

Chapter 2 “Doomed to Fail” vs. “Speak Like Yourself”

Why do so many speakers put their audiences to sleep?

You might think it’s because they’re not good speakers. But while that may be true (at least for now), there’s also a deeper reason:

Their **speeches** aren’t good.

And those speeches *can’t* be good, because they’re built with a process that leads straight to mediocrity.

You Can’t Get There from Here

Pretend that your boss has just “asked” you to make a speech at an upcoming meeting or event.

You’ve never made a speech before—or worse, you’ve made some and they didn’t go well—but that’s not something you’re eager to tell your boss. So you gulp and take the assignment.

What happens next? (I mean, *after* the panic attack!) Your next move will probably be to call a trusted friend, colleague, or mentor and ask them how you should proceed.

Why Panic?

People who panic at the thought of public speaking are often dismissed as “too sensitive.” But they have grasped an underlying truth that their hardier colleagues tend to ignore: *They don’t know how to pull this off!*

They’ve never been taught basic speechmaking skills; so on what basis would they feel confident?

“No problem,” they’re likely to tell you. “It’s not that hard to put a speech together.” They will then explain how *they’ve* gone about preparing to give speeches in the past, or how they’ve observed their own colleagues, mentors, or bosses doing it.

What they’ll probably relay to you is the gold standard in business speechmaking—a simple, easily implemented process that I call the Doomed to Fail Approach.¹

¹ As the writer and social observer H.L. Mencken observed, “For every complex problem, there is an answer that’s simple, clear, and wrong.”

Here are the three steps in Doomed to Fail:

- Doomed to Fail Step 1:** Find out everything you can about your topic
- Doomed to Fail Step 2:** Put your facts into PowerPoint
- Doomed to Fail Step 3:** Ignore your speech until the day you give it

Let's take a quick look at this approach, so that you understand what's wrong with it.

Doomed to Fail Step 1: Find Our Everything You Can About Your Topic

There are two big problems with starting your speechmaking by delving into research:

- You haven't thought about your audience (so how do you know what will interest them?); and
- Since you don't know yet what matters to your audience, how will you narrow your topic down?

In fact, most people *don't* narrow down their topics. They just research everything that could possibly pertain to the title they've been given.

Believe it or not, the title is *all* that most people have to work with when they begin to gather information for a speech.

Where Do Speech Titles Come From?

Having written speeches for countless corporate events, I know a lot about how this particular sausage gets made. Often, a writer, a creative director, an account executive (salesperson) and/or an event planner are sitting in a room trying to figure out how they're going to fill X days of time, and someone will say, "We need to put the VP of Marketing onstage Wednesday morning." "OK," someone else will say, "Let's give her 45 minutes and call it, *Overview of Our New Marketing Materials.*"

If you're speaking for a non-profit organization or association, the decision is more likely made by one person, who'll probably also give you a generic title such as *The Future of Philanthropy.*

Remember, these people don't know you. They don't know what you want (or are qualified) to talk about. They may not know much about your audience, either. So take the title you're assigned as a *general suggestion*, not a comprehensive set of instructions for your speech.

If speech titles were *wonderful*... if they conveyed a unique *attitude*... if they united *your expertise* and *your audience's concerns*... this wouldn't be a problem. But 99% of the time, they don't do accomplish any of these things.²

Instead, your title is likely to be a bland construction that purposefully avoids a point of view, such as:

- **A Review of Phase One Findings**
- **Creating a High-Value Team**
- **Next Steps to eCommerce Implementation**

Why are these titles so non-committal? Because no one wants to give a speech with a title like:

- **A Review of Phase One Findings** Shows How Much Work We Still Have to Do
- **Creating a High-Value Team** is Probably Impossible, But We'll Try Anyway
- The **Next Steps to eCommerce Implementation** is Being Outsourced

Even when a speech is positive, the business convention is to give it a vague, lackluster title.

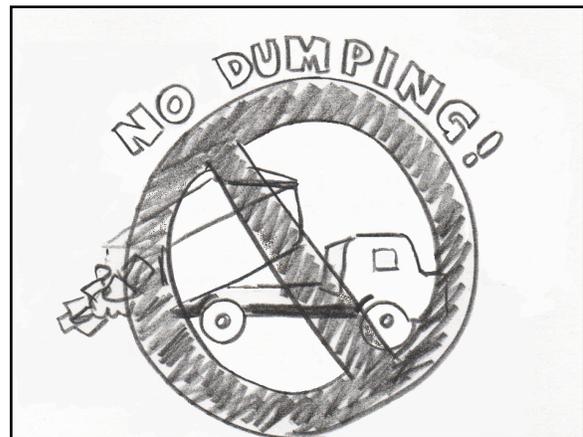
That isn't necessarily a *bad* thing. But be sure that your bland title doesn't lead you to create a bland speech!

Beware the Dreaded Data Dump

Because you don't know *specifically* what your talk with cover (or what your audience needs to hear), making a grab for whatever information you or your assistant can find, unfiltered by a sense of relevance, can lead to the dreaded "data dump."

What's a data dump? Picture a dump truck—the kind that's used to lay a load of gravel on a driveway or other work site. (If you have a young child, this image will come easily to mind.)

The particular truck I want you to picture, though, isn't loaded with gravel. It's loaded with every fact, figure, book, article, piece of information, or web site that's even remotely related to the topic of your speech.



Now imagine dumping all that content onto your desk, and figuratively shoveling through it to find something worth saying.

² You've probably noticed that 99% of the statistics I use are intended as hyperbole, or rather, they reflect my subjective experience. We'll talk more about this when we get to a discussion of personality types and what constitutes evidence. For now, just assume that if I'm using scientifically-validated data, I'll quote a source; otherwise, it's all "IMHO" (in my humble opinion).

Clearly, this is inelegant at best. Even if you had time to sort through the whole mess (and you don't), how could you possibly find the facts that are useful, and chuck the ones that belong in a landfill?

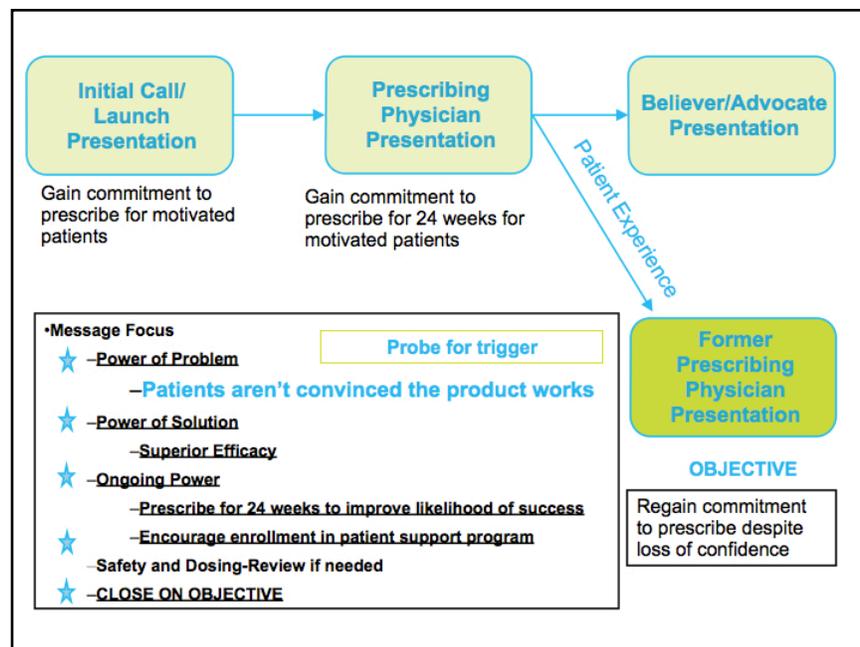
You can't.

Doomed to Fail Step 2: Put Your Facts Into PowerPoint³

Because it's not easy to make sense of the information you've collected, most speakers settle for transferring their data into neat little overloaded PowerPoint slides without *trying* to make sense of it.

The reason those slides are overloaded is because most people don't just put one *thought* on a slide; they put *everything they know* about *one aspect of the topic* on a slide.

Two graphs? Four pictures? Six lines of argument? No problem; if they're related, someone will put them on the same slide, and that slide may well look like this⁴:



This PowerPoint, like so many that you see in business settings, looks and reads like the output from a data dump.

³ By "PowerPoint," I also mean Keynote, the far more intuitive PowerPoint equivalent for Macs.

⁴ This is an honest-to-goodness, real (though carefully redacted) client slide from my corporate days.

It has no underlying logic or story; and if the slides that proceed and follow it are equally obscure, whoever is presenting them will have to fall back on that old business standby, “What this slide shows... this next slide shows... this slide illustrates... now let’s look at...”

Ho-hum.

Blind Men and Elephants

As you know from being on the audience side of things, listening to disjointed PowerPoint slides is like living in the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant.

In this story, which originated in India, several blind men are trying to determine what an elephant looks like. Because each one is examining a different part of its body, they reach very different conclusions:

- The man who’s patting the elephant’s trunk thinks it’s a long, tube-like animal.
- The man who’s touching the elephant’s ears thinks it’s a wide, floppy, animal.
- The man who’s tracing the elephant’s leg thinks it’s a short, stubby animal, etc.

The point is that a series of discrete and disjointed data sets do not add up to the big picture (or even to a point of view).

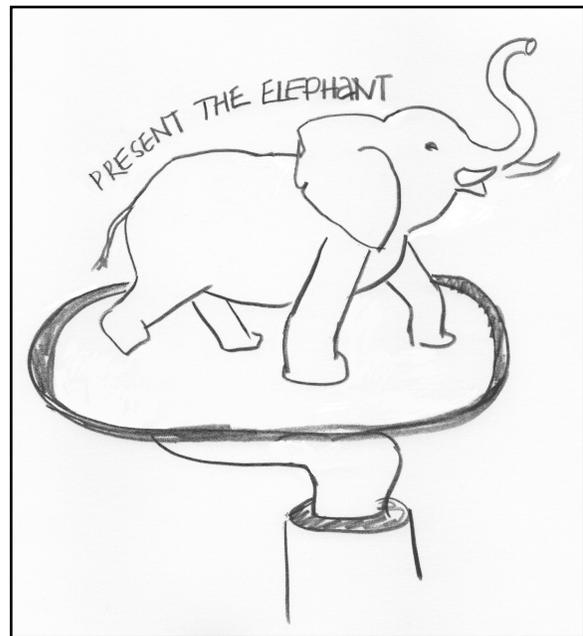
As a public speaker, ***your job is to see the big picture—to present the whole elephant***, if you will, not to say the speechmaking equivalent of, “This piece is long and tube-like... this piece is wide and floppy... this next slide shows that...”

Yadda-yadda-yadda.

Just Tell Me What I Need to Know

In my corporate speechwriting days, the second-most-frequently question I asked speakers was, “What am I supposed to learn from looking at this slide?”⁵

Nine times out of 10, the thing you’re supposed to learn is embedded in a lot of other data that adds nothing to your understanding. Here is what that typically looks like:



⁵ The first-most-frequently asked question was, “Why do I care?”

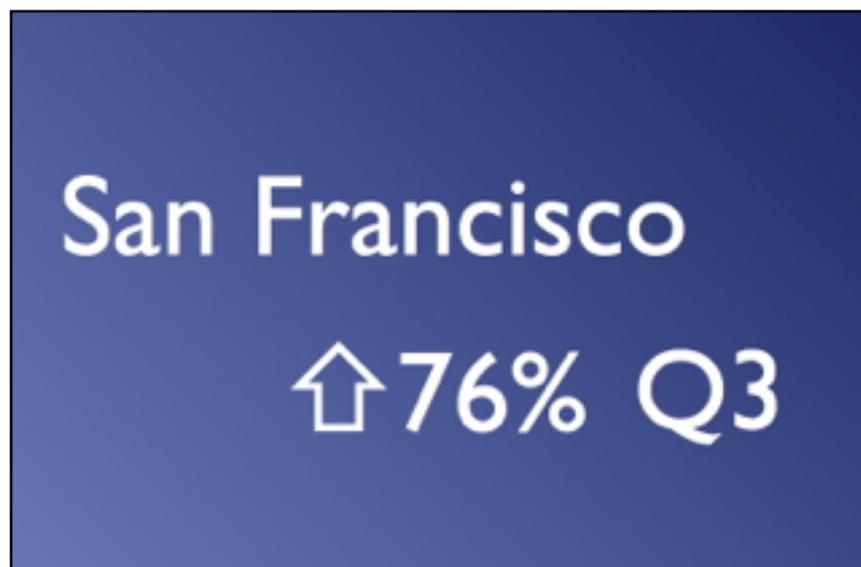


The “fun” part of listening to someone deliver a slide like this is that they almost invariably say, “As you can see, San Francisco grew 76% in Q3.”

But, of course, you *can't* see that, because—by the time you figure out where the data for Q3 (the third quarter) is, let alone which color represents San Francisco—your presenter has gone on to the next slide, and the next data point.

Which you'll probably will also miss, because you'll still be trying to decode *this* one.

So why not use a visual approach that immediately conveys what's most important, like this one:



I'm no graphic artist, but this slide has one unassailable virtue: No one in your audience will miss the fact that San Francisco was up 76% in Q3.

Doomed to Fail Step 3: Ignore Your Speech Until the Day You Give It

By the time most presenters have created a PowerPoint, they're pretty sure that their speech isn't going to be great.

And they're *very* sure they don't know how to change that.

So what do they do? They put their heads in the sand.

They put the whole damned thing out of their minds—or at least, they trying to fool themselves into thinking that's what they've done.

This is why so many presenters show up on Speech Day to deliver a talk with which they're utterly unfamiliar. They spent minimal time writing the thing, they never practiced it, and they've done their best to ignore it ever since.

Now they're going to have to *figure out* what their slides were supposed to mean—onstage, in front of hundreds of people.

What *Is* This Speech About, Anyway?

This is a very good self-test question. If you can't answer it clearly, succinctly, and with energy, you're probably not ready to deliver this speech!

Paradoxically, the other way to ignore your speech right up to the last possible minute is to keep compulsively editing it. I once saw an executive literally making paper edits to her speech notes *as she was walking to the stage*.

This is the essence of Doomed To Fail; and of course her speech was terrible, because she thought of it as (a) a flawed collection of words that she was *not* proud to deliver; and (b) a written document instead of a spoken communication.

If you treat your speech like *a written document that isn't good enough to be shared*, it's no surprise that you won't enjoy sharing it—or that your audience won't enjoy listening.

The Speak Like Yourself Approach

Doesn't the "Doomed to Fail" approach sound like fun?

No?

Well, here's the good news: You can start right now to replace the three Doomed to Fail steps with an approach that actually works.

Believe it or not, this approach is going to lead you straight to a speech that you'll *enjoy* delivering. It's also a speech that your audience will enjoy hearing, because it's crafted specifically for *them*.

And as an added benefit, this approach to creating a speech is *faster* and *easier* than the tried-and-truly-Doomed to Fail method.

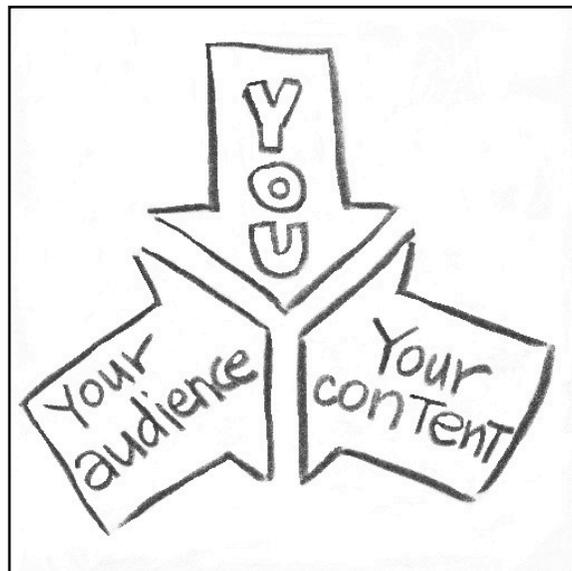
The three Speak Like Yourself steps are:

- Speak Like Yourself Step 1:** Prepare a Speech that's Valuable to Your Audience
- Speak Like Yourself Step 2:** Practice Delivering It Powerfully
- Speak Like Yourself Step 3:** Connect with Your Listeners and Present with Pride

In the chapters that follow, you'll learn about each of these steps, and how to apply them effectively, every time.

For now, though, the thing to remember is that, unlike Doomed to Fail, which is focused entirely on your *content*, the Speak Like Yourself approach succeeds because it recognizes that *public speaking is a relationship—or a transaction, if you prefer— that also involves people!*

Here's what that relationship looks like:



It's Not About You!

As you can see from this diagram, there are three elements in a public speaking relationship, and you're only one of them. The other two are:

- Your *audience* — a collection of people who'd really like to get some value for the time they're putting in; and
- Your *content* — a collection of ideas that *deliver* that value.

Whether you're fumbling or fantastic, mediocre or masterful, the public speaking relationship is about much more than *how people are judging you*; and isn't that a relief to know?

OK, It's One-Third About You!

Since you're one-third of the public speaking equation, it probably makes sense to put one-third of your attention on yourself and your experience. What doesn't make sense is to put 99% of your attention on either your content, or on concerns about whether you'll succeed.

It's also good to know that your relationship with your content *and your audience* can grow stronger *during the course of a speech*.

Here's how that works:

- ***If you respect your audience*** and take their needs and interests into account, they'll generally return the favor by listening to what you have to say.
- ***As you notice your audience listening with respect***, you'll deliver your content more powerfully.
- ***The more powerful your content sounds***, the more your audience will realize that it brings them value... and the more respect they'll have for you... and the whole circle begins again.

Think of this as a feedback loop, where everyone gets lifted higher. The more value you offer, the more your audience likes you, and the more you relax and offer more value.

And even when it isn't working perfectly, ask yourself: Isn't it ***way more fun and more productive*** to think about your speech this way than to think of it the way most speakers seem to—as a gladiator-style fight to the death in which their job is to be flawless, and the audience's job is to rip them to shreds when they're not?

OK, I'm Convinced. What's Next?

In Chapter 1, we talked about YOU. We asked,

- Do you have a right to be heard?
- Would having an Avatar make that easier?
- What are the communications strengths, skills, and qualities that your Avatar embodies?

In this chapter, we've talked about YOUR CONTENT, or rather, where people go wrong when they attempt to choose content using the Doomed to Fail approach.

Now it's time to think about the third element of a public speaking relationship: YOUR AUDIENCE. Understanding them is the first step toward speechmaking success—and we'll talk about how to achieve that understanding in Chapter 3.

The way that most public speakers go wrong is by leaving *people* out of their equation. A speech that is built around a title or topic can never be as rich or persuasive as one that's built with a particular audience and their needs and interests in mind. That's why you should avoid the Doomed to Fail approach that begins with a data dump and ends with not practicing, and adopt the three **Speak Like Yourself** steps: (1) prepared a speech that has value for your audience; (2) practice delivering it powerfully; and (3) connect with your listeners and deliver your speech with pride.

Take-Away+