

“How To Deliver A Talk Without Using Notes”

When I was just starting to speak publicly, I was always amazed by communicators who could speak without using notes. I wanted to be able to do that, but I had no idea how. I realized communicators who spoke without notes were almost always more effective, but I was at a loss to figure out how to become one.

So what’s the secret sauce? **Don’t memorize your talk. Understand it.**

I got that advice when I was a seminary student from Thomas G. Long, then head of homiletics at Princeton. I had the chance drive him to the airport one day when he was lecturing in Toronto. I asked him how I could free myself from notes, and that’s what he told me: Just understand what you’re going to say.

While it didn’t allow me to drop my notes right away, it transformed how I thought about communication. Within a few months, I was almost free of notes. Within a few years I stopped relying on them entirely (except when I’m reading a direct quote).

For those of you who are ready to drill down further, let me walk you through step by step how that works for best for me:

When I do these five things, I can give a 20, 40 or even full hour talk without using notes (except for direct quotes that tie into what the graphics operator is putting on screen...then I want to be exact and will quote what’s on the screen verbatim):

1. Build Your Talk Around A Single Point.

This is so difficult, but so important. Pick a point for your talk. Not eight. Not three. One. Write it down. You can remember one. You can’t remember eight, or three.

I turn my point into a (hopefully) memorable bottom line, such as “Our boldest moments are our best moments”, “There are no inspiring stories of accumulation, only inspiring stories of sacrifice” or “Wisdom often requires the opposite of desire.” It doesn’t mean you won’t have points, but it does mean all those sub-points will be built around one point. The more cohesive and unified your talk is around a single point, the easier it will be to deliver.

2. Understand The Talk’s Structural Pieces.

This is crucial. Master this and you’ve mastered your talk. So let’s get granular. Every talk has big pieces or sections. And here’s the magic about a clear structure: When you understand the structure of your talk, you understand your talk. And by the way, the clearer your structure is, the easier it will be for your audience to follow.

So how do you get a clear structure? There are many ways, but it’s simple. It just needs to be clear and logical. I sometimes use Andy Stanley’s suggested structure of Me, We, God, You, We. Other times I structure the talk this way: Problem, Make the Problem Worse, Teaching, Resolution.

Regardless of your method, every talk follows this basic structure: Introduction, Teaching (Body), Application, Conclusion. So let's use that for the purposes of this post.

I also always use four of the questions Andy Stanley outlines at the end of the book on communication he and Lane Jones wrote called *Communicating for a Change*. (*The questions are: What do they need to know? Why do they need to know it? What do they need to do? Why do they need to do it?*) These questions guide me through the key sections of my talk. Each piece of the talk's structure answers one of those four questions:

a. Introduction:

This is where you need to decide how to introduce your topic. I'll often paint a problem, introduce a tension, tell a story or find common ground to draw everyone into the message. It lasts five – ten minutes max, and it's easy to remember the problem, tension, story or common ground point you're trying to establish because the introduction tries to answer this critical question: *Why do they need to know this?*

That's all I try to do in the introduction. If I can answer that, it becomes easy to do the introduction without notes, because you're simply communicating some common ground (drawing everyone into the talk) what's at stake, why this matters and why anyone should care.

b. Teaching:

This is where I dig into the heart of the issue, the problem, the tension and its relationship to the biblical text or the main subject of the talk. I usually jump between the biblical text and people's lives today, trying to identify key life issues that arise from the text, point out surprises, highlight tension and drill down on the main point of the talk.

The teaching section answers the question: *What do they need to know?*

c. Application.

Application doesn't start here. If you've done the introduction well, you've already shown people why this matters and how it can make their life better/different. But this is where I drill down. It's where you get specific, granular and might tell more stories. Focus on remembering the key application points and your story(ies).

The application section answers the question: *What do they need to do?*

d. Conclusion.

You've got to land this plane at some point. Too often, communicators crash land. I've done it before, and it's usually because we don't think clearly about how to finish. I try to finish by reiterating the key point and showing people what happens when they apply it in their lives. I help people imagine a different and better future when they put what they've heard into practice.

The conclusion answers the question: **Why do they need to do it?**

Now, that sounds complicated. But it's not. If you can remember:

- How you're introducing the subject
- What you're teaching
- How you're applying it
- How you're wrapping up

You've learned your talk. Bingo. If you have a total meltdown seconds before the big moment, just answer four questions on your way up the stairs onto the platform:

- What do they need to know?
- Why do they need to know it?
- What do they need to do?
- Why do they need to do it?

And then start talking. I promise you it will be a great talk. Those 4 questions are powerful.

3. Start Early.

The longer you live with a talk, the easier it will be to remember. I write the basic series outline two months in advance, finish it a month in advance (including small group questions) and write the message early in the week. This gives it time to digest. Preaching is like a good stew – the longer it simmers, the better it tastes.

4. Review It.

I usually read my message through a few times on Saturday night right before going to bed. I'll get up early on a Sunday and read over it again several times. Before I finish, I try to be 100% familiar with the key points in each of the big pieces of the talk.

5. Deliver It.

Just get up there and speak from your heart. If, while delivering your talk, you forget a point, move on. No one knew you were going to make it anyway, so just move on. They'll thank you for being two minutes shorter.

Resource: Adapted from "How To Deliver A Talk Without Using Notes"; Carey Nieuwhof Blog; November 28, 2012