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How to Deliver a Graduation Speech

You've finally graduated and have the prestigious honor of delivering the class's graduation speech. You're literally the voice of the class. Before your quake and quiver about that responsibility, remind yourself of how lucky you are. The truth is that when you've written an awesome graduation speech, delivering it in front of your peers, parents, and teachers is an experience that you'll never forget. Here are some tips, pointers, and suggestions on delivering a knock-out graduation speech.

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Sample Middle School Graduation Speech



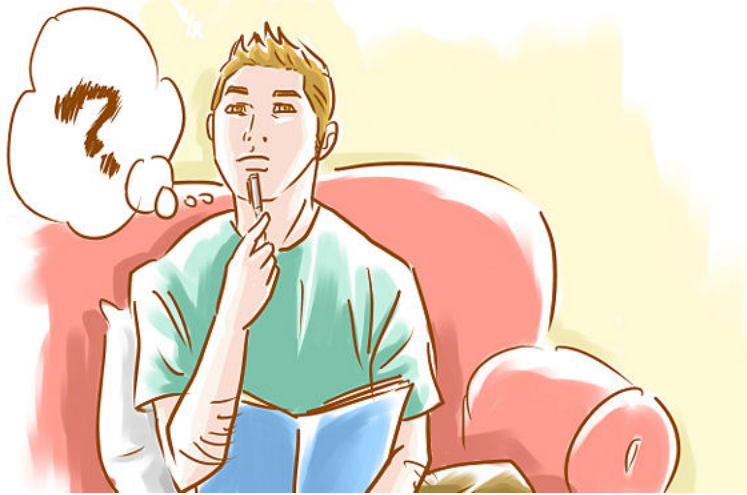
Sample High School Graduation Speech



Sample College Graduation Speech

Writing Your Graduation Speech

- 1 Brainstorm about what your experience in school has meant to you.** You've been in school for quite a while now. Ask yourself: What has this experience taught me, and maybe others, about life, about success, and about growing up along the way?



Some other questions you might ask yourself as a way to brainstorm ideas:

How have I changed since I started this level of school? How might other classmates have changed since they started?

What is the most important lesson I can take away from my time in school?

What are some success stories that happened during our time in school?

What are some of the challenges we face in the next leg of our journey, and how are we better prepared to overcome those challenges now that we're here?

- 2 Start to develop a theme.** You want your graduation speech to have a theme. Your theme can be very specific or very broad, but you want a theme in order to tie everything together. Without a theme, it can seem like you're just reminiscing about your time, and there's no *lesson* or *moral* your speech. Some common themes include:



Adversity. Adversity is the challenges that you as a group overcame in order to get where you are now. Maybe one of your classmates got diagnosed with cancer, and taught the rest of the class how to fight, not just a disease like cancer, but any obstacles that come your way. This is adversity.

Maturity. An especially good theme for high school students, maturity is about becoming an adult and taking responsibility. Perhaps you can talk about how young and green most Freshman were when you started, and how Seniors now have grown into shining examples of people who are adults, not because they need to be, but because they want to be.

Life lessons. School is a microcosm for life. That's a fancy way of saying that school helps teach people about life in general. School teaches you that hard work pays off, that there's more to learning than memorizing equations, that what you do outside the classroom is just as important as what you do inside, and that the friends you make are the glue that keeps you together.

- 3 Think about the structure of your speech.** The structure is where you place each part in the speech so that what you're saying makes sense.



Consider using the **burger method**. The top bun is your introduction; the patty is your ideas in paragraph form; and the bottom bun is your conclusion. Use a lot of ketchup, mayonnaise, and other condiments: They are your jokes, but remember that too much mayonnaise can ruin an otherwise good burger.

- 4 Start the introduction with something catchy.** It can be an interesting quote, fact, story or even a good joke about your school or class. Whatever it is, it needs to grab the attention of your audience. This means it needs to be relevant and catchy. Perhaps start off with something like this:



"I remember when we all filed into this room four years ago. We looked young, like we had just walked out of bed. And while all of us now look older, I see that most of us still look as sleepy as we did on that fateful day."

"I don't want to alarm you, but the class of 20— has a serious problem. It's not a financial problem. It's not an intellectual problem. It's an attitude problem. The class of 20— has a problem being awesome."

- 5 Make the middle of your speech interesting and remember to tie it in with your theme.** Start off strong. Put your best idea in right in the beginning to hook people in.

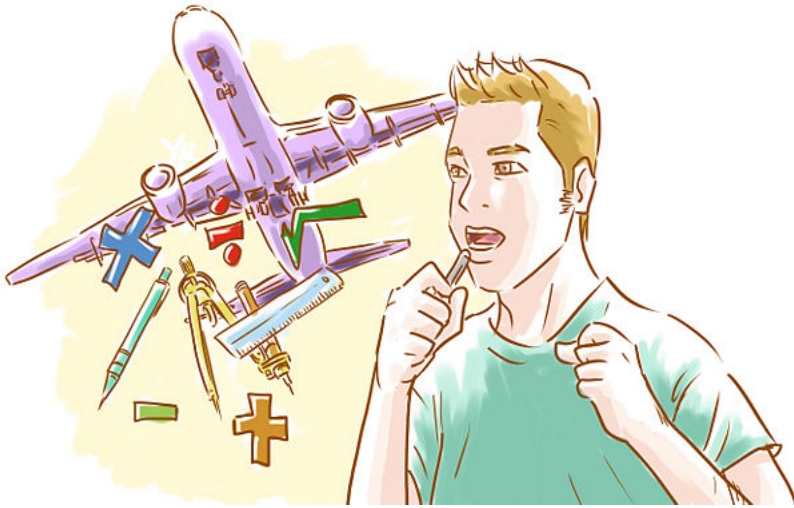


Make it interesting by saying something unexpected. If you're talking about facing adversity, everyone expects you to talk about tests, dating/relationships, and time management. Why not talk about something unexpected? Talk about how grades aren't always a sign that you have learned, maybe, or about how hard it is to let teachers let their guard down. Surprise your audience in novel ways.

Make sure your theme is never far away. Ask yourself: How does this paragraph relate back to my theme? If it doesn't relate, ask yourself why it's there.

- 6 Use your conclusion to draw a lesson.** Take your theme and ask the question *So what?* What can we

learn from the theme? This will be your lesson. Some lessons might sound a little something like this:



"In conclusion, high school has taught us that the grades that we earn aren't as important as the education that we receive. We earn a grade for taking a History test. We get an education for understanding why slavery is immoral. We earn a grade for taking a math test. We get an education for understanding that mathematical models can help us fly. We earn a grade for writing an English essay. We get an education for understanding that words are poems and poems are beautiful."

"When I think of our class, I don't think of any one person, I think of a community of workers, a family. A community has a certain responsibility, and as of yet, we have never forgotten that responsibility. As we walk off into the wider world today, let us not forget the responsibility that we carry both as members of this community, and as citizens of the world."

Delivering Your Graduation Speech

- 1 Speak slowly.** When you get up in front of lots of people, with your heart beating and your mouth dry, it'll be tempting to speed things up. Good speeches, however, are almost always delivered slowly, with force and feeling behind each word. Remember to slow down.



Listen to a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the most effective public speakers ever, and pay attention to how slowly he speaks. Slow speeches sound really good because they let the audience process what is being said.

Practice delivering your speech into a voice recorder and listen to the recording. You'll see that even when you *think* you're speaking slowly, it comes out a lot quicker than you imagine. There's always an opportunity to slow down.

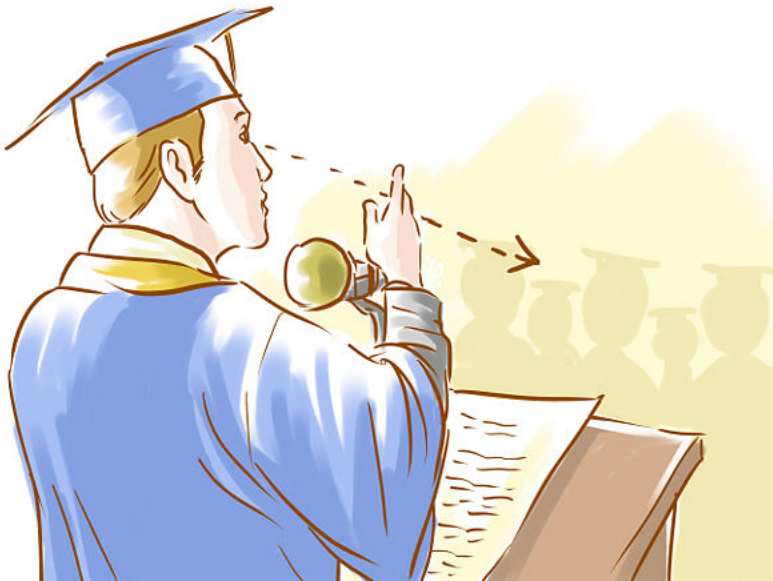
- 2 Pause for effect.** Don't be afraid to take a breath or two after you've finished a sentence. Give the audience time to make sense out of what you're saying. Pause after you deliver a really heartfelt sentence so that the meaning of the sentence can sink in.



- 3 Have the speech memorized, mostly.** Have the speech memorized so that you're not just looking down at your notes, reading off of a piece of paper. Reading off of a piece of paper can make the speech sound robotic, robbing it of all the natural rhythm and flow of the language.



- 4 **Make good eye contact with your audience.** Making good eye contact will allow you to grab the audience not just with your words, but also with your eyes and with your presence. This is a really important part of public speaking that is easily overlooked because it is so hard to master.



Scan the audience every once in a while. If you're reading your speech, you'll obviously spend a lot of time looking at your paper. When you finish a sentence, however, look up from the dais and scan the people in the audience. This will help you catch your breath.

Don't be afraid of focusing on one person for a short while. It's not uncommon for a speaker to lock eyes with a person in the audience for two, three, or four seconds. (Four seconds is a *really* long time when you're alone on a podium!) Don't do it all the time, but try to do it every once in a while.

- 5 **Don't worry about mess-ups.** If you mess up a line, don't worry about it or apologize. Get the line right and move on. The less you labor over your mistakes (which you will make; everyone does), the less they'll be noticed.



- 6 **Put feeling into your voice.** Don't ramble on in a monotone voice for eight minutes or you'll put everyone to sleep. Get excited about your speech, and let your excitement bleed into your voice. Mix up the volume, pitch, and speed of your voice for an even better delivery.

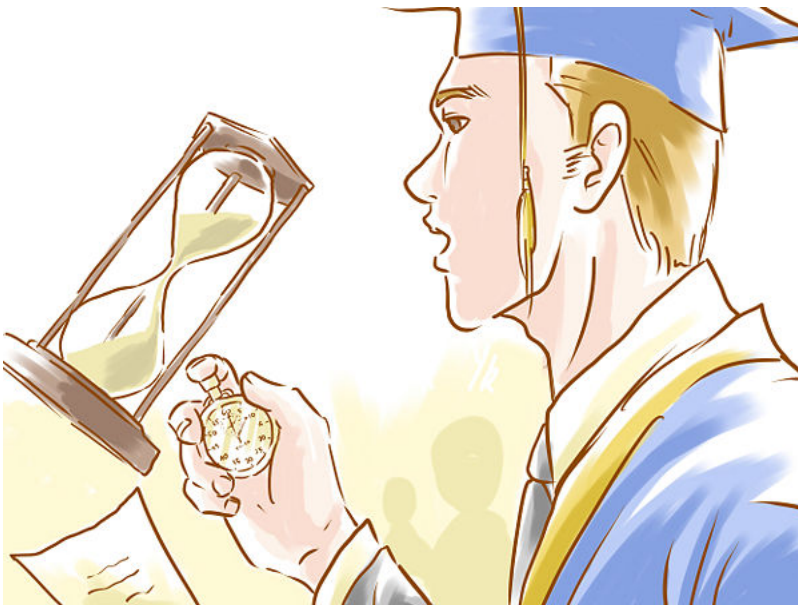


- 7 **Be confident, not cocky.** Be confident in your ability to make people laugh, to help them understand you better, to inspire them to be better people and to realize their full potential. You're delivering this speech for a reason, right? Trust in the people who trust in you and reward them for their trust.



If you're getting nervous, try out the old public speaking trick of imagining someone in the audience being naked. Don't fixate on it, but imagine it. It will help rake away some of the butterflies and allow you to concentrate on delivering a more confident speech.

- 8 Practice your speech ahead of time.** Practicing your speech ahead of time, perhaps on a few trusted friends, will do two things:



It will get you in the habit of what works in the speech and what doesn't. There's still time to change that joke that no one understands, or focus more on that part that your friends really like.

It will help you memorize the speech, making you less nervous and giving you better presence.

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