoothly and effortlessly, paying careful attention to the set-ups, pauses before the punch lines, the punch lines, the punch words, and the ending pauses.

**Humor should be inserted wherever the speech lends itself to it.**



## EVALUATION GUIDE FOR **MAKE THEM LAUGH**

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Note to the Evaluator:** The purpose of this project is for the speaker to present a five- to seven-minute speech that begins and ends with a humorous story and uses several jokes in the speech body. The humorous opening story should tie into the speech subject, and the humorous closing story should reemphasize the speech's main point. The jokes in the speech body should illustrate or emphasize points and/or break up any tedious or complex parts of the speech. In addition to your oral evaluation, please give written responses to the questions below.

- ▶ How well did the opening story relate to the speech topic?
  
- ▶ How well did the closing story reemphasize the speech's main point?
  
- ▶ How well did the jokes illustrate or emphasize the speaker's points?
  
- ▶ If the speech had any tedious or complex parts, were jokes used to break them up? If so, how effective were the jokes at doing so?
  
- ▶ How smooth were the transitions between the jokes and the speech body?
  
- ▶ How comfortable and confident did the speaker appear while telling the stories and jokes?
  
- ▶ How well did the speaker deliver the set-ups, pauses before the punch lines, punch lines, punch words, and the ending pauses for the stories and jokes?
  
- ▶ Were the stories and jokes appropriate? Were they amusing to you?

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

An opening joke can break the ice and help you develop a rapport with the audience. The safest joke to tell is one about yourself. Audiences love to hear a speaker put himself down. Telling a series of jokes of the same subject in the body of your speech is also a good way to illustrate points or to break up complex or tedious portions of your presentation. Make sure transitions between jokes are smooth, as are your lines leading from your speech into the jokes, and from the jokes back into your speech.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- ▶ Prepare a speech that opens with a self-deprecating joke.
- ▶ String together two or three related jokes in the speech body.
- ▶ Close the speech with a humorous story.

**Time:** Five to seven minutes

# KEEP THEM LAUGHING

In Project 1, you learned how to open your speech with a humorous story to attract your audience’s attention and lead them into your presentation. But you can preface your talk in another way – with a joke. And you also can string together several jokes – not just one, as learned in Project 3 – in the body of the speech to illustrate points or break up tedious or complex material.

## AN OPENING JOKE

One of a speaker’s most difficult tasks is breaking the ice and developing a rapport with the audience. Once you have accomplished this, you are more relaxed and confident, and the audience is more receptive to your message. You have been doing this in the previous projects by telling a humorous story. But you could help to break the ice more quickly by telling a short joke before beginning your speech. The joke can be in addition to the humorous story or in place of it.

The joke you tell could target yourself, the audience, the introducer, or a prominent member of the audience. Bantering is recommended only when you know the other party quite well. Otherwise you could offend someone and jeopardize your presentation before it even begins. The safest joke would be one about yourself.

Audiences love to hear a speaker put himself down. If you’ve been invited to speak because of some special knowledge or expertise you possess that the audience does not, putting yourself down takes you off the pedestal and down to a level the audience will find more comfortable. By demonstrating that you have a sense of humor, you are considered to be a peer, not a superior.

Following are some self-deprecating jokes you could tell after you have been introduced to the audience:

*I was hoping (name) would say, “Our speaker today needs no introduction,” but apparently (name) thought I needed all the introduction I could get.*

*Thank you, (name), for that gracious introduction. You read it exactly as I wrote it.*

*Wow! After that eloquent introduction, I can hardly wait to hear what I’m going to say.*

*I wish my mother and father were here to hear that introduction. My father might have enjoyed it. My mother might have believed it.*

*I’m not disappointed by the size of the crowd. I’d just like to know who heard me speak before and squealed?*

▶ **The safest joke to tell is one about yourself.**

*I want to thank you for that glowing introduction. I think some of the statements were overly kind. But as a golfer, I'm always grateful for a good lie.*

*I want to thank (name) for that generous and flattering introduction. For a while I wasn't sure if I was 10 feet tall or six feet under.*

*Thank you for that flattering introduction. Usually you have to die to have such words spoken about you. However, I do not intend to do so just yet.*

*Being here in such excellent company certainly will enhance my image. I hope it doesn't detract too much from yours.*

### **SERIES OF JOKES**

In Project 3 you learned how to incorporate jokes into your presentation to illustrate points or to break up complex or tedious portions of the speech. However, you learned how to insert a single joke at a time. Another option is to tell a series of two or three jokes on the same subject at a time to accomplish the same objective. The jokes should be on the same topic and fit together.

For example, a speech critical of political ethics could include these jokes at one point:

*I asked Mayor Jones about that tax cut I've been reading about in the newspaper. He assured me the city is cautious about a tax cut. "It's not something you rush into," he said, "like a municipal pay raise." And last week Jones announced he was running for reelection. His opponent has been attacking him in a vicious smear campaign. But last night on the news Jones said he isn't concerned. "I will not stoop to answer his sordid accusations," he said. "I never have campaigned on anybody's shortcomings. I've always been elected on my own."*

**Illustrate points or break up complex or tedious portions of your presentation by telling a series of jokes on the same subject.**

After you've written your speech, decide where you will insert jokes. Then review your humor file and select two or three jokes that are appropriate. Once you've selected your jokes, experiment with them. Try arranging them in different orders and rehearse them until you have the right combination of connecting thoughts. Make sure your transitions between jokes are smooth, as are your lines leading from your speech into the jokes, and from the jokes back into your speech. Remember to use humor that doesn't offend.

### **YOUR ASSIGNMENT**

For this project, you will prepare and present a five- to seven-minute speech that

- ▶ Begins with a self-deprecating joke
- ▶ Has at least two sets of jokes in the speech body, with each set composed of several jokes
- ▶ Ends with a humorous story

You may choose any speech topic you wish. Each set of jokes should emphasize points and/or break up tedious or complex parts of the speech. The closing humorous story should reemphasize the main point of your speech. You may base your stories and jokes on actual personal experiences or use stories and jokes from other sources. Rehearse until you can deliver the stories and jokes smoothly and effortlessly, paying careful attention to set-ups, pauses before the punch lines, the punch lines, the punch words, and the ending pauses.



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

The purpose of a humorous speech is to entertain. Humorous speeches have a theme, make a point, tell a story, and use exaggeration to create the humor. Once you've selected your topic, break it down into several subtopics, then develop stories and jokes about each subtopic. Tie everything together with your narrative. Pay careful attention to delivery, as it can make or break a humorous speech.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- ▶ Use exaggeration to tell a humorous story.
- ▶ Entertain the audience.
- ▶ Effectively use body language and voice to enhance the story.

**Time:** Five to seven minutes

## THE HUMOROUS SPEECH

In previous projects you learned how to use humor in your speeches to attract and keep listeners' attention, to illustrate points, and to break up tedious or complex parts of a speech. Most likely this is how you will use humor in your speeches. The purpose of your speech is serious, but you add humor to effectively achieve your purpose.

However, sometimes you may want to give an entirely humorous speech – one whose primary purpose is to entertain.

In Project 4 you learned how to string together several jokes about the same topic. A humorous speech is based on the same principle. You select a topic, then find or create jokes about that topic. But a humorous speech has several special features:

1. **A theme.** A humorous speech is not like a comedian's monologue, which is a series of jokes strung together about a variety of subjects. A humorous speech has one theme or subject.
2. **A point.** A humorous speech does make a point, although this point may be broad and the point is not the primary purpose of the speech.
3. **A story.** A humorous speech relates a story – an experience – real or imaginary – that you or someone else had.
4. **Exaggeration.** The humor comes from great distortion of events and details.

For example, suppose you just purchased your first personal computer and have had difficulty understanding how it worked and how to get it running. You could develop a humorous speech based on your experiences selecting a computer to purchase, finding a place to put it at home, figuring out the instructions, installing the software, and calling the customer service "hotline" for assistance. You could create humor by exaggerating your experiences and incorporating appropriate computer jokes from your humor file. The purpose of your speech could be to emphasize that the "information age" is difficult for those approaching "old age."

Again, your humorous speech topic must be appropriate for your audience. The subject must be something they will understand and identify with or even have experienced themselves. The above subject most likely would not be suitable for or funny to an audience of software developers since they have so much technical knowledge, but an audience of 50-year-old homemakers may appreciate it.

Once you have selected your topic, break it down into several subtopics. For example, the computer story was broken down into five subtopics: selecting a computer to purchase, finding a place to put it at home, figuring out the instructions, installing the software, and calling the customer service "hotline" for assistance. Then use your

**Humorous speeches have a theme, make a point, tell a story, and use exaggeration to create the humor.**

humor file to find stories and jokes about each subtopic. Finally, tie everything together with your narrative, making sure transitions are smooth. To be most effective, the funniest stories and jokes should be at the end of your speech. You want to leave your listeners laughing heartily. Be sure to avoid offensive humor.

Be aware that room size can affect the success of your humorous speech. If possible, arrange for a small room that your audience will fill, rather than a large room where your audience may be seated throughout, possibly with many vacant chairs between people and between you and your audience. When you are closer to your audience and they are closer to one another, an atmosphere of intimacy develops that enhances your speech.

**Room size can affect the success of your speech. A small room that your audience will fill creates an atmosphere of intimacy that enhances your speech.**

## DELIVERY

Delivery can make or break a humorous speech. Your goal is to convey your exaggerated experience to your listeners. You want them to be able to visualize the story in their minds and experience it with their senses. Your body language and voice play a major role in accomplishing this.

Put your whole body into the story. Don't stand stiffly behind the lectern (unless, of course, doing so relates to what you are talking about). Move about the speaking area. Use your hands and arms to emphasize your words and story. Use facial expressions to add drama.

Your voice must be expressive, adding meaning to your words. Rehearse your speech aloud, recording it if possible, paying attention to the following:

**Tempo.** The tempo of your voice should vary according to the action. For example, in the story about purchasing a computer, your tempo should be slow as you describe examining each model in the store and studying its features. Later, as your frustration mounts, you would increase the tempo.

**Rhythm.** Rhythm is a good device to add emphasis to a story, but be careful to avoid a sing-song effect. "*Kilobyte, megabyte, gigabyte – I was bombarded with so many strange words . . .*"

**Inflection.** An inflection is when the voice rises or drops at the end of a word. Inflections can add meaning and emotion to words. For example, raising your voice on the last syllable of "megabyte" gives the word a questioning tone. Dropping your voice on the last syllable can indicate dismay.

**Pause.** As discussed in earlier projects, pauses heighten the impact of your words and attract the interest of your listeners. Pause before changing ideas, before important words, or before important actions to create curiosity in your listeners. Also pause to allow your listeners time to reflect on the meaning of your words. Of course, pause before and after any punch lines.

**Volume.** Increase the volume of your voice to indicate excitement, surprise, or action. Lower your voice to a whisper to add suspense or emotion.

## YOUR ASSIGNMENT

For this project, you will prepare and present a five- to seven-minute humorous speech. The speech's primary purpose is to entertain the audience. The speech should have one theme or subject, with humor about that subject. The speech should have a point, but the point is not the speech's main purpose. The humor should come from exaggeration of events. Use body language and voice to enhance and dramatize the speech.



## WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN NOBODY LAUGHS?

Sometimes, no matter how carefully you prepare and rehearse, your humorous story or joke just doesn't amuse the audience. You pause at the end of the punch line, giving your audience ample time to respond, but all you hear is silence. No one even smiles.

Maybe you stumbled in your delivery, or maybe listeners didn't think the joke was funny. For whatever reason, your humor apparently failed.

This need not be a tragedy, however, and you can recover from it without embarrassment (or at least with minimum embarrassment) by following a few simple rules.

1. **Don't panic.** You may become flustered because your careful planning has gone bad. Remain calm and focused. Remember, you still must appear confident to your listeners if you want to retain their attention. If you become visibly upset, they will become uncomfortable.
2. **Don't repeat it.** You may think listeners simply didn't hear the story or joke, and your impulse is to tell it again. Resist the temptation. Most likely they did hear it, and repeating it only will make the situation worse.
3. **Don't explain it.** If you have to explain all or any part of a joke or story, the humor may have been too subtle or obscure for your audience. An explanation still won't make them smile, and you will call even more attention to the joke or story's apparent failure.
4. **Don't blame the audience.** Don't say or otherwise imply they aren't as smart as you if they didn't think the story or joke was funny. Its failure is your responsibility. Either you made a poor choice of a story or joke, or your delivery was lacking. So don't make remarks like, "I know you're out there. I can hear you breathing," or "I told that joke yesterday at a bankers conference and they loved it," both of which imply that something is wrong with the listeners since they didn't understand or like it.
5. **Don't apologize.** "I'm sorry, that wasn't very funny, was it?" and other remorseful expressions may make the audience uncomfortable.

The best way to handle an unsuccessful attempt at humor for most speakers is simply to continue with the speech as though nothing happened. Pretend the story or joke was supposed to be serious. Most likely your audience accepted it as such and won't notice.

Or, if you are more confident and daring, you could employ what professional speakers and comedians call "savers"—quick, one-line, funny remarks that make fun of the joke's failure. You use a saver as soon as you realize your joke or story failed.



Following are a few examples:

*I just threw that in. I should have thrown it out.*

*That was the kind of joke that's kept me out of the big time.*

*That story was in a book that came in my cereal box.*

*Well, everyone can't be funny all the time – and I've just proved it.*

Collect savers for your humor file. Of course, you never know when you will be called upon to use a saver. This means you must have them memorized and practice them just as you would your jokes or stories.

Whether you decide simply to continue as though nothing had happened or to use a saver, it is important to keep the failure of that one joke or story in perspective. An audience's silence does not necessarily mean it was a failure or that your entire presentation failed. You could be speaking to a small audience whose members just don't laugh out loud or smile when they are amused. Remember, too, that it is only one joke or story. Don't be frightened into eliminating any other jokes or stories you planned to tell during your presentation. They could be successful, and your audience will be deprived of some enjoyment. And you could be denying yourself the opportunity to successfully use humor in your speech.

### **AD LIBS FOR UNEXPECTED OCCURRENCES**

No matter how carefully you prepare and how many times you rehearse your speech, something may unexpectedly go wrong. You may lose your place in the presentation, drop your notes, or spill a glass of water. Or the microphone may stop working, the lights will go out, or an airplane will fly low overhead.

Simply ignoring the interruption could be awkward and, in some instances, impossible to do. If a school band made a mistake in room arrangements and came marching down the aisle during your presentation, you could not pretend it never happened once the band realized its error and sheepishly trooped out the door. The audience will expect you to make a remark about the interruption. It is to your advantage to make the remark humorous. A humorous remark will ease the tension the audience may be feeling, focus their attention back on you, and allow you to maintain control of the presentation.

Many speakers already have humorous remarks prepared for just such occasions. Although the remarks appear to be spontaneous, they aren't. The speakers have kept and memorized these ad libs so well that they can say them effortlessly when necessary.

Following are some ad libs you can use:

#### **When you lose your place**

*Of all the things I've ever lost, I miss my mind the most.*

*If anyone wants to jump in right here, it's okay with me.*

#### **When the microphone malfunctions**

*Some people say my speeches are better when they can't hear me.*

*This mike is like my son in college – expensive and not working.*

*I'm always a little intimidated by a microphone. Of course, a microphone never made a fool of anybody. It only shows 'em up.*

**When the microphone gives feedback**

*A little more feedback, please!*

**When the lights go out**

*I forgot to tell you we have a curfew tonight.*

*They told me they paid that bill!*

**When the audience is distracted**

*No one is listening to me. Just like my kids.*

**A loud noise interrupts**

*You can't scare me. I have children!*

Use your ad libs carefully. You don't want to appear to be a whiner and you don't want to insult your audience.

**HUMOROUS SPEECH CONTESTS**

You may discover that you enjoy creating and presenting humorous speeches. If so, consider entering humorous speech contests. Many districts conduct these contests annually, with contests beginning at the club level. Winners proceed through area and division contests and district finals. Contact a district officer to find out if the district conducts humorous contests. If your district does not conduct a humorous speech contest, your club may still conduct one for itself if enough members are interested.

As in any competition, there are rules to be followed, including rules about originality of speech material. Before entering a humorous speech contest, be sure to read the rules carefully. Humorous speech contest rules are in the Toastmasters International Speech Contest Rulebook at [www.toastmasters.org/rulebook](http://www.toastmasters.org/rulebook).

# PROJECT COMPLETION RECORD **HUMOROUSLY SPEAKING**

PROJECT	SPEECH TITLE	DATE	VICE PRESIDENT EDUCATION'S INITIALS
1. Warm Up Your Audience			
2. Leave Them With a Smile			
3. Make Them Laugh			
4. Keep Them Laughing			
5. The Humorous Speech			

Save this page to verify your completion of the projects in this manual. Submit the Project Completion Record form from the appropriate manuals when applying for the Advanced Communicator Bronze, Advanced Communicator Silver, or Advanced Communicator Gold awards.