How to Be a Ruthless Editor

Pack More Punch in Your Speeches by Pruning Your Prose

by Mitch Mirkin

There are few situations in life in which being ruthless is a virtue. Editing your own speeches is one of them.

It’s natural for all of us who write to want to preserve every word of the “final” draft we’ve labored over, carefully crafted and lovingly nurtured into existence. Each clever phrase, sparkling anecdote, and colorful adjective seems precious. How could we consider cutting even a single word of all that sheer brilliance?

But cut we must, if we care about our audience and want to communicate effectively. As one famous author put it, “In writing, you must kill all your darlings.”

Using one of my own Toastmasters projects as an example, I’d like to share steps you can follow to edit your own speeches more effectively. I call it the P-R-U-N-E method. Each letter stands for a potentially problematic type of content you’ll want to consider cutting: Platitudes, Redundancy, Unnecessary words, Needless complication, and Excursions.

When you prune, you remove branches from a tree or bush to improve its shape or growth. Even living branches, bursting with greenery and flowers, may have to be thinned out for the greater good. Likewise, pruning away certain elements from your speech, even if they seem perfectly fine in their own right, may help the overall speech and allow it to come alive and blossom.

I recently gave a Toastmasters speech about body language across cultures. I focused on hand gestures that mean different things in different regions of the world. As I wrote the speech, I realized I had almost nine minutes of content for a five- to seven-minute talk.

Yes, it’s possible to request more time, but generally it’s best to fit your material into the prescribed length. That alone is one reason to prune your speech. But even more important, a vigorous edit will make your speech tighter, clearer, smoother, and more impactful.

Here’s what to look for as you prune:

Platitudes

These are trite, insipid statements. They will bore your audience. In my speech, for example, what if I had opened with the painfully obvious observation that “we live in a multicultural world?” Or what about this jaw-dropping revelation: “Poor communication can produce unintended results.” Can you just hear the yawns?

Banish stale, tired, uninspired lines from your speaking or writing. Take no prisoners. Instead, aim to use fresh, vivid, concrete language that will make your listeners sit up and take notice. I included this line in my talk: “Welcome to the wild, wacky world of cross-cultural communication, where the wrong hand gesture can insult your host, spoil a potential business idea, or perhaps even start a war.”

Strive to use colorful, punchy prose in place of platitudes.

Redundancy

A speaker may repeat certain elements for emphasis or effect. That’s not redundancy. Here, I’m talking about a speaker repeating certain elements for emphasis or effect. That’s not redundancy. Here, I’m talking about

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