

# Wolverhampton Speakers Club

## Speech Construction and Signposting

### Constructing a Speech



Someone once said to me:  
*'You don't construct a speech,  
it's not a building - you speakers  
are silly!'*  
Well, actually ...

A good speech DOES have an underlying construction and we speakers DO know a thing or two.

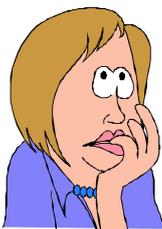
So why do we do it and how do we do it?

### Why do we do it?

You have something important to say and you should arrange it in a logical and consistent way so that your audience can easily follow your argument or message. That's what we mean by 'structure'.

Your structure holds everything together.

Your speech construction is a very important thing to do well. A speech without a clear structure will not go down well with your audience and will not get your message across - they will not know where you are going with it.



Of course, it also helps YOU, when you are speaking, because a good structure helps you remember where you are in your speech, so you don't get lost!



### How do we do it?

It is an interesting fact of human psychology that we often appreciate an odd number of things better than an even number, and that we especially respond to things in threes.

We will often refer to the 'Rule of Threes' because research has shown that that three to five points are usually enough for people to relate to, with three being the better and the facts are easier to retain. This is why a good speech structure is made up of three parts and the most usual structure for a speech is to write it in three connected parts and we will concentrate on that method here.

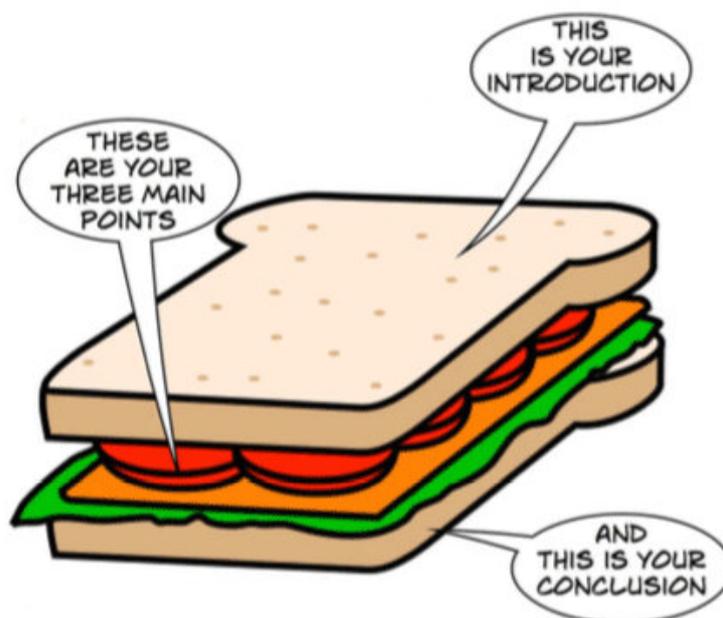
## The BLT!

What!!!

Oh yes - consider the humble Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato sandwich - the BLT. It's a good example to show what we mean.



Consider a well-structured BLT sandwich – from top to bottom it has a slice of bread, then three fillings and finally another slice of bread to hold it all together. This illustrates the most commonly used structure for a speech:



### Beginning

This is the **introduction** to your speech, where you capture the interest of your audience and make them want to listen to the rest.

Maybe you will also let them know what you are going to tell them - this is what we call **signposting**, and we'll look at that shortly.

### Middle

This is the **main body of the speech**. This is where you set out and develop the main points of your argument, and is often itself made up of three main points, just like the filling of your BLT.

### End

**This is your conclusion.** All parts of the speech are important and while the middle of your speech is where you set out your arguments, you've got to have a good beginning to capture your audience's attention, and a good ending to consolidate what you've told them.

## Beginning, Middle and End

### Beginning

**A good beginning is vitally important** – this is where you pique your audience's attention and set the scene for your message. It is also where the audience is at its most receptive, so grab them and make them like you and want to continue listening to you. Convert their initial attention into interest.

Lose your audience now and you have lost them for the whole speech – give them a punchy, powerful and succinct opening - memorise and practise it so that you don't have to look at your notes: it's so much more effective that way.

Make an impact and indicate your purpose. You can make that impact with what you say and especially how you say it. Answer their unspoken question: 'why should I pay attention to you?'

Once you've made your opening statement, you can go on to explain and briefly let the audience know what you're going to speak about - this is 'signposting'.

### Middle

**This is where you present and develop your argument or message.** You have just captured your audience's attention and interest, so how should you carry on?

Because this is the main part of your speech you need to work out what points you are going to put across and then present them in logical sections that will allow your audience to digest what you are saying.

Remember that for a clear structure research has shown that three to five main points are usually enough, with three being the better because the mind often works in threes and the facts are easier to retain. Arrange your material to build your argument towards the conclusion and make sure that each point is properly developed.

### End

**The end is just as important as the beginning** – go out with a bang! Again this should be a powerful statement that summarises the message and inspires your audience. This is the climax of your speech, use it to reinforce your message and call your audience to action.

Your audience must remember your key message and short sharp sentences are effective and your last sentence should be strong and final – finish on an up-beat.

### How long?

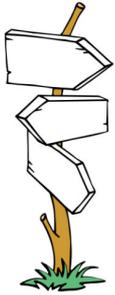


How long should each of the three main parts take?

That will obviously depend on the nature of your speech and what you have to say, but for a well-balanced speech a good rule of thumb is that the beginning and end of the speech should each last up to 15% of the total time and the middle section the remaining 70% ...

... but this is a flexible rule and should not be followed rigidly.

## Signposting



You can't always be sure that the audience are good at actively listening to what a speaker is saying, so they probably need some help.

You can help your audience follow your speech by giving verbal clues as to what's going on while you speak – you are giving them a 'road map'. This is called 'signposting'.



Someone - was it Churchill? Aristotle? or some other bloke? - is supposed to have said ...

*"Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you've told them."*

Whoever said it, this is what signposting is all about.

### Tell them what you're going to tell them ...

Here you are listing what you are going to say by looking forward to the points you are going to make. You could put this short section in the beginning of the speech or as a link between the beginning and the middle. Whichever it is make sure that it is clear, concise and memorable and comes early enough in the speech to make sense.

In most cases it doesn't matter that you are laying bare your outline - you want your audience to follow you - it's a speech, not a mystery novel!



*'Today I am going to explain why paper is still important in today's digital world'*

That's pretty general signposting, but it IS still signposting.

If I wanted to be more detailed I could have said:

*'Today I'm going to cover three things about 'paper' ...*

*'First, I'll introduce a short history of paper-making ...*

*Then I'll briefly explain how paper is made today ...*

*And thirdly, I'll explain why paper is still important in today's digital world'.*

However you do it, leave your audience in no doubt about what they are going to hear.



## Tell them ...

The main points you are exploring are in the middle, the main part, of your speech. You need to work out how many points you are going to make and you will need some sort of link between each to signpost where you are.

However many main points you are going to make you will need to make sure your audience knows where you are in your speech - which point you are going to talk about next - with some sort of link between each to signpost where you are.



So I might introduce my first main point by saying:

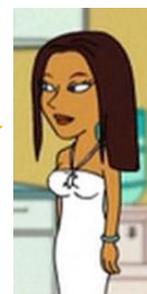
*'Firstly let us look at how paper was made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ...'*

... and then go into that part of my speech

Then I might link to the second main point by saying:

*'Now I'll move on to how paper is made today ...'*

...and so on



An important phrase that Jasmine is likely to use is:

*'Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen ...'*

...because this clearly indicates a new topic is coming up, and it's especially useful when preparing for the conclusion ...

## Tell them what you've told them ...

Whatever the form of your ending make sure that at some point you summarise the main points or refer back to what you started with, so as to show that you've covered what you said you would cover.

Reinforce anything you particularly want your audience to take away from your speech and then finish with your striking ending (memorised and practised as before).

## Careful! The dangers of signposting!

**Not everyone uses this model**, and indeed it may be that some speeches might not be so effective if you follow it too rigidly: for example, you might not want to give too much away at the beginning and play your 'trump card', revealing all, later in the speech; or you might be telling a story or delivering a narrative.

It is very easy to make your speeches sound too formulaic or boring by a too-rigid use of detailed signposting - sometimes just general signposting is best; but in most business or educational situations it's best to do it in detail.