

HOW TO USE HUMOR IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

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How to Use Humor in Public Speaking

When you use humor in your speeches you have a real advantage over those speakers who don't. People love to laugh and to be amused so anyone who can accomplish this task is well on the way to success, especially in public speaking.

Many people have forgotten how to laugh with gusto. It is almost as if it is something they put away at the onset of adulthood. Children have no problem laughing. In fact the research indicates that children laugh over 400 times a day while adults can only manage 15. It is in our best interest to rediscover the pleasure found in humor and laughter.

We learn to laugh by laughing. I read recently about a study that was done on laughter. One person in a group started to laugh. The laugh began softly and gradually grew in volume and intensity. The other people in the room had no idea what was causing the laughter but they began to join in. Soon everyone in the room was laughing heartily at nothing more than the laughter of another. Try it sometime. Just start laughing in the presence of others and see what happens. People tend to join in the fun and good humor whether they know the cause of it or not.

The same phenomenon applies to public speaking. Some believe that people should never laugh at their own jokes. I disagree with this totally. If I am speaking and I share a humorous anecdote or one liner within the context of the speech I always laugh after telling it. Inevitably the audience joins in whether they found it funny or not. Those in the audience who found it funny laugh heartily. Those who didn't find it funny end up laughing with those who did. It works. Try it.

If I am using humor in my speech and I don't laugh after telling it, just how funny was it in the first place? If I think the story is funny I want the audience to think so too. They will be more inclined to find it humorous if I am standing in front of them obviously getting a charge out of it myself.

Get used to the fact that humor is subjective. What one person finds funny another doesn't. Some will literally roll in the aisle laughing, others will sit there stone-faced, some will be mildly amused and many will laugh quietly. It is important to remember that not all who sit unsmiling in front of you didn't enjoy the humor in your story or remark. I once had a person approach me after a speech and tell me how much they enjoyed my humor. They could have fooled me for they didn't laugh at all throughout the talk. You really can't tell a book by its cover.

Once in awhile something you say in your talk will result in howls of laughter and you will have no idea what made them laugh. If this happens make a mental note of it and use it again in your next speech. If it evokes laughter again don't question it. Just go with it and insert it into your speech permanently. It was a gift.

Never use dirty humor. Even if there are people in your audience who like this kind of humor there will be many who don't. Even those who are not offended by dirty humor in their private lives are offended by it when it is used within a speech. Never risk alienating a good segment of your audience with dirty humor. Now earthy humor is a different matter.

While I never use dirty humor in my talks, I frequently use earthy material. Most people love a good earthy story providing it doesn't cross the line. Here is what I mean by earthy humor: **Did you hear about the old man who streaked through the annual flower show? He won first prize in dried arrangement.** To me this is cute and earthy. Not too many would be offended by this short piece....I don't think.

Why Use Humor in a Speech?

Humor is used in public speaking because it is enjoyable and fun. These two reasons alone are sufficient to justify its use, but it also distracts, clarifies, entertains, mirrors the human condition, releases tension, promotes relaxation, emphasizes a point and maintains audience attention. George Bernard Shaw once said that if we find something funny we should search it for hidden truth. I like to say that the word wit stands for **W**- wisdom, **I** - insight, **T** - truth. On top of all these functions we can add one more. Humor has a fantastic bonding capacity. People who laugh together tend to become friends more easily. We are attracted to people who make us laugh and we want to be in their company as often as possible.

Humor Distracts:

Humor is frequently used to control pain.. When I first read this I wondered what there was about humor that was able to do this. Apparently it is accomplished by distraction. I suffer from long term back pain which can make my life miserable. If I am out having a good time and my wife asks how my back is I often realize that in the process of having fun I had forgotten my back pain. When my attention is drawn to the pain I start feeling it again. This is what humor does. It distracts our attention from the pain we are feeling and focuses it on a story or experience that makes us laugh.

When this is done we tend to forget the pain and enjoy the laughter. If this is true then we should laugh as much as possible.

There is also research to suggest that humor and laughter lessen physical pain by increasing endorphin levels in our body. These are the feel good chemicals which are released by the body under certain conditions. I can't really comment on the validity of this research. I just know that when I am feeling physical or emotional pain, laughter helps me feel better. When you feel like laughing least, you need it most.

Humor Lessens Tension and Promotes Relaxation.

If you want a relaxed audience include humor in your speech. When people arrive to hear you they are often coming from tense jobs and stress-filled families. Add the anxiety of travelling on congested highways in order to listen to you and you have all the ingredients for a stressed out audience. Under these conditions humor becomes a must for any speaker. Stress vanishes in the presence of humor and laughter.

Humor Maintains Attention.

Have you ever noticed how your ears perk up whenever a speaker tells a funny story? We do seem to be drawn to humor. If this is true then use humor to keep your audience's attention throughout your speech. You will be able to tell when you begin to lose the listeners. When you sense it happening insert a bit of humor and draw them back to you in a hurry.

Humor Mirrors the Human Condition.

I have a cartoon book for teachers which reflects the world of education through humor. Every time I offer it for sale and teachers take a look at it they are frequently heard to say, “Isn’t that the Truth?” This is exactly what humor does when we confront it in any form. It makes us say, “Isn’t that the Truth?” It reflects life back to us. Humor also makes us aware of the fact that we are not alone in any situation. Others have been there and survived. Someone once said that when we can laugh at life’s absurdities we are on the way to overcoming them.

The Difference Between a Comedian and a Humorous Speaker.

A comedian is mainly concerned with making people laugh. This is their only intention. Humorous speakers, on the other hand, use humor to get their message across; to maintain audience attention and add spark to their presentations. I have great respect for comedians. They have nothing to hide behind when they’re on stage.

If they’re not funny the audience doesn’t respond and when this happens they bomb. A humorous speaker can always hide behind content when the audience doesn’t respond to their humor. It always gives me a sense of comfort to know that I have somewhere to hide.

What to Do When Something Meant to be Funny, Isn't ?

We all have had this happen to us from time to time. One audience will respond the way we want them to respond. Others will sit in silence and we are left wondering what went wrong. At these times I do one of two things. I either move quickly to the next point in my presentation or I make a comment like this, “ I found that one really funny, but obviously I was the only one that did. Oh well, back to the drawing board.” Make this remark in a light hearted tone and not in one that reflects irritation. I find that this remark often gets the hearty laugh that the funny quip or story didn't.

What Type of Humor Should I Use in my Speeches?

There are many types of humor to choose from - brief quips, personal humorous anecdotes, jokes, cartoon gag lines, brief one liners, definitions, newspaper misprints and quotations. The easiest to use if you are just beginning to use humor in your speeches are the brief one liners, quips, definitions and gag lines. Stay away from telling jokes and personal anecdotes unless you feel confident with them. Brief humor doesn't take a lot of time to tell and doesn't require the same sense of timing and pacing that longer pieces do. As you grow in comfort and confidence you can give longer humor a try.

I also find that brief one liners, gag lines, etc., tend to fit better into the flow of a speech than longer forms do. Here are a few examples of short humor and how I connect them to my speeches.

The Quote:

Related Speech Theme: Individual well-being

“ If we are what we eat, many of us are in serious danger of becoming french fries.”

“ Begin each day with a smile.....and get it over with.” W.C.Fields

“ Some people should have written on their tombstone, DIED AT 35. BURIED AT 80.” G.B. Shaw

The Quip:

Related speech theme: Communication

It's OK to hold a conversation, but not too tightly or too long.

Getting into an argument with a teenager is like getting into a peeing contest with a skunk. You'll never win.

Newspaper Misprint:

Related Speech Theme: Communication

In an employment want ad: The successful applicant should have 203 years of experience. Hopefully they meant 2 or 3 years experience.

Humorous Question and Answer:

Related Speech Theme: The joy of being human

If money talks, why is the only word it says to me “ goodbye”?

Definition:

Related Speech Theme: Attitude and perception

A mature person is one who can play golf as if it were a game.

A medical specialist is someone who has had the operation.

Middle age: when a man has more hair growing from his ears and his nose than he does on his head.

Cartoon Gag Lines:

Related Speech Theme: Coping in today’s society

Old man (holding a bill in his hand) to dentist’s receptionist “ Excuse me, but last month I was in here for a root canal and you billed me for the Suez Canal.” I would love to send this to my dentist

One liners: (Heard on the radio or read in the newspaper)

Related Speech Theme: Human relations/ Communication

Former President Clinton was said to have lied falsely. (Can you lie truthfully?)

It was recorded on a medical record that the patient had failed to achieve his wellness potential. (He died)

Graffiti:

Related Speech Theme: Aging

Inside every old person there's a young person saying, " What the hell happened?

Related Speech Theme: Parenting/Perception

Raising teenagers is like trying to nail jello to a tree

Related Speech Theme: Positive Attitude

Isn't it wonderful that wrinkles don't hurt?

Signs:

Related Speech Theme: Modern Living

It's not hard to meet expenses, they're everywhere.

The only time the world beats a path to your door is if you're on the toilet.

Sayings:

Related Speech Theme: Modern Living

It's hard to make a comeback when you haven't been anywhere.

The problem with being punctual is that there's no one around to appreciate it.

Humorous Remarks:

A frustrated first grade boy named Marc, to his teacher: "For 20 years I have spelled my name with a "c" and you still want to spell it with a "k"." This is a true story.

Wife to husband who was getting ready to give an important speech: "Now don't try to be witty and charming. Just be yourself."

These are just a few samples of the humor I have collected and use effectively within my presentations. Feel free to use them in yours. Remember that this type of humor cannot be copyrighted so you don't have to worry about breaking copyright law.

The Humorous Personal Anecdote

This is the one form of humor which requires practise to master. You must know the story well enough to tell it smoothly and effectively. Write the story out in detail trying to lead the reader to the humorous punch line and deliver the punch line crisply after being well set up. Don't get too wordy in the telling of the story. Keep the story flowing smoothly, pausing for effect and pacing yourself so that you create the desired humorous impact at just the right time. Watch comedians in action to get a real sense of what I mean here. Try to imitate them.

Here is an example of something funny that happened to me in a talk which I now use in all my presentations on the value of humor. It goes over well. I will share the essence of the story followed by how I tell it for the desired humorous effect.

Basic Story Line: When I mentioned that adults only laugh 15 times a day, while kids laugh over 400 times per day, I asked the audience why adults have stopped laughing. One woman in the front row answered, “We got married.” When this happened everyone roared with laughter. Quite possibly the laughter was due, in part, to the spontaneity of the woman's statement as well as the humor in it. When I retell the story to other audiences I have to recapture the atmosphere of the original experience. That means I have to create drama using vocal expression, pausing and pacing as I lead the audience to the punch line, “We got married.”

Here's what I mean. In the course of my talk on the value of humor I tell this story like this: “I recall speaking to a group of middle aged women one evening on the subject of humor in our lives. I happened to mention that children laugh over 400 times a day and adults can only manage 15.

I looked at the women and said, **Something terrible has happened to us as adults.** (Pause). **We have stopped laughing.** (brief pause).

WHY HAVE WE STOPPED LAUGHING? (Ask the question with emphasis) No sooner had the question left my mouth than a woman in the front row looked up at me and, without missing a beat, said in a loud voice, **“ WE GOT MARRIED!!”** If the timing and the pacing are correct it always gets a huge laugh.

Your Task: Identify a funny experience you have had and try to tell it in a way that will make people laugh. If you can do this consistently then you will be able to include this form of humor in your talks and presentations. If it doesn't work for you then use those forms of humor that do. The shorter pieces outlined earlier are pretty foolproof.

IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER!! Keep the story brief and crisp.

MINING THE MOMENT

In my books and talks on the value of humor to human health and well being I refer to a skill I call “Mining the Moment”. When you mine the moment you analyse your experiences, looking for the humor they contain. Humor is all around us if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear. I suggest that when something funny happens, write it down in your ever-present notebook. Just jot down the story line. Don't worry about details, you can add them later. The important thing is not to forget the essential humor of the moment. Later add the colour to the story and use the story in conversation with friends. You can begin the story with, “ You'll never believe what happened to me today...” Once again your aim is to tell the story so that you get them laughing.

Not only does mining the moment sharpen your humor identification skills but it provides you with the many therapeutic benefits that humor evokes. (For more on “Mining the Moment” and the benefits of laughter and humor see my book **LIGHT UP WITH LAUGHTER** available from www.motivationalplus.com/mpstore.html

Start Your Own Humor Collection

I give 5 or 6 different talks on a wide variety of topics related to Humor and Human Relationships including parenting, humor in the workplace, humor and stress, positive attitude, etc. I collect humor on all these topics and file them under the many subject headings. At present I have literally hundreds of short humor pieces filed in my collection. Whenever I am preparing a talk I go to my files and select a number of appropriate humor pieces to work into the content of the talk.

Where do I find my humor? Well, I have become a real humor hound over the years. I look for funny material while I read newspapers, watch television, listen to the radio or have a coffee at the local coffee shop. I recall having a coffee one morning when a smartly dressed man entered talking on his cell phone looking and sounding very authoritative and important. As he stood there in all his self-perceived glory he finally noticed what many of us had already noticed.....**HIS FLY WAS OPEN** and a piece of his white shirt was sticking out for all to see. When he became aware of the situation he took off for the washroom in a hurry and emerged a few minutes later a much more humble man. I immediately took out my notebook and recorded it. This funny story is now used in my talks on leadership and human relations and the people love it. **Become a humor hound.**

Tips On Using Humor in Your Speeches

- * Select the humor that suits your style, comfort level and comedic ability. Never use a specific form of humor if you are uncomfortable with it. Trust your instincts.
- * Know the story well enough so you don't become confused or too wordy in the telling of it. Make it short and crisp to the punchline.
- * Tell the story, never read it.
- * Have a smile on your face as you share your humor so your audience will know that you find it amusing and hope that they will too.
- * Share your humor with enthusiasm and expression.
- * Just before you hit them with the punch line pause for a second for dramatic effect. Then let them have it.
- * Never use dirty, racist or sexist humor.
- * Never make fun of someone in your audience to get a laugh.

Should You Begin Your Speech with Humor?

I don't suggest that you begin your talk with a joke or a one liner unless you are really good at it. When you stand before an audience for the first time they have no idea who you are. If you try to be funny at the beginning of a speech and you fail, they might turn you off before they get a chance to turn on. I usually start off casually saying how pleased I am to be with them. As I proceed and sense the comfort level of the audience increase I insert a bit of well chosen humor.

Perhaps, if you are a natural humorist and have the kind of personality that people warm up to quickly, you can get away with using humor at the beginning of your talk. I have seen too many speakers try and flop. I just don't want to take the risk. You don't need the audience thinking, " Oh GREAT... another clown!".

Playing With Your Audience

Many speakers are uncomfortable with the thought of playing with their audience. If you fit into this category then don't do it. If you are open to giving it a try then you might just have, at your disposal, a terrific tool to get a point across and evoke a lot of laughter and fun in the process.

Here is One Way I Play with My Audience.

In one of my presentations I try to make the point that children have a great deal to teach us adults about being free and spontaneous. Adults seem to have lost the ability to be silly and have fun. We are so worried about what other people will think of us that we have become tight and reserved in the process.

When my daughter was about 8 years old we used to have a tradition called Daddy/Daughter Day. Every Saturday Beth and I would hang out together for most of the day or until she got tired of me. Really what the day involved was me doing whatever Beth wanted me to do which usually included going out for lunch and shopping.

One Saturday after having lunch we entered the biggest Mall in town, via the food court entrance, to shop our little hearts out. Once inside Beth invited me to skip with her through the food court chanting “Skipping is Fun! Skipping is Fun!” I spent the next 5 minutes trying to explain why a man of my age, size and position couldn’t possibly do what she asked especially through a public food court. By the way, none of my explanations made any sense to her or to me for that matter.

Beth looked up at me and said in a sad little voice, “Daddy, You go all over the place telling people to be free and have fun and you won’t even skip with me here in the mall.” Well, that did it! Off we went skipping and chanting through the food court like the two utterly free spirits we were. Although I must admit to being a somewhat reluctant free spirit. You know what? IT WAS FUN!

Whenever I tell this story I select a woman from the audience to be Beth and come up and skip with me. The audience becomes the food court and away we go chanting and skipping. The audience loves the story and really gets into the spirit of the moment.

We all have a lot of fun and laughs. At the end I get the audience to give my volunteer a big round of applause before she sits down. This is just one example of how I play with the audience. If you're comfortable with this kind of activity and it fits your style, then give it a try. I'm sure you have a story you can act out with the people listening to you. If you're not comfortable with the idea, don't do it.

35 Humorous One Liners for Public Speakers

By Mike Moore

I believe in the awesome power of humorous one liners to get and maintain audience attention and to promote retention of the material you cover in your presentations or seminars. Mastering the art of the one liner is simple, much easier than mastering the art of telling humorous stories. The latter requires a keen sense of pacing and timing to deliver a punch line which results in laughter from your audience. Some speakers just can't get the timing right when telling longer stories, but usually have no problem at all with one liners.

If you know who said the one liner always give credit, but if you don't, just use it and forget about authorship. Many one liners are credited to so many sources, that no one really knows from whom they originated. The origin and authorship of most are lost. Just use them.

Here are 35 of my favorite humorous one liners for you to use in your speeches. Practise delivering them with sharpness and confidence.

1. Expecting people to treat you nicely because you're a good person is much like expecting a bull not to charge you because you're a vegetarian.

2. Start each day off with a smile.....and get it over with. W.C. Fields

3. My Mother told me I wouldn't get far in life because of my procrastination, but I told her, "Just you Wait!"
4. If you go to a doctor's office and find all the plants dead, get yourself another doctor. Erma Bombeck
5. If at first you don't succeed, so much for sky diving.
6. My insides feel so much younger than my outsides look.
7. We must do more than gargle from the well of knowledge.
8. I read recently in the newspaper that impotence is on the rise. Really? MM
9. I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens. Woody Allen.
10. They laughed at Joan of Arc, but she went right ahead and built it anyway. Gracie Allen
11. The only time the world beats a path to your door is when you're on the toilet.
12. It's not hard to meet expenses, they're everywhere.
13. Some days you're the dog and some days you're the hydrant.
14. If all is not lost where the hell is it?

15. If God wanted us to bend over and touch our toes He would have put them on our knees.

16. The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.

17. It's hard to make a comeback when you've never been anywhere.

18. If a cat could speak it would probably say something like, "Hey I don't see a problem here."

19. Isn't it wonderful that wrinkles don't hurt?

20. Parenting teens is much like trying to nail jell-O to a tree.

21. You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there.

22. Inside every old person is a young person wondering what the hell happened.

23. I know there is no life on Mars. It has never shown up on my daughter's phone bill.

24. The problem with being punctual is there's no one around to appreciate it.

25. Minister at grave side: "What we have here is a mere shell. The nut is gone."

26. Her husband is always willing to go that extra mile. He just won't stop and ask directions.
27. Why is it that when I throw a pity party no one ever shows up but me?
28. You know you're getting old when friends compliment you on your new alligator shoes and you're barefoot.
29. When you come to the fork in the road, take it.
30. Charisma is that special quality bald, boring, overweight billionaire's have.
31. Despite the high cost of living it is still quite popular.
32. I started to take Flintstone vitamins. I didn't really feel any better, but you should have seen me stop my car with my feet.
33. There's one advantage to being 102 years old. No peer pressure.
34. Dogs have owners, cats have staff.
35. Any day above ground is a good day.

Conclusion

As I bring this report to a close I want to take a moment to really encourage you to work hard at developing or sharpening your humor delivery skills. Keep in mind that you can do anything you put your mind to. Your efforts will pay off in increased audience attention and interest. Hearing you speak will be a fun experience everyone one will want to be involved in. Your reputation will spread and your bookings will increase. So will your fees. All because you can make people laugh as you share your important message with them. Remember, people love to laugh.

Good Luck!

Mike Moore

About the author

Mike Moore is an international voice on the role of appreciation, praise and humor in performance motivation and human potential. He has spoken to groups throughout Canada and the United States on getting the most out from life and achieving our enormous untapped potential. If you would like Mike to speak to your group or organization you can reach him on- line at www.motivationalplus.com or www.speakforprofit.com His email address is mikemoore@motivationalplus.com If you want to use regular post write to:

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