

THE WEDDING SPEECH MANUAL

**THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO PREPARING, WRITING
AND PERFORMING YOUR WEDDING SPEECH**

PETER OXLEY

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

So you've been asked to make a wedding speech: congratulations! As well as being a real honour, delivering a great speech can be rewarding, enjoyable and something which you and your family and friends will look back on with real pleasure for years to come.

However, there's a good chance that you don't feel that way right now as you look ahead to the big day...!

Many people dread doing a wedding speech, not knowing where or how to start or what they should say, and having nightmares about actually standing up and speaking. At its most extreme, these fears and unhelpful thoughts can take over and paralyse the would-be speechmaker, ruining any chance of them enjoying the day itself.

You are not alone if you feel this way: public speaking is often considered to be one of the biggest fears people have, with some surveys listing it as being voted worse than heights, spiders and even death! While you'd question how accurate these surveys really are (doing a speech worse than death, really?), anyone who has felt the fear of standing up and speaking will acknowledge that it is very real and not at all pleasant. I should know: I felt the same once.

As a teenager and young man, I used to be terrified of speaking in public, to groups of any size. Just the very thought of standing up and talking would fill me with dread, and I would go to any lengths to avoid it. But then I got sent on a presentation skills course, one of those exhausting two day intensive things where you not only spend the whole time standing up and presenting but also get videotaped doing it. I hated the thought, and the idea of quitting my job just to avoid going did cross my mind! But I persevered, and forced myself to go and participate.

In doing so, I discovered something rather strange: I quite liked it. All those eyes focused on me weren't so bad after all, as they all really wanted me to just do well. And I was talking about things I knew, which gave me a huge confidence boost and also opened up new friendships with people who until then didn't realise I quite liked writing, music and Formula One...

I came back from that course a changed man, having found that, rather than it being something to dread, I actually find public speaking fulfilling. As a result I found myself seeking out other opportunities to speak in public, and haven't looked back since! That's not to say I don't get nervous—on the contrary, every time I get ready to speak I feel nerves. It's just that I know that the benefits to me of doing it far outweigh any fears I might have.

So the first thing to realise is that you are not alone: many others, probably some in your own wedding party, will be feeling exactly the same way.

More importantly, **you don't have to feel this way**. You can, and will, get over this fear: if I can, anyone can! There are a few simple techniques which can really help you not only beat your nerves, but also write your speech and then present it in a way which comes across as professional, assured and confident.

I came across these techniques during one particularly hectic year when I spoke at two weddings just a couple of months apart: first as the groom and then the best man. Fearful of standing up with nothing to say and making a fool of myself, I read everything I could find to learn what to say and how to say it.

However, I found that the best preparation lay in what I already knew: my experiences and training in business, spending years (after that amazingly terrifying presentation skills course!) presenting to small groups of directors round a boardroom table as well as hundreds of disgruntled employees on the factory floor. Not just that, but also spending countless hours teaching and coaching colleagues in presentation techniques at a variety of different companies.

I realised that writing and making a wedding speech really was not that much different from what I'd learnt and put into practice over all those years. Doing the speeches proved this theory right. In fact, I was surprised by how easy it all was.

In this book I will show you:

- How to prepare properly and when to start.
- What you will be expected to say.
- How to ensure nerves don't get the better of you.

- How to ensure that your speech works for your audience.
- How to get the material you'll need for your speech.
- How to write your speech.
- How to deliver your speech confidently and professionally.

Not only that, but this book has also been designed to act as your step-by-step guide, taking you through the process with practical exercises which, if done in order, will provide you with the finished product that you are looking for: a personalised wedding speech which you can deliver with confidence!

How to use this book

This book has been designed with all types of wedding speaker in mind and can be used in a number of different ways:

- If you're a complete beginner (or just that way inclined), you can read it in the traditional way, starting at the beginning and working your way through to the end. Each section has been designed as not just a guide on how to do it, but also with exercises to lead you through the process, step-by-step. If you follow these in order then you'll find that, in no time and with much less effort than you probably thought, you'll be fully prepared and ready to stand up and make that speech.
- If you feel happy with certain elements of the process but not so sure about others, you can just read the relevant sections. All of the chapters in this book have been designed to be self-contained, so while it's useful to read them in order, I won't be offended if you decide to skip around – promise!
- Similarly, you can dip in and out of whichever sections you want whenever you want. There are many areas which are useful to general public speaking, or even just confidence building, and so you will no doubt find yourself referring back to this book time and again, long after the wedding is over.
- Exercises are included throughout the book which will help you to build your speech. Complete these in order and you will have your finished wedding speech!
- Finally, if you find yourself struggling with a particular issue, try using the Troubleshooting section at the end of this book. This includes many of the common problems which can arise, with tips on how to deal with them or avoid them altogether.

The importance of personal content

One thing I truly believe is that the best wedding speeches are made up of plenty of relevant, personal material. This beats a collection of off-the-peg one-liners and jokes every time—especially as the Internet these days means that everyone has access to the same sites and therefore the same jokes, with the result that more and more speeches are at risk of sounding exactly the same (or at least, recycling the same jokes and one-liners).

It can be very tempting to rely on tried and tested gags and jokes to fill your speech and get people laughing and, while you shouldn't avoid these altogether, you should use them in moderation.

One or two lines are great to give you an easy laugh, but use too many and you'll leave your audience unsatisfied. Remember: you've been asked to speak because of who you are. Because of your relationship with the happy couple, they have entrusted you with the job of providing the audience with some nice, entertaining insights to their lives.

This book will show you how to build and deliver a speech tailored to the individual circumstances of your particular happy day. This in turn will give you a personal, entertaining speech which (a) no-one else could have done and (b) will be remembered by all those present, for all the right reasons!

Chapter 2 - The Speeches

Before we dive into the process of pulling together your wedding speech, it's worthwhile briefly considering where the speeches fall in the grand scheme of things and what is usually included in or expected of each speech.

2.1 The order of the speeches

There are no hard and fast rules which say which speeches should be done and in what order. If you're organising a wedding, it's largely up to you how many speeches you have and when they are. It's your big day, after all!

Traditionally there will be three speeches: the father of the bride, followed by the groom and then the best man. In many weddings these will come at the end of the wedding breakfast and before the evening's celebrations begin, marking a dividing line between the formal part of the day and the less formal (or more fun?) part.

You don't need to follow this format if you don't want to. For example:

- I've been to weddings where the speeches were held before the meal, to allow the speechmakers to enjoy the meal without the speeches hanging over them.
- At my wedding, we spread the speeches out, one after each course of the meal, to reduce the risk of "speech fatigue" among the guests.

In deciding how many speeches to have and when they should be, consider the following:

- **The comfort and attention span of your guests.** If you leave all the speeches to the very end of the meal, remember that everyone in the room will have been sitting for a long time and be itching to hit the dance floor (and/or the toilet!). You should therefore avoid long, drawn-out speeches without comfort breaks.

- **This especially applies to the number of speeches you have.** For example, it's becoming more and more common for others to say some words (such as the bride, or the groom's parents). I would caution strongly against having too many speeches though: the longer the speeches go on, the more likely you are to bore and even irritate your guests.
- **The expectations of your guests.** If you're having a very traditional wedding, it may make sense to ensure that everything follows a traditional format.
- **The preferences of the organisers and the logistics of the day.** At my wedding, having a speech after every course meant that we needed to make sure there was some very tight co-ordination and communication with the kitchen and serving staff. Discuss your thoughts with the organisers and the wedding venue to make sure that what you want to do will actually work.

2.2 *The purpose of the speeches*

Although there are in theory no limits to what you can say in your speech (apart from of course taste, decency and the audience's sense of humour—more on this later in chapter 5), there are certain things which you will be expected to say.

Below are some outlines which are intended to give you an introduction to the general areas to include for each type of speech. For full and detailed speech outlines, see chapter 7.

Father (or mother) of the Bride

In a nutshell: welcome everyone!

Traditionally the father of the bride will speak about his daughter, but it is becoming more common for the mother to also say something along similar lines. For the parents, this should be seen as your chance to tell the groom and your guests about your daughter, her growing up and your wishes for the future for her and her new husband.

You should:

- Welcome the guests to the wedding.
- Take the opportunity to talk about your daughter (in particular, say nice things about her).

- Give some insights into her past (and what her husband is letting himself in for!).
- Set the scene for the rest of the day.
- Thank people for attending, helping to organise the day, etc.
- Toast the bride and groom.

The Groom

In a nutshell: thank everyone!

If you're following a traditional order of ceremonies, then the purpose of the groom's speech is to respond to the father of the bride's speech, thank him for his words, thank everyone for their gifts and well-wishes, and say something about your new wife.

On the last point above, don't be afraid to gush and be romantic: given the occasion, your mates won't rib you (too much) for it, and into the bargain you'll earn some big brownie points and get everyone in the audience on your side.

You should:

- Respond to the father of the bride's speech and thank him for his words (i.e. the speech he has just made in which he was (hopefully!) complimentary about you).
- Thank everyone for coming.
- Thank everyone for their gifts and well-wishes.
- Thank anyone who helped pay for the day and / or were involved in the organising and running of the day.
- Thank the bridal party for performing their roles: i.e. the bridesmaids, best man, ushers, etc. You may wish to give them presents as a thank you for their roles. This could be a useful way to fill time if you're afraid that you don't have enough to talk about. Alternatively you could hand out the presents at a different time, especially if you're worried about the speeches going on for too long.
- Talk about how you met your wife, your relationship, your life together and how you feel about her and being married to her. In particular, don't forget to say nice things about her.
- End on a toast: traditionally to the bridesmaids.

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The Bride

In a nutshell: thank everyone!

While traditionally the bride has not been expected to make a speech, more and more want to have their opportunity to publicly thank everyone and say something about their new husband. The points to cover in this speech are similar to those of the groom above, but (assuming the groom is also making a speech) to avoid people hearing the same thing twice, it is advisable for you and the groom to split what you are going to say, for example, the bride could:

- Thank your father for giving you away and for his kind words.
- Thank everyone for coming.
- Thank the bridesmaids for performing their roles.
- Talk about your new husband: how you met him, your relationship, your life together and how you feel about him and being married to him.

You can then leave the rest for the groom to speak about.

The Best Man

In a nutshell: wish the happy couple all the best!

Typically this will be the best or oldest friend of the groom, possibly someone he trusts to not completely humiliate him (!). Given that the other speeches have been about the bride, this speech is usually about the groom: giving an insight into who he is and providing some humorous stories from his past.

A word of caution. It's almost universally accepted that the best man will poke fun at the groom and, done in the right way, this can be a speech to remember. However, in doing so you should be good-natured, definitely not vindictive, and make sure you don't step over the line. In thinking about where "the line" is, don't just think about the bride and groom's reactions, but also your audience (see chapter 5): they need to find it funny too, otherwise you'll get them offside and, as comedians say, "die the death". Trust me: you don't want this to happen.

You should:

- Respond to the groom's speech, thanking him for his words (and any gifts) on behalf of the bridal party.

- Read out any messages / cards from people who were not able to be there.
- Compliment the bride on how she looks.
- Tell some humorous anecdotes about the groom.
- If you are the final speaker, introduce the evening's entertainment.

The Maid of Honour or Head Bridesmaid

In a nutshell: wish the happy couple all the best!

Not a traditional speech as such, but more and more weddings include time for the maid of honour to also say some words. You should:

- Respond to the groom's speech, thanking him for his words (and any gifts) on behalf of the bridal party.
- Compliment the bride on how she looks.
- Provide some insights into the bride—her past, personality, interests—from the perspective of her friends.
- Welcome the groom to your circle of friends and maybe talk about your first impressions of him.
- If you are the final speaker, introduce the evening's entertainment.

The Wedding Effect—a Warning to the Groom (and Everyone Else!)

Please, please, please bear in mind your bride's sensitivities and avoid poking fun at her unless (a) you're really sure she will find it funny and (b) it's nothing too close to the bone or humiliating. If in doubt, check. Actually, check even if you have no doubts at all.

You may have always known her to be up for a laugh, but don't underestimate The Wedding Effect. Even the most laid-back and "laddish" of women will have harboured dreams of their special day since they were a little girl: looking like a princess, everyone fussing over them, etc., etc.

Even the smallest careless word could hurt her and ruin her day and paint you as the villain, so the biggest and most important piece of advice that I can give you is to *play it safe*. The one thing most likely to lose you the goodwill of your audience (and in particular her friends and family) is upsetting the bride. This applies to all the speeches, so fathers of the bride and – especially – best men, also take note!

That said, tears of joy are good and if you want a target to aim for, getting her to well up with tears as a result of the beauty of your words is a good one to have (I particularly enjoyed playing this game: get her going and just watch everyone else in the room follow suit!). You should not be afraid to ladle it on thick here and be gushy and romantic: even if you are in front of all your mates. You will reap dividends in terms of the reactions of the audience, not to mention that of your new wife.

What all the speeches should include

Aside from saying nice things about the bride, you'll see from the above speech outlines that thank yous are a common theme. A great way to start your speech, whether you're the father of the bride, groom or best man, is to thank people and then lead the applause.

This has a few big benefits:

- It's easy to write and remember.
- It gets everyone on your side and gets them involved in your speech.
- Most importantly, everyone will be clapping while you're standing there talking—this will have an amazing effect on your confidence and set you up nicely for the rest of your speech.

Wedding speeches also traditionally end in a toast. Different people will have different ideas about what and who to toast. There are conventions and traditions as noted above, but if you'd like to do something differently that should be fine as long as you agree it with the organisers and the other speechmakers in advance to make sure that you don't all say the same thing.

Should I be funny?

A key role of the speeches is to provide the link between the serious, formal business of the day (the wedding and the wedding breakfast) and the fun, informal part (the dancing). The speeches are effectively the organisers' way of telling the guests that it's OK to now relax, have a laugh and have fun. It's good to therefore include an element of humour, but don't get too obsessed with this.

There is increasing pressure these days for the speeches to be funny. Indeed, this is often the source of many people's nerves at having to do the speech: worrying that they won't be funny enough.

Bear in mind that it is more important to keep the audience's attention and to entertain them than have them rolling in the aisles. Being funny is good, but it shouldn't be the be-all and end-all.

In particular, you really should avoid turning your speech into a series of one-liners, like a stand-up comedian. You may get some laughs but the audience will be left wanting more (not in a good way), wondering where the personal content was, the bit which told them something about the happy couple and the day they're enjoying. Remember: your job is to celebrate the people you've all come to see: the newlyweds. If you think that a stand-up routine's needed, hire a comedian.

That's not to say you should shy away from humour altogether. Remember that you should be entertaining: humour is often a key part of this. Seek to balance this based on your own style, the people you are talking to, and the people you are talking about. We will explore all of this more in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

2.3 How long should they be?

Bear in mind the audience's comfort and attention span, as even the best speech in the world can be a bore if it goes on for too long.

As a general rule I'd suggest you aim for five minutes maximum. This is long enough for you to say a decent amount of good stuff without boring everyone to tears.

Five minutes usually equates to about two or three pages of A4 paper if typed out with no blank lines between paragraphs. When you think of it this way, and remember that there is some formal stuff which you can throw in right away, then suddenly the job of writing the speech doesn't sound quite so bad!

Use the suggested five minutes as a guide: don't worry if you're a few minutes either side. If in doubt, err on the side of making the speech shorter rather than longer. It's really hard to make a speech too short, but very easy to make it too long. *Less is definitely more when it comes to wedding speeches.* As long as you cover the key stuff, no-one will think you were too quick. However, rambling on and on over the same old points for the sake of filling time will be noticed and won't win you any friends!

A common question is whether five minutes is really enough for you to be able to say everything you want to say. There are two points to bear in mind here:

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- If you break it down, there are only a few key things that you really need to say (I love you / I'm proud of you / You're an idiot sometimes but also my best mate...). Such things are so much more powerful if they are said in as few words as possible. The rest is just window dressing to entertain the crowd: but again remember that less is more!
- Don't forget that you are there to be entertaining, not to tell your life story. If there's more that you want to say, but can't fit it in to a short and entertaining speech, then take the bride and/or groom to one side afterwards and tell them separately.

2.4 Putting it into perspective

After reading this far you may be starting to worry about all the things you need to do or think about. How you can't possibly manage to do all this. How there's just too much to do.

It's perfectly natural to worry about these things, but you shouldn't worry. This book will take you through every step and make sure that in no time at all you'll be ready and raring to go.

It's very easy to overplay the importance of the speeches in the grand scheme of things. However, you should remember that they are only one part of the day.

The main purpose of the day is the wedding itself, and making sure that the newlyweds and their family and friends have a good time. No-one ever went to a wedding just for the speeches.

A good speech will be remembered and talked about. A bad speech has to be particularly bad to be remembered in years to come: follow the guidelines in this book and you can avoid making the sort of bad speech which is talked about for years to come, and will be all set to make a very good one!

We return to this theme when we think about nerves and how to deal with them in the next chapter: Reasons to Not be Fearful.

The Speeches: Summary of main points

- Traditionally, the speeches start with the father of the bride, followed by the groom and then the best man.
- There is, however, no reason why you shouldn't change this if you want to.
- Bear in mind the audience's comfort, expectations and the overall flow of the day.
- All speeches should include something complimentary about the bride – remember The Wedding Effect!
- Thanking people and leading a round of applause is a great way to start your speech, getting everyone involved (in a positive way) and giving you a nice confidence boost.
- Being funny is good, but don't overdo it. Avoid just having a speech full of off-the-peg one-liners: personalised content is best every time.
- Keep it in perspective: yes, you want to do a good job, but there are more important things going on that day...
