

Graduate With Style: Commencement Speech Tips From Toastmasters

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How does a commencement speaker inspire graduates to soar into their future? Here is some advice from Toastmasters, the public speaking experts. Tammy Miller, professional speaker and former member of Toastmasters International's Board of Directors, says to pick a topic with a clearly defined theme to make the audience remember it. She developed the acronym BRIEF to help commencement speakers make a first-class exit from junior high, high school or college:

B - Brevity - Speak for 10-20 minutes. This will force you to focus on the most important aspects of your message while helping to make the overall event more bearable for the audience.

R - Relate to the audience -It doesn't matter how many accolades you have or how many letters are behind your name. As the commencement speaker, you are there for the members of the audience. At Duke University's 2009 commencement, Oprah Winfrey offered personal stories about the ways other people touched her life. One of her stories centered on a woman who told her she was pretty when she was a girl. Winfrey said, "And it made me see myself differently from that day forward," which she followed with advice to the grads, "...If you can be generous enough to say kind, affirming words to those who may long to hear them, you will be a huge success."

I - Inspire and offer hope -Inspiring a graduating class is an awesome responsibility, but it can also be a fantastic opportunity. Leave them with a tidbit to ponder. School textbooks don't teach feelings from the heart. The Dalai Lama addressed this beautifully in his 1998 Emory University commencement speech, "Education and the Warm Heart," when he talked about a "good, warm, compassionate heart" combining with a person's knowledge to better the world.

E - Engaging - Audiences relate to stories about real people. Steve Jobs, in his 2005 Stanford commencement address, "Find What You Love," used three personal stories to illustrate his points. Each short story offered a valuable life lesson that resonated with the audience. He spoke about his early life as an adopted child, dropping out of college, and his battle with cancer.

F - Fun - Interjecting humor is an important element in getting your message across. Actor Tom Hanks spoke at Vassar College's graduation ceremony in May 2005. His speech entitled "The Power of Four" described how any four actions, people or things can change the world. He discussed four letters: h-e-l-p. Then he played it as only a great actor could: "Help. HELP. HEEEELLLLLLLPP!" he pleaded. Fun and humor is not about cracking jokes, but about making the situation lighter. Humor helped Hanks connect with his audience, lightened heavy concepts and made his message more memorable.

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 12,000 clubs in 106 countries. Since its founding in Santa Ana, California, in October 1924, the organization has helped more than 4 million men and women give presentations with poise and confidence. For information about local Toastmasters meetings, visit www.toastmasters.org.

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