

Toastmasters Offers Tips to Commencement Speakers

To hook the college crowd, keep it short and engaging

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This year's lineup of graduation speakers includes such figures as news journalist Christiane Amanpour, actress Lisa Kudrow and New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. All are savvy communicators who no doubt will add unique style to their presentations.

But nationally prominent figures are not the only ones delivering commencement addresses. Many community leaders are asked to speak at graduations - at local high schools, middle schools, community colleges, even volunteer and civic programs. Any graduation is a milestone, so a speaker's part in it is special. Toastmasters International, which has taught millions of men and women how to speak with confidence and poise in front of audiences, offers some pointers:

Keep it Brief. Be concise and to the point. This is no time for a long-winded oration on the meaning of life. By the time you're introduced, the students will be itching to explode in celebration. "If there was ever an occasion that demands brevity and humor, the commencement speech is it," says David Brooks, Toastmasters' 1990 World Champion of Public Speaking, who is based in Austin, Texas.

Keep it Real. Audiences relate to stories about real people. Connect by offering anecdotes from your own life. Tammy Miller, a Pennsylvania speech coach and veteran Toastmaster, cites a commencement address given by Apple CEO Steve Jobs at Stanford University. The tech titan shared stories about three different phases in his life: his early days as an adopted child, his experience dropping out of college, and his battle with cancer.

Keep it Funny. Humor is a great tool in a graduation speech. Miller says wit and a sense of fun can help a speaker lighten heavy concepts and establish rapport with an audience. Even better is self-deprecating humor. Poke fun at yourself - a couple of jokes at your own expense will go a long way.

Keep it Fresh. Many graduation speakers like to use profound, pithy quotes to reinforce their points. But first consider whether those phrases run the risk of overexposure, warns Brooks. Don't use the same famous quotes that everyone has heard a thousand times.

Keep these tips in mind and you'll put your stamp on a memorable day. Let the speeches commence!

About Toastmasters

Toastmasters International is a nonprofit educational organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills through a worldwide network of clubs. The organization currently has 250,000 members in 12,500 clubs in 106 countries. Since its founding 85 years ago in October 1924, Toastmasters International has helped more than four million men and women give presentations with poise and confidence. For information about local Toastmasters clubs, please visit www.toastmasters.org

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