



THE POWER OF HUMOR IN AN IMPROMPTU SPEECH

LEVEL 4 PROJECT



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INTRODUCTION



Humorous speeches require the participation of the audience. Being aware of and empathetic to the feelings and personalities of audience members is your best guide to delivering a successful humorous speech. This is especially true when you are called on to say a few words or give a speech unexpectedly.

Navigating an impromptu speech is a challenge for even the most experienced speaker, especially when you are expecting or hoping to make your audience laugh. The best way to succeed is to be prepared. You have already begun part of your preparation by building a collection of stories to help you construct a humorous speech. The other way you can prepare is by understanding as much as you can about your audience.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Purpose: The purpose of this project is for you to develop your method for giving impromptu speeches and practice adapting rehearsed stories during a presentation.

Overview: You will deliver two 2- to 3-minute speeches. When you are ready to begin the first of your speeches, the Toastmaster of the Day will select a topic from the Impromptu Speech Topics resource on page 17. Your speech must last 2 to 3 minutes and include at least one anecdote that is related to the topic. When the first speech is complete, give a second 2- to 3-minute speech on a new topic. Both topics should be selected at random and without your prior knowledge.

For all assignment details and requirements, review the Project Checklist on page 13.



Throughout this project you will see icons in the margins next to the text. These icons indicate additional resources available online.



Video: Sign in to Base Camp to watch a video that supports this project.



Interactive Activity: Sign in to Base Camp to complete an interactive activity.



Resource: Sign in to Base Camp to view this resource online.

ASSESS YOUR SKILLS

Evaluate your current skill level by rating each statement.



Select the appropriate number based on your skills today:

5
EXEMPLARY

4
EXCEL

3
ACCOMPLISHED

2
EMERGING

1
DEVELOPING

Pre-Project					Statement	Post-Project				
5	4	3	2	1	I can adjust a speech to work for the demographics of my audience.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	I can develop multiple speeches to prepare for different settings and audience types where I might be called on to present.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	I am comfortable delivering an impromptu speech in any situation.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	I understand how to connect with an audience using humor.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	I can effectively use humor to connect with an audience.	5	4	3	2	1
5	4	3	2	1	I recognize how this project applies to my life outside of Toastmasters.	5	4	3	2	1

COMPETENCIES



The following is a list of competencies that you will learn and practice in this project.

- Adjust speech to audience demographics.
- Develop speech content for multiple possible topics/situations.
- Effectively engage an audience with humor.
- Respond effectively to an impromptu speaking situation.
- Understand how to use humor to connect with an audience.

THE IMPROMPTU SPEECH

Humor adds to any speech and can make a dry subject more engaging and entertaining. As you have worked to add humor to your speeches, hopefully you have also experienced the pleasure of laughter from an audience.

Humor in an impromptu speech—even something as serious as a eulogy—can bring heart and hope to a solemn or challenging situation. There are many times you may be invited to give an impromptu speech. Some speakers thrive on delivering unexpected speeches. Others face the experience with a burgeoning sense of panic. The most effective way of managing an impromptu speaking situation is to prepare.

Preparation for an impromptu speech is different than for a prepared speech, but it does have some of the same steps. You have already taken the most important step: keeping in mind well-organized and rehearsed stories or anecdotes. Remembering these stories will give you the tools you need to succeed when you give a speech with short or no notice.

Along with preparing a collection of stories, being cognizant of audience response throughout your speech will help you succeed.

LET DEMOGRAPHICS GUIDE YOUR STORY SELECTION

Awareness is the greatest asset for any speaker giving an impromptu speech. The first and probably most important place impromptu speakers need to have awareness is with the audience.

You may know your audience well if you are at a family event or work function. You may also be speaking at an event where you know very few audience members or none at all. Observing the varied groups that make up the audience will help you prepare for the possibility of contributing an impromptu speech.

There are questions to ask yourself before you are called on to speak at an event with a familiar audience.

What type of function?

There is an important difference between the stories you may relate to a casual family gathering or a large formal wedding, even though the members of your audience may be the same.

Who is present?

You may be attending an event with a few coworkers or a meeting that includes important clients. Taking a moment to consider the guest list, even when you know the attendees, will help you narrow your speech options in case you are invited to speak.

What is the overall tenor of the event?

Even at a very formal or serious event, such as a funeral or a board of directors meeting, humor may be exactly what the audience needs. You may be called upon because organizers know you can bring humor into an otherwise somber event, or you may have a sense that it is needed when you are asked to deliver an impromptu speech.

Audience demographics are a great tool to help you select your topic and the anecdotes you would like to share. Your understanding of the audience and event will help you create an impromptu speech that is both appropriate and effective.

Who organized this event?

The previous scenarios address an audience you know, whether it is with family, peers, or colleagues. There are questions you can ask yourself when the audience is unfamiliar.

Knowing the planners of the event will often give you information about who will be in attendance. For example, if you are attending an event organized as a fundraiser for a local zoo, it is likely that the members of the audience are concerned about animal welfare. This information can also help you identify what members of the audience have in common. Knowing the organizers and surmising the likely audience demographics may help you identify the prepared stories or anecdotes you can successfully share if you are invited to share a few words.

Who is in the audience?

Learn as much as you can about the audience. Demographics run deeper than appearances; they can relate to religion, commitment to a cause or organization, or political point of view.

How formal is the event?

As with a wedding or a casual family event, the formality of the gathering will help you choose your topic and guide your story selection. Regardless of the formality, focusing on universal themes to bring humor to your speech is likely to be the most successful strategy.

BROADENING YOUR COLLECTION OF STORIES

- The next step in preparing for impromptu speeches is to review the stories you like to use and think about different ways you can tell them. For example, if one of your favorite stories includes a flat tire on a rainy night, consider how you might adjust that story for different events or types of audiences.
- Identify the source of the humor in your story and consider how you can adjust the story around that universal idea to be appropriate for different types of audiences. Decide how you might tell the story for a conservative audience, coworkers, or those attending a funeral or wedding.
- Remember that some stories will never be appropriate for a particular audience but are perfect for others.
- Push yourself to find a way you can deliver a favorite story no matter the circumstance. This type of flexibility will help you when you are asked to speak unexpectedly.



- Make use of the Story Collection tool to organize files of stories by event, speech type, or audience demographic.



- Identify generic stories you feel confident can work with most audiences and events, and those stories you would save for a speech that was only intended to entertain or create laughter.

THE CHALLENGING IMPROMPTU SPEECH

There are times when leaders, or those unexpectedly thrust into leadership positions, need to make impromptu speeches. Often, the circumstances of the speech are difficult. From an expected change with an unexpected outcome to the most catastrophic loss, having well-rehearsed stories and anecdotes can help you navigate the most challenging speeches.

Leadership

Leadership in this example can be traditional, such as a leader in a professional organization. It is also important to note that leaders rise in families, neighborhoods, and other collectives when there is a need. In times of great stress, leaders who bring levity and hope into the situation can help a group transition from crisis to solution. The same guidelines you have learned for impromptu speeches apply to impromptu speeches in leadership and difficult situations.

Preparation

Preparation is not always writing a speech but may be having enough confidence from practicing different types of public speaking to step into a difficult situation. The most important preparation you can make is to build a broad collection of stories—humorous stories as well as stories of strength and courage—that will support you when speaking in this type of challenging situation.

Empathy

Knowing the audience, empathizing with their level of concern, and even setting aside your own pain in a challenging situation will serve you well. This is true whether or not a speaker is accustomed to speaking in a leadership role. Take a few minutes as you prepare for this speech and consider how you might use the same stories and skills in a difficult leadership situation. Think about a professional challenge if that is appropriate for your life circumstances, a personal crisis, or both.

Update

Once you have reviewed the challenges you might face, look again at your story collection. Be sure you have what you need to speak in any circumstance and remember to update your collection often with new experiences, jokes, transitions, or anything else that may help you when you have little or no time to prepare an important speech.

PREPARING AND REFLECTING

BEFORE YOUR SPEECH

One of the most important tools in your humor toolbox is your ability to empathize with others. Audiences, like individuals, can have a certain personality. Demographics will help you to an extent, but paying attention to audience response to other speakers and the event itself will bring you to a higher level of understanding.

Look for cues around you. Notice when the audience laughs (or doesn't laugh) at other speeches. Be especially aware if audience members take offense to a particular type of content, or find it demeaning in some way.

If there are other speakers, listen. You want your content to be fresh, not the fourth story in the last hour about the weather. Even if you believe your weather story is your funniest and best, it may not work for an audience who is already bored with anecdotes about the weather.

There are also times when an audience may be in a laughing mood. They may find humor in everything. These audiences are wonderful for humorists, as long as the humorist expects the audience to laugh. If, however, you intend to use a story or share an anecdote that is touching or bittersweet, this audience may not respond as you would like or you may inadvertently bring down a positive, upbeat audience.

DURING YOUR SPEECH

The need for empathy is especially acute when you are in the middle of your speech. Just like you can take note of audience reaction to other speakers, awareness of the audience as you are delivering your impromptu speech will help you.

- If you see your audience losing interest or becoming uncomfortable, change something about your presentation.
- The most successful speakers have a high level of reciprocity with their audience. This means knowing when to change topics, adjust your story, or end a speech that has stopped benefitting the audience, even if you intended to speak for longer.
- Especially with humor, your success is not in completing a speech, but in bringing a speech to the audience that engages, moves, or entertains.
- Awareness and empathy will guide you to recognize and adjust to the mood of your audience, and help you design a speech that is successful.



AFTER YOUR SPEECH

Once your speech is complete, there are steps you can take to improve your future speeches.

Learn from Experience

Each speech is a learning experience. This is especially true of speeches that are unexpected or impromptu.

Reflect

Taking a few minutes to collect your thoughts and make some notes about the speech you gave, the stories you used, and the success of your presentation will help you when you prepare subsequent speeches.

Write it Down

Without being critical of your speech or your performance, make a few notes about what you think was the most favorable and what you would change if you were to do the speech again.

Include the Audience

Though it is unlikely you will give the exact same speech to a similar audience, knowing what worked will help you the next time you give a similar speech. Also make a few notes on the audience itself and how well you identified their needs and their subsequent responses.

Be Objective

As much as you can, be objective about how well you met the needs of the audience. You can assess this by remembering their engagement, their laughter or positive response to your humor, and the effect of your speech when it was done.

The most successful impromptu speeches contain well-prepared content. You can develop and practice stories so that when you are called on to give an impromptu speech at any event, you are poised and ready, capable of delivering a meaningful speech.

REVIEW AND APPLY

- How can you prepare for an impromptu speech?
- What adjustments can you make to your prepared anecdotes and stories to support different audience types?
- How does understanding the demographics of your audience help you succeed?
- What adjustments can you make to your prepared anecdotes and stories to support different types of events?

COMPLETE YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Now that you have read through the project, plan and prepare your speech or report.

Review: Return to page 3 to review your assignment.



Organize: Use the Project Checklist on page 13 to review the steps and add your own. This will help you organize and prepare your assignment.

Schedule: Work with the vice president education to schedule your speech.



Prepare: Prepare for your evaluation. Review the evaluation resources on pages 14–16 and share all resources with your evaluator before your speech. You may choose to share your evaluation resources online.

PROJECT CHECKLIST

The Power of Humor In an Impromptu Speech

Purpose: The purpose of this project is for you to develop your method for giving impromptu speeches and practice adapting rehearsed stories during a presentation.

Overview: You will deliver two 2- to 3-minute speeches. When you are ready to begin the first of your speeches, the Toastmaster of the Day will select a topic from the Impromptu Speech Topics resource on page 17. Your speech must last 2 to 3 minutes and include at least one anecdote that is related to the topic. When the first speech is complete, give a second 2- to 3-minute speech on a new topic. Both topics should be selected at random and without your prior knowledge.

This project includes:

- Two 2- to 3-minute speeches

Below are tasks you will need to complete for this project. Please remember, your project is unique to you. You may alter the following list to incorporate any other tasks necessary for your project.

Add stories and anecdotes to your Story Collection tool to prepare for your impromptu speeches.

Schedule your speech with the vice president education. Be sure to share the project description and the topic resource.

Practice adjusting your stories, anecdotes, and jokes based on the topic list.

The day before your speech, print or email the Impromptu Speech Topics resource to the Toastmaster of the Day so they are prepared to select your topics.

After you have completed all components of the assignment, including your speeches, return to page 4 to rate your skills in the post-project section.

EVALUATION FORM

The Power of Humor In an Impromptu Speech

Member Name _____ Date _____

Evaluator _____ **Speech Length:** Two 2- to 3-minute speeches delivered at the same meeting

Speech Title _____

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is for the member to develop their method for giving impromptu speeches and practice adapting rehearsed stories during a presentation.

Notes for the Evaluator

The member completing this speech is working to develop a method for delivering effective impromptu speeches and to practice adapting rehearsed stories during an impromptu speech.

About this speech:

- The Toastmaster of the Day will choose at random a speech topic from the list provided.
- The member will complete two speeches: one on the first topic drawn and one on the second.
- The Toastmaster will select the topics one at a time, only selecting the second topic after the first speech is complete.
- Evaluate the member on both speeches. If one is significantly better than the other, you may choose to score the more successful speech and make notes about the reasons you think the second speech was less successful.
- As you evaluate consider the member's poise and presentation, the humor of their stories, and how well they connected their stories to the topic.

General Comments

You excelled at:

You may want to work on:

To challenge yourself:



EVALUATION FORM – The Power of Humor In an Impromptu Speech

For the evaluator: In addition to your verbal evaluation, please complete this form.

5 EXEMPLARY	4 EXCELS	3 ACCOMPLISHED	2 EMERGING	1 DEVELOPING	
Clarity: Spoken language is clear and is easily understood					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Vocal Variety: Uses tone, speed, and volume as tools					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Eye Contact: Effectively uses eye contact to engage audience					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Gestures: Uses physical gestures effectively					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Audience Awareness: Demonstrates awareness of audience engagement and needs					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Comfort Level: Appears comfortable with the audience					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Impromptu Speaking: Presents a speech with humor appropriate for the described situations					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	
Humor: Anecdotes or stories supported the impromptu topics and humor was acknowledged by the audience					Comment:
5	4	3	2	1	

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The Power of Humor In an Impromptu Speech

This criteria lists the specific goals and expectations for the speech. Please review each level to help you complete the evaluation.

Clarity

- 5 – Is an exemplary public speaker who is always understood
- 4 – Excels at communicating using the spoken word
- 3 – Spoken language is clear and is easily understood
- 2 – Spoken language is somewhat unclear or challenging to understand
- 1 – Spoken language is unclear or not easily understood

Vocal Variety

- 5 – Uses the tools of tone, speed, and volume to perfection
- 4 – Excels at using tone, speed, and volume as tools
- 3 – Uses tone, speed, and volume as tools
- 2 – Use of tone, speed, and volume requires further practice
- 1 – Ineffective use of tone, speed, and volume

Eye Contact

- 5 – Uses eye contact to convey emotion and elicit response
- 4 – Uses eye contact to gauge audience reaction and response
- 3 – Effectively uses eye contact to engage audience
- 2 – Eye contact with audience needs improvement
- 1 – Makes little or no eye contact with audience

Gestures

- 5 – Fully integrates physical gestures with content to deliver an exemplary speech
- 4 – Uses physical gestures as a tool to enhance speech
- 3 – Uses physical gestures effectively
- 2 – Uses somewhat distracting or limited gestures
- 1 – Uses very distracting gestures or no gestures

Audience Awareness

- 5 – Engages audience completely and anticipates audience needs
- 4 – Is fully aware of audience engagement/needs and responds effectively
- 3 – Demonstrates awareness of audience engagement and needs
- 2 – Audience engagement or awareness of audience requires further practice
- 1 – Makes little or no attempt to engage audience or meet audience needs

Comfort Level

- 5 – Appears completely self-assured with the audience
- 4 – Appears fully at ease with the audience
- 3 – Appears comfortable with the audience
- 2 – Appears uncomfortable with the audience
- 1 – Appears highly uncomfortable with the audience

Impromptu Speaking

- 5 – Appears comfortable, seamlessly presenting a speech with humor appropriate for the described situation
- 4 – Appears comfortable, presents a speech with humor appropriate for the described situation
- 3 – Presents a speech with humor appropriate for the described situations
- 2 – Struggles to address the described situation and/or has limited success including humor
- 1 – Fails to address the described situation and/or alienates the audience with inappropriate humor or no levity at all

Humor

- 5 – Anecdotes or stories fit perfectly with the impromptu topics, and humor engaged and entertained the audience
- 4 – Anecdotes or stories fit well with the impromptu topics and humor was well-received by the audience
- 3 – Anecdotes or stories supported the impromptu topics and humor was acknowledged by the audience
- 2 – Anecdotes and stories may or may not have supported the topics, and humor was present but less than engaging
- 1 – Speaker struggled to apply anecdotes or stories to the topic or they did not support the topic at all, and humor did little to engage the audience

IMPROMPTU SPEECH TOPICS

1. You have unexpectedly won an award or other recognition. You are asked to say a few words.
2. You have started a new job and are asked to share something about yourself with your colleagues.
3. You are at an event when the demonstration fails for some reason. The organizers call you from the audience to talk for a few minutes while they fix the issue.
4. The worst news possible has just been given to a gathering of friends and family. You are asked to speak to the group to give words of hope and support.
5. You are invited to share your thoughts about the completion of an important group project or event.
6. Your company has just announced a merger. You are asked to share a few words about the benefits of change.
7. You are surprised to be asked to give a short eulogy for a friend.
8. Your club is holding an open house. You are asked to share a short speech about your experience in Toastmasters and how it has enriched your life.
9. The speaker for an important event is late. You are invited to open the event and fill a few minutes until the speaker arrives.
10. There is a natural disaster. You and many others are safe in a shelter, but there is a lot of fear and uncertainty. As a community leader, you are asked to speak for a few minutes to reassure and calm the group.
11. You are delivering a speech that requires presentation slides. Your computer stops working and you need to fill the time with an engaging speech while the technology issue is repaired.
12. There is sudden thunder storm at a picnic for a large family reunion. Everyone is stuck in a gazebo. You decide to speak for a few minutes to entertain the group while the rain passes.

Notes



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