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“Allison Shapira’s new book is as much about leadership as it is about public speaking. She prods us to ask tough questions: what do we want to accomplish, who is our audience, why should they listen to us? And then she makes us critique ourselves and test our messages with the audience. I wish I had met her years ago.”

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“Allison skillfully commands the attention of her audiences with professionalism, grace, humor, and insight. Through *Speak with Impact*, she provides pragmatic tools, practical advice, and examples that will help readers build powerful public speaking skills.”

—ZOË DEAN-SMITH,
vice president, economic empowerment &
entrepreneurship, Vital Voices Global Partnership

SPEAK WITH **IMPACT**



How to Command the Room
and Influence Others

ALLISON SHAPIRA



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LEADERSHIP

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	<i>vii</i>
INTRODUCTION: Confessions of a Former Opera Singer	1
CHAPTER 1 Before You Speak: What Is Public Speaking, and Where Does It Happen?	11
CHAPTER 2 Start with Strategy: The Three Most Important Questions to Ask Before a Speech or Presentation	25
CHAPTER 3 Write the Speech: A Process to Write Any Speech or Presentation	43
CHAPTER 4 Empower Your Audience: Critical Tools to Connect with Your Audience	63
CHAPTER 5 Polish the Speech: The Final Steps Most People Neglect	79
CHAPTER 6 Show What You Mean: The Three Movements That Make Your Speech Come Alive	93
CHAPTER 7 Pause and Breathe: Calm Your Nerves and Strengthen Your Voice	115
CHAPTER 8 Give the Speech: All Those Last-Minute Details	129
CHAPTER 9 Illustrate the Speech: How to Use Visual Aids and Technology	143

CHAPTER 10 Prepare for the Unexpected: How to Speak Off the Cuff and Answer Questions	159
CHAPTER 11 Speak in Different Situations: On Calls, On Panels, or Across Borders	175
CHAPTER 12 Build Your Executive Presence: Five Components to Bring Out Authority and Authenticity	193
CHAPTER 13 Find Your Courage to Speak: How to Use This Book to Speak Up	205
ENDNOTES	213
INDEX	221



Start with Strategy

The Three Most Important Questions to Ask Before a Speech or Presentation

PREPARING TO SPEAK

Let's assume you have a speech or presentation coming up. You're sitting at your desk, scratching your head while looking at a blank screen or sheet of paper, agonizing over what to say. The closer the speech date is, the more pressure you feel. The more important the audience is, the more pressure you feel. All that pressure is enough to make your mind go blank and your heart beat fast. It's almost as if you're experiencing the same fear you'd feel standing onstage.

Let's take a step back.

I'm going to walk you through a series of steps that will guide you painlessly and efficiently through the process of preparing for a speech, presentation, meeting, or phone call. By using this structure, you will find your motivation to speak and kick-start your creativity.

Before you start writing, identify the context of your speech.

- *Where* will you be presenting? Is it a conference or meeting? Where geographically will it take place? Imagine the venue and the setting to put yourself in the minds of your audience members.

- *When* will it take place in the overall agenda? If you are the first speaker of the day, your energy will set the tone for the entire day. If you are the last speaker of the day, you have to keep up the energy in front of a tired audience who wants to leave early to beat the traffic and go home (we'll talk about how to engage the audience in Chapter 5).
- *Who else* is speaking? If you're speaking on a controversial subject, will other speakers refute your point of view? Conversely, how can you differentiate yourself from other speakers at the conference?

At one conference I attended, a magician persuaded the audience to play a trick on an unsuspecting volunteer by convincing the volunteer that he had vanished onstage (he hadn't). Ironically, the very next speaker was an expert in trust building, something we very obviously had *not* done in the previous situation. That's an example of poor advance planning.

A few more questions about the context of your speech:

- How long will you have to speak? Five minutes, thirty minutes, or an hour or more? The duration will help shape your goal.
- Will your speech include time for questions and answers? If so, Chapter 10 will help you prepare.
- What does the organizer expect from your speech? Sometimes the organizer's expectations differ from yours. Make sure that your expectations are in alignment. I will normally ask a meeting planner, "What do you want the audience to *do*, *think*, or *feel* as a result of my speech?"

While the above questions are intended for a conference, they apply to a meeting as well.

The answers also help you prepare to be flexible. Having sat through numerous meetings, I know that those speaking toward the

end will have their speaking time squeezed as the meeting runs late. One of my clients mentioned that she knows this will happen, so she comes prepared with a “back-pocket edition,” a shortened version of her presentation. This lets her calmly and smoothly deliver the most critical information instead of rushing through the entire presentation like an actor accepting an Oscar, racing to include all her *thank-yous* in her Academy Award speech as the music starts to get louder and louder.

Now that you have the context firmly in your mind, it’s time to kick-start the creative process.

There are three questions I ask myself before I write any speech or presentation or prepare for a difficult conversation, a client pitch, or speaking up in a meeting. They are so critical, I call them “the Three Questions.” They are:

1. Who is your audience?
2. What is your goal?
3. Why you?

The Three Questions are not the structure of your speech; they form the *strategy* of your speech. They warm up your mind and unlock your creativity so you can choose a subject easily and organically. These are the questions that overcome writer’s block.

1. WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.

If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”

—Nelson Mandela¹

Before you can decide what to say, you need to know whom you are addressing. Your audience can be one person in a corner office, fifteen

people in a boardroom, or five hundred people in a ballroom. Are they peers, direct reports, or your company's leadership team? What is their professional background: Are they parents, business executives, or lawyers? Are they all of the same nationality, or are they a diverse group? Do they have the same specialized education as you? Oftentimes, you will have numerous types of people in the audience, but you have one *target* audience.

Now ask yourself who else might see this speech if it's posted online.

We can no longer assume that what we say in a room will stay in that room. An offhand comment in a closed-door meeting can be made public and have disastrous effects. Look at 2012 American presidential candidate Mitt Romney's statement disparaging 47 percent of Americans to see how one comment can elicit major debate.² 🌐 Words matter, and they can easily be taken out of context or become the unintended message of your entire campaign.

What Language Do They Speak?

Once you identify your audience, you will know which language to speak. I don't mean which foreign language, although that may certainly be a factor. I mean: Do they speak the specialized language of your industry, of your culture? Will they understand your jargon or acronyms?

Think of how many terms exist in your industry or even within your company. If you use the word "development," will your audience know if it's about real estate, international aid, fund-raising, or software? If you use the acronym SME, will your audience know if you are referring to Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises or Subject-Matter Experts? If people in your audience are unclear as to the meaning, they probably won't raise their hand to ask. Who wants to risk looking foolish in front of their colleagues asking a question they "should" know the answer to? They'll be so distracted by their own feelings of inadequacy that they will have disengaged from the speech.

This doesn't mean you need to get rid of acronyms altogether; simply explain what they mean the first time you use each one.

Will Your Quotations Resonate with Them?

When we speak in a house of worship, it's customary to quote religious scripture. When we give a political speech, we often quote political leaders. The audience and context of the speech dictate our use of language. Quoting a source the audience admires is a great way to build rapport.

At the Harvard Kennedy School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, we use the term "across the river" to refer to the Harvard Business School, which sits across the Charles River in Allston. We often use that phrase to describe the difference between business and government: "Well, here at the Kennedy School we look at economic conditions from a policy perspective, but 'across the river' they do things differently." These phrases have a clear meaning to those "in the know" and can promote a sense of unity and camaraderie with the audience. But outside that circle, those phrases can feel exclusive or confusing.

I once coached a woman who worked for UNICEF, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. She was preparing a major speech to potential donors and talking about UNICEF's life-changing work on the ground in conflict zones. At one point, she said, "We are repatriating children associated with armed groups back to their communities."

I stopped her. "What does that mean?" I asked. She replied, "Well, basically we are sending child soldiers home to their families." That second phrase was so much more powerful.

While the original sentence would have worked well for an internal UNICEF audience, this woman was speaking to individual donors who give out of a sense of personal connection to the mission. You don't pull at someone's heartstrings using jargon; you need to paint a vivid, emotional picture so that the audience can actually *see*

the impact of your work. If they can see it, they are more likely to give money toward it.

What Does Your Audience Know About Your Subject?

One of my banking clients said to me: “Next week, I’m presenting to the CEO and CFO of a mid-sized company. The CEO thinks in big-picture terms, while the CFO wants the financial details. Basically, I have to speak two different languages at the same time.” We discussed ways she could explain the details and then step back to explain the implications. Another client at that same bank suggested: “Don’t just explain the numbers, explain what the numbers *mean*.”

When a graduate student and entrepreneur at MIT pitches her high-tech startup idea to investors, how does she describe complex, groundbreaking technology in clear, concise language? When a scientist at the US Food and Drug Administration describes new research affecting the health and safety of the American public, how can he use language that is clear and urgent for policymakers who don’t have the same scientific background? When the public affairs staffer at a country’s central bank wants to teach better spending habits to the general population, how can she explain micro- and macro-economic factors in layman’s terms? Simply describing the speech in our own language is easy; describing it in a way that our audience will understand takes time and effort.

But the payoff is huge; our success depends on others taking action as a result of our speech. If you want the audience to take action, then you need to speak to them in *their* language. Certainly, we may be called on to speak at an academic conference where everyone speaks the same technical language, but we all appreciate hearing something described in clear, concise terms. I’m not talking about dumbing down your research; I’m talking about clearing away the excess descriptions that are clouding up your speech to arrive at the essence of what you want to say, so you can build a compelling case for it.

How Does Your Audience Feel About You and About Your Subject?

When you walk onstage or into a conference room, people are evaluating your credibility and authority as a speaker. Are you speaking to an audience that is already familiar with your background, or are you addressing a new audience with no idea of who you are? Are you speaking to friends, foes, or undecideds? This information will determine what you say, and how.

One female client I worked with was about to turn fifty. The good news and bad news was: she barely looked thirty. I don't have to tell you why this was good news. Why was it bad news? Because the moment she walked into a room, people assumed she was a junior staffer. She came up with phrases she could put in her introduction that mentioned her "twenty-plus years of experience in this industry" and served as a signal to her audience that she had the credibility to speak to them.

When I wrote and delivered speeches for the Consulate General of Israel in Boston, it was essential to understand how my audience felt about the Middle East conflict. Were they pro-Israel or anti-Israel? Would I be walking into a room full of people who were going to welcome me or reject me before I even said a word? Understanding this would help me prepare for the kinds of questions they would ask and to frame my message in a more inclusive way. If I knew the audience could be hostile to my message, then I could phrase my arguments in a way that took their concerns into account; I could potentially neutralize some of their questions before we got to the Q&A, thereby making the Q&A session more productive. Chapter 10 will give us more tools for handling questions.

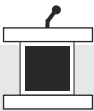
How Do You Research Your Audience?

There are numerous ways you can research your audience in advance of the speech. Talk to the event organizer to get a sense of why they

invited you to speak. Talk to people who represent the audience. Before all our speeches and training programs, my team and I interview potential audience members to understand the organization's culture, its expectations, and how it has reacted in the past to speakers. Spend time on their website and search for recent news about the organization and its industry.

If you've been invited to speak to a group at one of their regular meetings, attend a meeting in advance. That's what I *should* have done with one particular speech. I was invited to speak at a monthly leadership meeting in the DC area. The organizer briefed me on his expectations: tell them your story, and focus on one particular topic. We agreed that I would talk for about twenty minutes and then make it interactive, even though I *normally* use interaction immediately in my speeches and workshops. During the speech, I could tell that I was losing people. They seemed distant, and I could feel them judging me while I spoke. In a survey afterward, people said, "You should make your speeches more interactive; that's what we expect in these monthly meetings." I was so frustrated. Had I attended even one of these meetings beforehand, I would have known the flow and format.

When you understand your audience, what language they speak, and how they feel about your subject, you can start to craft a message that will resonate with them and inspire them to take action. You will *speak their language*. And if they can understand you, then they are much more likely to listen to you.



In anticipation of your upcoming speech or presentation, take time to analyze the audience and find out as much information as you can about their interests, needs, and goals.

2. WHAT IS YOUR GOAL?

In her book *On Speaking Well*, Peggy Noonan says that every speech has a job to do. “Figure out what the job of your speech is and go do it.”³

Have you ever sat through a boring presentation with no end in sight, wondering where it was going and how it was relevant to you? *How many times* have you sat through such a presentation? Through this book, we’ll make sure you’re not one of those speakers.

Every speech is an opportunity to touch people, to educate them, to inspire them, and to influence their behavior for the better. Before you start to write the speech, determine what you want its outcome to be. What do you want people to *do* after hearing you speak? Determine your intended outcome and build toward it in the speech.

Do you want constituents to vote for you?

Do you want venture capitalists to invest in your business?

Do you want prospective clients to buy from you?

Do you want funders to donate to your nonprofit and open doors to their wealthy friends?

Do you want people around the world to know what is going on in your country?

You might decide to *start* the speech with the goal in mind: “I’m standing before you today because I hope to earn your vote in November.” Or you might *end* your speech with a clear call to action: “And so, I ask for your vote at the polls in November. Tell your friends and family how important this election is to their future and the future of our country.”

I’ve judged a number of startup competitions and heard hundreds of business pitches. Excited entrepreneurs will stand up and make a persuasive case for a compelling business model based on groundbreaking new technology. But sometimes they will leave off the most important part: the “ask.” They fail to say exactly what they need and what they will do with it. The more precise you are with your ask, the easier you make it for people to give you what you want.

In addition to strengthening your opening and closing sentences, having a clear goal helps you determine the content you use in your speech.

If your goal is to build trust with the audience, then what information will demonstrate your ethics? You could include a personal story about a time you learned the value of integrity.

If your goal is to raise money from investors, then what information can you provide that highlights your early success and the promise of your product or service? Find those stories, anecdotes, or outcomes.

If your goal is to open people's eyes to a business threat that no one has considered, what evidence should you provide that shows them that the signs are all around them? Look for statistics, trends, or predictions.

What Are the Audience's Barriers to Action?

Professor Marshall Ganz of the Harvard Kennedy School teaches about the importance of understanding people's barriers to action, especially when fostering social change. When you determine the goal of your speech, try to determine your audience's barriers to action. What's holding them back? Could it be politically risky to adopt this new policy? Are you asking people to do something that will make them look foolish in front of their friends and colleagues? Do people lack the money to give? Are you asking people to do something they simply don't have the time to do? Understanding what is holding your audience back helps you come up with a realistic and actionable goal.

For instance, if you are speaking at a political rally, think of some easy steps your audience members can take. Instead of asking them to become full-time volunteers for your campaign, ask them to follow you on social media and share your content with their followers. Ask them to bring a friend to the next rally or make a small donation. The easier you make it for people to take action, the more likely they are to take that action.

How Do You Want People to Feel?

In thinking about the goal of your speech, ask yourself how you want people to feel at the end. Do you want them to feel inspired and uplifted? Challenged and determined? Knowledgeable and ready?

Nearly all my team's workshops end with a survey requesting feedback from the audience. The most important question on that survey is: "How do you feel after this workshop?" The answers to that question help us gauge the success of that workshop. If people respond with: tired, overwhelmed, or hungry, then we have some work to do to make the workshop more engaging. Luckily, people usually respond with: confident, inspired, or empowered. Those responses remind me of the power of these workshops and reinforce my commitment to help others.

Where Can You "Give the Work Back"?

As speakers, we are tempted to walk into a room ready to present all the answers to a particular challenge. We sit in our office, think about the challenge, and develop a solution that we then present to our colleagues to take action. You feel this pressure especially when you're presenting to people you lead. However, when the solution requires other people taking action, then the more you include those people in the solution, the more committed they will be.

I once worked with an executive who needed to address a core group of individuals within his organization. The head of the organization had just chastised this group, and now this executive was dealing with the aftermath. As we prepared the content of the speech, we realized that he couldn't just walk in there and present a solution. The managers themselves probably had valuable ideas on how to find a solution. So instead of planning a formal speech to this group, we drafted a *conversation starter* that demonstrated his faith in those managers and his belief that they had all the tools they needed to find a solution. He then opened the meeting up for them to discuss ideas and together talk about how to move forward.

In their book *Leadership on the Line*, my professor Ronald Heifetz from the Harvard Kennedy School and his co-author, Marty Linsky, call this “giving the work back.”⁴ Instead of the stoic leader trying to come up with the perfect solution to a challenge facing an organization or community, they talk about including the community itself in finding the solution. You give the work—finding a solution—back to the people who are most likely to have the best answers. This strategy helps you solicit ideas from people on the ground, receive critical feedback, empower others to speak up, and gain valuable buy-in. As we discussed earlier, giving a speech is not just to impart information; it’s to empower people to work together to solve a challenge. Before you speak, look at ways to bring others into your leadership strategy to make your message more impactful.



In anticipation of your upcoming speech, think about the goal of the speech. What do you want people to do and feel? How can you bring them into the solution? Write that down.

3. WHY YOU?

What gets you out of bed in the morning? What made you choose your line of work? What made you volunteer for this particular cause? Why do you do what you do? In other words, *Why you?*

Why you? is the single most powerful question you can ask yourself when preparing a speech or presentation. This is where you put aside the bureaucracy of your job, the politics of your cause, or the dysfunction of your office, and determine the sense of purpose that guides your actions.

It's not "So I can make more money" or "So I can get promoted" or "So I can look good in front of my boss." It's deeper than that. And you might have to ask yourself this question repeatedly to get the underlying answer.

In one of our leadership communication training programs, my team and I coach the sales managers of a financial institution. I was helping one particular mid-level manager prepare for an upcoming sales call. I asked her, "Why you? Why do you do what you do?"

She responded, "Well, I like serving others."

"Why?"

"Because I believe in service."

"Why?"

"Because service is important to me."

"Why?"

"Because that's what my parents taught me."

"Tell me more."

"Growing up, my parents ran their own business. Every single day, I saw them get up early to serve their customers, putting others' needs before their own. I think about that experience every day when I wake up, and I want to teach that to my children as well. That's why I do what I do." *A-hah!*

Do you see how we had to dig down a few layers there? We had to get past the generic answer to arrive at the underlying drivers of her behavior.

In another training program, one woman got straight to the point when she said, "My father sold insurance, and every day he came home happy. When it was time to choose a career, I chose to follow in his footsteps. That's why I do what I do."

You'll notice a lot of the *Why you?* comes back to family and early childhood. You might think it's unprofessional to share a personal story in a business setting. But we are not robots; we are human beings doing business with other human beings. We are driven by personal motivations, and we have values that guide our actions. When you share those motivations with others, even in a business setting, you connect on a personal level and you build trust.

One of the best places to include your *Why you?* is in the beginning of your speech or presentation. Imagine using the story about growing up in a family-owned business when you are pitching a small business prospect. Using that story, the prospect might think, “Yes, this person understands where I am coming from. I can trust this person.”

There are many different advantages to having a *Why you?*

It helps you choose language that is authentic to you. It’s hard to sound authentic when you are parroting corporate jargon. *Why you?* brings out your natural language and makes your speech more genuine.

It animates your body and voice. In Chapter 6, we will learn how body language and vocal tone can complement your message. When you truly believe in your message, that sense of purpose animates your body and voice naturally.

It builds your confidence. Both young professionals and seasoned executives will confess to a lack of confidence when speaking. What if others in the room know more than I do? What if the audience is questioning my authority to speak? Connecting with your *Why you?* reinforces your credibility and your authority.

I remember a young woman from Egypt in one of my workshops at Harvard. She had written a very general speech about the dangers of revolutions. She was too nervous to speak, and finally asked me in front of the class: “Why would anybody want to listen to me? I’m only nineteen years old.”

I responded to her: “You have lived through a revolution. You have more personal credibility than someone with a PhD in the subject.” She thought about that for a moment, then stood up and gave one of the most passionate, personal speeches I have ever heard, telling her own story. She had to give herself permission to speak.

Why you? is the most powerful question you can ask when preparing a speech, presentation, or conversation. It centers you, calms you, and helps you connect with a sense of purpose.

Sometimes *Why you?* can be hard to find.

I remember coaching a man who worked in real estate development. I knew this was an engaged, passionate individual with a fabulous sense of humor. But as he stood up to practice a presentation to a community board, he changed completely. His shoulders slumped, his smile drooped into a grimace, and he sighed loudly while leaning on one hip and weakly gesturing at the slides behind him. He was afraid that he was a boring speaker. And actually, *he was*. So we worked through the Three Questions, and when we arrived at *Why you?* he came to a startling realization. I asked him why he was passionate about his work. It turns out, *he wasn't*. He hated his job. He mistrusted his boss. He didn't like the industry. He wasn't a boring speaker, he was just *bored*.

If you are bored with your subject or if you hate your job, it's going to be very difficult to give a powerful, authentic speech. And in those cases, you do have a couple of options. You can change careers, as my friend did. He wound up quitting his job and pursuing his dream to revitalize an abandoned building in his city. But maybe you have three kids to support, college bills, and a mortgage. So instead of searching for what you're passionate about, think about what you *like* about your work.

Working with investment bankers, I sometimes find resistance to the word "passion." They'll say, "I work hundred-hour weeks in a high-stress environment. I'm not just doing it for the money, but I wouldn't exactly say I'm passionate about it. I *do* like being able to solve problems for my clients. It's like a puzzle, and I like putting together the pieces of the puzzle." That works.

You can find your "*Why you?*" in a few different ways. Ask yourself:

- Why do you care about your audience or about the occasion of the speech?

- Why do you care about your subject or your organization?
- What are you proud of in your work?

How will you know when you find the answer that resonates? You'll know, because you'll feel it and think, "Yes, that's the thing I'm looking for."



Now that you've researched your audience and determined the goal of your speech, ask yourself "*Why you?*" Speak it out loud before you write it down. Ask it a few times to go deeper into your motivation, and then try to explain it further. Share it with a trusted friend or colleague. You'll know when you've found it.

DETERMINING YOUR MAIN MESSAGE

Once you've asked yourself the Three Questions, you're ready to determine the main message of your speech. In fact, now it should be much easier to arrive at the message.

Imagine an audience member leaving your speech. She goes into an elevator, and someone asks her, "What was that speech about?" Her answer should be your main message. The main message should be relevant and compelling to your audience; what will they get out of the speech? Be explicit.

"In today's presentation, I'll show you how to improve client satisfaction in a way that helps you retain more clients, get more referrals, and exceed your sales goals."

“Every single one of us will feel the effects of climate change, and we have to act before it’s too late.”

“If we work on our company culture, then business growth will follow.”

When you focus on a single message, you increase the power of that message. When you throw in five different messages, you dilute each one.



Write your main message in one sentence and read it out loud. It can be a compound sentence, but keep it short and simple. What are you going to talk about, and why is it important to your audience?

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