

A Good Speech Doesn't Stop on a Dime

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Have you seen the movie, *The Manchurian Candidate*? If so, what did you think of the ending? Sitting in the theater as this film came to its close, I felt my jaw drop open. Beside me, my husband shook his head in disbelief, "Is that all?" The movie had ended abruptly. The hero (Denzel Washington) stood gazing blankly over the ocean, his feelings and his future unresolved. There we were, still on the edge of our seats, and the movie was over. It had stopped on a dime.

Shuffling out of the theater, I felt dissatisfied and frustrated. A thoroughly suspenseful movie had left me hanging at the end. Testing out a theory, I asked my husband about his feelings, "Do you feel angry?" "Yes," he answered, "I do." I realized that I felt angry too.

What holds true in a movie holds true in a presentation. An audience expects an ending. In fact, an audience expects a cohesive package that moves smoothly from beginning to middle to end. A good presentation does not end on a dime.

As you prepare the close of a presentation, keep the following points in mind:

Audiences like Circles

A good speech has a story line or a line of logic that runs through it, connecting the chunks of material together. At the end, audience members want closure; they want things tied up in a neat package. One way to provide closure is to set up a circle in the speech. When the ending refers back to the beginning, listeners experience a sense of closure and satisfaction.

Provide a circle in your conclusion by referring to your opening story, statistic, or quote. You can also provide a circle by beginning with a rhetorical question and ending with one answer or a choice of answers.

Speakers Have Unspoken Contracts

I was able to predict my husband would be angry at the ending of *The Manchurian Candidate* because I had recently listened to an audiotape series, *Story Theater Live*, by Doug Stevenson. Stevenson reminded me that audience members expect stories to come to a satisfactory conclusion, that they literally get angry when a speaker leaves a story unresolved.

Stories are one of our best tools for communicating because listeners pay rapt attention to them. Tales tap into the non-logical parts of our brains and engage us emotionally. Once a listener is engrossed in a story, the storyteller has a sort of unspoken contract with that listener. The storyteller has an obligation to complete the story. If elements in the story remain unresolved, the listener feels cheated and betrayed.

By all means, use stories and other techniques in your presentations. Just make sure any story lines or lines of logic are resolved by the end of the talk.

The Ending is the Final Impression

In a speech, a positive first impression may capture attention, but the final impression is the one that lingers. The last thing you say is the thought that goes home with the listener. Here are some techniques for a strong closing:

- Use a powerful quote to stir the spirit.
- Tell a good story, clearly related to the talk, to claim a spot in the memory.
- Issue a culminating challenge to change a life.
- End with a compelling question to provoke thought or action.

A weak closing is guaranteed to leave a lingering weak impression. Unfortunately, the weak impression will not be directed solely at the talk. The weak impression will be directed at the speaker. The content of the talk will dissipate, but the negative impression of speaker will stick.

The Audience Needs Action

Audience members usually come to a presentation in a passive mode. The most powerful speeches are ones that convert audience members to action. For example, our nation will never forget John Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Carefully plan an action statement, even for an informative business speech. Audience members may come passively, but they don't want to leave having wasted their time. Let them know what they should do as a result of your speech.

In a presentation, you are selling ideas, recommendations, policies, or products and services. No matter what you are selling, make sure you close the sale with a request for action.

The *Manchurian Candidate* is a good movie, but the ending left me frustrated and angry. That negative impression colors my memory of the whole film. When you make your next presentation, remember the *Manchurian Candidate*. Remember that good presentations, like good movies, don't stop on a dime.

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