

# When There's No Time to Prepare: Tips for Speaking Off the Cuff

By Lisa Braithwaite

It's inevitable: You're at a luncheon to honor a colleague and someone asks you to "say a few words." Or your boss tosses an assignment into your lap that requires a presentation to your team with a turnaround time of one hour.

These can be the most nerve-wracking of presentations; after all, we're taught that thorough preparation is the foundation of a successful presentation. When there's no time to prepare, a key building block of your talk is missing.

No need to sweat; you can do it! Just follow the tips below for an off-the-cuff speech that makes you sound like the clever, articulate, unruffled genius you are.

## Pointer 1: Stall for time!

If you're asked to speak at an event where there will be several speakers, see if you can put off your time slot for a few minutes. Even five minutes will give you the time you need to do some speedy homework.

## Pointer 2: Write out some quick notes.

Take a moment to think about your audience, the purpose of the occasion, and what you want to convey. Make some quick bullet points (on a napkin, if necessary), but no more than three so you don't overwhelm yourself or the audience.

Because no one is expecting a long dissertation, don't feel pressured to say more than is necessary.

Take your notes with you when it's your turn to speak; because you only have a couple of bullet points, you won't be tempted to stare at the paper the whole time you're speaking, neglecting to make eye contact with your audience.

Write out your first sentence and memorize it, so that you can start off your remarks with an air of confidence. And make an effort to fit in an eloquent closing.

Remember, it's about the audience, not you. If you're saying a few words about a colleague, say something personal, but don't bring up negative or embarrassing stories. Share positive memories, but most importantly, speak sincerely and from the heart. Give the audience what they want, and you will find your anxiety melting away.

## Pointer 3: Get it together.

If you can get away, go to the restroom or another room for some privacy. Breathe deeply and do some neck rolls and stretches to get the blood flowing. Clench and unclench your hands and feet a few times if you're sitting at a table and your hands and feet are hidden.

This is where visualization and positive self-talk can be useful. You've been asked to speak because someone believes you have something important to say. Remember this as you're doing relaxation exercises and tell yourself that this is an opportunity, not a punishment.

## Pointer 4: Be yourself, whatever that means.

If you are generally an informal speaker, don't try to be formal just because the occasion is formal. Likewise, if you are a more reserved and formal speaker, don't attempt a laid-back style. As a last-minute speaker, the last thing you should be doing is trying on a new persona in front of the audience. Do what you do best, and don't try to be someone you're not.

Ideally, you will always anticipate being asked to speak in certain situations, and won't be caught off guard. Plan ahead if you think it's possible that you will be asked to speak; have a few remarks in mind, just in case.

Last of all: Don't panic. With a few moments to pull yourself together and make some pertinent notes, your last-minute

speech can be genuine, natural, succinct, and meaningful, as though you had plenty of time to prepare.

2009 © Associated Content, All rights reserved.  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)