How to add humor to your speech—without being a comedian

You may not think you're a natural, but anyone can learn how to be funny. Just follow these tips.

By Avish Parashar

Humor is a powerful tool. If you can get your audience to laugh (or at least chuckle or smile), you're golden.

While you may not have the desire to do a full on humorous speech, there is no reason why you can't add some humor to your presentations to mix things up and engage your audience.

This is not to say every speech you deliver should drip with humor. However, the occasional use of humor, whether peppered lightly throughout your presentations or used heavily in the occasional dedicated funny speech, can have a few benefits:

- Appropriate humor that's true to you let's your audience get a sense of your personality.
- People like to laugh. If your speech is funny, your audience will stay engaged.
- Good humor stands out and is memorable.

Some people believe you can't learn to be funny—either you have it or you don't. From my experience teaching people humor and comedy, I strongly disagree. Humor is a skill you can cultivate and develop.

Below are five things you can do to tap into your inherent humor and add it to your next speech:

1. Identify things that make you laugh.

Chances are there are things that make you laugh—TV shows, movies, books, certain blogs, etc. Pay attention to the stuff you find really funny, and ask yourself, "What is it about these things that makes me laugh?"

Do you like puns, rants, observational humor, slapstick or double entendres? Whatever it is, make note of it. The style of humor that makes you laugh is a good style for you start weaving into your speaking.

Also add more of those things into your life. This will help you in two ways:

1. **It's easier to write funny presentations when you feel funny.** Consistently watching, reading and listening to things that make you laugh will help you feel funny.

2. **You can learn from the things you laugh at.** You can learn structure, style, construction and pacing from observation. I usually listen to stand-up comedians because they make me laugh, but sometimes I will pay careful attention not to what the comedian is saying, but to the nuances of how he or she is saying it.

2. Identify things you already do that make others laugh.

I believe everyone has some area in their lives where they make others laugh. It may happen rarely, but I bet there are certain people or situations that bring out your inner comedian.

Think back to what you do in those situations and ask yourself, "How can I weave that into my speaking?"
This technique led to an evolution in my speaking business. I realized that the times I made my friends laugh the most were when I would go on extended rants making fun of things that annoyed me. However, at the time, I wasn’t doing any of that in my writing or speaking.

Once I realized this, I launched my Motivational Smart Ass brand, and starting weaving that ranting style into my presentations. My audience response has improved, and my referral rates have gone up.

Start paying attention to what you are already doing to make others laugh, and weave that into your speaking. You should see your audience response and referral rates go up, too.

3. Learn the basics of humor.

Some people are fortunate enough to automatically be funny. If you are not one of these lucky people, then you should learn some of the fundamentals of humor and joke construction.

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There are many ways to weave words into humor. Once you understand some of the techniques comedians and funny speakers use to create humor, you can easily edit your material to add some humor of your own.

Here are a few techniques to consider:

- Exaggeration: "Then I talked to a woman whose voice was so high only the dog could hear it."
- Puns: "Did you hear about the guy whose whole left side was cut off? He's all right now."
- Self-deprecation: "And then, even though I knew it was too hot to eat, I bit into the pizza anyway. Because, clearly, I am an idiot."
- Wordplay: "She brought me a plate of french fries instead. At least I thought they were French because they had an attitude and wore berets."

These are but a few; there are many more. I highly suggest picking up a book on humor to familiarize yourself with the different tools at your disposal.

4. Understand that humor comes in the rewrite.

Sometimes you get lucky and your first draft is very funny. Usually, however, the first draft is content focused. It may have some funny ideas you need to develop, but it’s not going to be funny as is.

The blank page can be daunting, and adding the pressure of being funny in a first draft can make it doubly so. The best way to write a first draft is to write quickly without editing or worrying about the quality. As you practice writing funny, your first drafts will get funnier, but at first they may not be so guffaw-inducing.

Once your first draft is done, you can review it and find places to add lines, reword things in funny ways, figure out where to use humorous delivery, apply many of the humor techniques from No. 3, and even remove things you thought were funny at first but now realize they’re not.
For most people it’s much easier to punch up a written piece using the humor tools above than to think of something funny to write.

Here’s a simple draft-writing plan you can use:

Draft 1: Write your speech, funny or not.

Draft 2: Go back and add as much humor as you can.

Draft 3: Remove anything that isn’t funny, doesn't support your point or breaks the flow of the piece.

5. Keep working at it.

Like anything else, humor takes time to develop. If you expect to come out of the gate and immediately start creating hilarious material, you will be disappointed. If you are committed to gradual and steady improvement, you will find that, over time, your presentations will get funnier and the work easier.

When I started speaking, I put very little humor in my presentations. I performed improv comedy from the stage, but other than that I delivered straight content. The first time I decided to add in funny stories and jokes, it took me weeks to get it done. I experienced a lot of uncertainty, fear, procrastination and writer’s block. Over time it has gotten much easier (I’d like to think the quality has gotten better, too), and I can add in new humorous bits to my speeches relatively quickly.

Give yourself time to find your voice and develop your humor. It may not be easy, but it's worth it.

Adding a little humor to your presentations is not that difficult. Like most things, it takes an understanding of how to do it, a commitment to try and a little time and practice.

The techniques above can give you the understanding of how to do it—the other two are up to you!

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