
COMMENTARY

Ten Suggestions for a Successful Commencement Address

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INTRODUCTION

The commencement ceremony is one of the most meaningful and symbolic events in a college student's career. It is a time to reflect on the sacrifices and accomplishments of the past, and on the hope, excitement, and responsibility of the future. It is a time when parents and friends visit the campus and meet, often for the first time, the classmates and faculty members of the graduates. In many cases, it is the last formal on-campus encounter with the college community and a crucial moment in the graduates' forming of lifelong impressions of their alma mater.

If you have been chosen to deliver the keynote address, it is probably because of your eminence in your field and because you are well respected. You have been entrusted to offer an inspirational address.

The following 10 suggestions are one man's opinion, based on the observation of over 50 commencement addresses, some of which were good, many mediocre, and a few bland, boring, tasteless, or downright inappropriate. These tips are intended to help in the composition and delivery of wise, interesting, inspiring, and effective addresses. They are not carved in stone, and they are not inviolable; they are merely suggestions. In no way do they jeopardize freedom of speech, inhibit creativity, or stifle ideas.

The Journal of Chiropractic Education
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Vol. 20, No. 2. Printed in U.S.A.
1042-5055/\$22.00

TEN SUGGESTIONS

The first suggestion is one of the main guidelines for all writing or public speaking.

1. Know your audience. The audience is comprised of both professionals and lay persons—graduates, family and loved ones, staff, faculty members, administrators, and others. They come from diverse backgrounds and it is surprising how simple it is to offend one or more of them.
2. Know what the commencement address is and is not about. It is not about the speaker; it is about the graduates and their guests. The message should be uplifting and should deal with education, wisdom, the future, and what the graduates have accomplished. It is about the sacrifices made by graduates and those near and dear to them. It is not about the speaker's accomplishments and sacrifices. Nor is it a platform for selling books, tapes, and seminars. The speaker should focus on what is important and relevant for the graduates and guests. If the address contains the words "I, me, my, or mine" more than once or twice, it may have missed the point.
3. As in everyday conversation with strangers, avoid the following:
 - a. Religion, race, creed, or sexual orientation
 - b. Personal brands of chiropractic or favorite technique systems
 - c. Political opinions
 - d. Negative views of other professions (members of each profession are usually represented in the audience)
4. Don't dwell on the past, or get too technical. A

bit of history or technical detail can be useful in illustrating a point. Too much blurs the message, especially to lay people who may not understand (or care about) such complexities.

5. Never attack the graduates for the past or present sins of our profession. The graduates are not guilty of these transgressions, and they do not deserve to be brow-beaten about them. A few words about professional responsibility are far more effective than a litany of colleagues' wrongdoings. Parents and spouses do not care about chiropractic unity, infighting between straights and mixers, or debates about technique systems. The commencement ceremony is not the appropriate venue for airing the profession's dirty laundry. Rather, it is a golden opportunity to reassure the audience that chiropractic is a worthy career choice; that the education was worth the time, effort, and expenditure required to obtain it; and that there is genuine hope for the future.
6. Balance the serious with the humorous. Gifted commencement speakers manage to strike a balance between gravity and levity. They may poke fun at themselves, but they do not poke fun at others. Addresses that are too solemn or too jocular run the risk of annoying the audience and undermining the message.
7. Don't over-quote. One or two well-placed quotations from famous people can be most effective in driving home a point. Any more sounds preachy or smug.
8. Avoid miracle-cure anecdotes. Magic and miracles may occur in practice once in a while, but what's really magical and miraculous about chiropractic is what happens every day—day in and day out. The graduates will benefit most by being reminded that the mainstream material taught in college is what makes chiropractic successful. The right message is that they do not require practice management gurus, marketing gimmicks, and technique panaceas. Graduates, instead, need to be reassured that it is preferable to be rational and mainstream.
9. Avoid money-talk. It is distasteful and inappropriate to discuss success in terms of dollars, patient visits, or high-volume practices. Such talk contradicts the patient-centered values the colleges encourage.
10. Finally and perhaps most important: keep it brief and keep it lively. Sir Winston Churchill, perhaps one of the greatest speechwriters and

orators ever, once opened an address with, "I am going to give a long speech today—I haven't had time to prepare a short one." Everyone appreciates speakers who carefully choose their words, who get to the point, and who conclude briskly. Five to 10 minutes is just about right. At 200 to 250 words per minute (practice and time your delivery), that equates to about 1000–2500 words. Table 1 lists the word count of a sampling of some recent commencement addresses.

CONCLUSION

Composing and delivering commencement addresses is thoroughly discussed in many excellent sources.^{1–6} Reading some of these references and incorporating these suggestions will not guarantee a great speech but, combined with a compelling message and an uplifting ending, may help in achieving that goal.

Received, January 20, 2006

Revised, May 27, 2006

Accepted, May 28, 2006

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Table 1. Word Count of Some Commencement Addresses

Speaker	Occupation	Commencement address	Date	Word count
Fred Rogers	Television celebrity	Dartmouth College ^a	2002	1473
George W. Bush	President of the United States	U. S. Coast Guard Academy ^b	May 2003	2454
Barbara Ehrenreich	Political activist, writer	Barnard College ^c	2004	1977
Jon Stewart	Television comedian	College of William & Mary ^d	May 2004	1805
Kofi Annan	Secretary-General, United Nations	Harvard University ^e	June 2004	2173
Alan Greenspan	Chairman, Federal Reserve Board	Wharton School, University of PA ^f	May 2005	1768
George W. Bush	President of the United States	Calvin College ^g	May 2005	1620
William F. Schulz	Executive Director, Amnesty International	Oberlin College ^h	May 2005	1705
John Lithgow	Actor	Harvard University ⁱ	June 2005	2959
Tom Brokaw	Network television news anchor	Dartmouth College ^j	June 2005	2699
Steve Jobs	CEO, Apple Computer	Stanford University ^k	June 2005	2248
Jane Lakes Harman	U.S. Representative	Smith College ^l	May 2006	2208
Mean:				2091
Median:				2075

^a <http://www.indigo.org/mrrogers.html>.

^b <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030521-2.html>.

^c <http://www.longviewinstitute.org/research/ehrenreich/becommencement>.

^d <http://www.wm.edu/news/?id=3650>.

^e <http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2004/04.15/01-speaker.html>.

^f http://www.wharton.upenn.edu/whartonfacts/news_and_events/newsreleases/2005/p_2005_4_332.html.

^g <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050521-1.html>.

^h <http://www.oberlin.edu/colrelat/commencement/speeches/schulz-william.html>.

ⁱ <http://www.harvard-magazine.com/commencement/05-lithgow.html>.

^j <http://www.dartmouth.edu/news/releases/2005/06/12a.html>.

^k <http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/grad-061505.html>.

^l <http://www.smith.edu/commencement/>