

Contest participants share sure-fire ways to create a humorous speech.

The Humorous Speech Contest is a popular Toastmasters event. Who doesn't like listening to a funny speech? A problem that clubs often face is persuading members to participate as speakers. Toastmasters who are happy to take part in the International Speech Contest all too often will pass on performing a humorous speech, saying, "Oh, I can't think of anything funny to talk about."

Make Them Laugh

By William H. Stevenson, III

The truth is, humorous topics are *everywhere!* We've gathered a few pointers from recent participants in Humorous Speech Contests on how to come up with a funny topic and develop that idea into a speech.

The Funniest Subject: You

Comedians have always known that if you poke fun at yourself, people will laugh. Often all you need to do is exaggerate actual events a little, and sometimes the simplest ideas are the funniest. In the 2009 District 30 contest, Bruce Jin of Saturday Morning Workout Toastmasters in Aurora, Illinois, gave a speech about his name. "In Chinese my name, Jin Yu, means 'goldfish,'" he explains. "When I tell people stories about my name they laugh. So I made a speech about it."

Jin's speech began with recollections of his boyhood. "I asked my Mom: Why did you not name me Shark? Or Dolphin? Some big fish?" His mother told him to count his blessings. She could have named him Crawfish. When Jin moved to the United States, he found that his name caused problems. "When someone called out, 'You, Jin!' I thought, No, its Jin Yu." At the end of the speech he recounted how he gave in to the inevitable and changed his name, choosing something similar – Bruce Jin.

You don't need a funny name to poke fun at yourself. "Finding ideas is not that difficult," says Nga Nguyen of Harris SpeakEZ club in Melbourne, Florida. "As Toastmasters,"



she says, “we like to talk, and we forget how to listen. Just watch how people around you go about their business. The ideas are everywhere.”

Nguyen got the idea for her most recent humorous speech on a trip to the mall, where she noticed how obsessed contemporary culture is with looking young. To turn this idea into a speech, she made herself the subject of most of the jokes – focusing on how she went to ridiculous lengths to turn back the clock.

Her “Prime Time” speech was organized using the classic framework of introduction, main ideas and conclusion, with three ludicrous “how-to-look-young” ideas supplying most of the laughs. “People got a kick out of my idea on how to create an instant facelift,” recalls Nguyen. “I showed them how I tie my hair into a pony tail with a hair tie, and then pull the hair really tight, to create the effect of a facelift.” Nguyen’s careful speech construction illustrates one of the benefits of entering Humorous Speech Contests: They challenge Toastmasters

to craft well-organized speeches with transitions so smooth and effortless that the audience hardly notices.

Use Battle of Sexes for Comedic Barbs

Personal experience is a rich vein of topics that everyone can mine. The battle of the sexes has always supplied material for comics. Angie Palmer, a Toastmaster in Ohio, exploited this theme in a speech on the idiosyncrasies of her marriage. “It just came naturally,” she says. “It’s the day-to-day life, like seeing how my husband stacks dishes in the sink so he can put more in there instead of washing them. Plus, he made fun of me during the previous Humorous Speech Contest, and I thought it was about time for me to put him on the spot.”

Without her husband’s speech to goad her on, Palmer might never have tried her hand at competing. “That was my first attempt at a humorous speech,” says the Chinese native. “I never thought I could do it because jokes are so culture-specific. But I decided to

A Fast and Fun Humor Resource

If you're looking for tools to help with your humorous speech – or just something to put you in a funny mood – try the Museum of Humor at www.museumofhumor.com. The Web site was developed by humorist Malcolm Kushner, author of the book *Successful Presentations for Dummies*.

While the site's dated graphics could use an update, it offers a wealth of resources and even a free e-zine, offering funny quotes to use in your presentations.

First, take a look at the Museum of Humor's "Resources" page that takes you to various Web sites offering amusing cartoons, widgets and information. To get there, click "Resources" at the left side of the museum's homepage screen. The resources you'll find range from odd news to an anagram generator. The generator is particular fun, as you can type in any word and generate a list of anagrams from its letters. For example, type in "speaking" and a list of 100 anagrams appears, with dandies such as "Ask Peg In" and "Apes King."

The site also offers a rhyme generator. One click takes you to **Rhymezone.com**, a fruitful spot for helping you create wordplay, witty tunes and snappy remarks.

People can do some pretty funny things, so if you're looking for anecdotes to share about human behavior, this online museum – with its variety of odd news links – can lead you to a wealth of stories.

The resources page is just one part of the museum. If you want to learn more and see examples and tips from the humor professionals, take a trip to the site's library... by clicking the "Library" button on the left side of the homepage screen. Articles, sample sitcom scripts, interviews, how-to tips and plenty of research are available. There are even some free books to download.

For some extra fun, try the "Exhibits" link from the homepage. There, you'll find a generator that can convert any number into its weight or size in penguins. Be advised that the penguins are metric. See, that's funny. And you can be funny too! See it for yourself at the Museum of Humor.

give it a try and I'm glad I did. I went all the way to the division contest."

John Zimmer, an attorney in Geneva, Switzerland, also draws on marital dynamics for material. In the 2009 Humorous Speech Contest, he playfully offered a strategy for men facing an angry wife: Use the Toastmasters evaluation technique. The next time your wife rails at you, Zimmer suggested husbands should calmly evaluate her "performance" – taking notes, offering positive reinforcement and pointing out ways she can improve. This "reasonable, analytic approach" will completely take the sting out of her fury, he concluded.

The speech went over so well that Zimmer won the contest for District 59. He also won the district contest in 2008, with a speech that included an Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonation.

When it comes to delivering humorous speeches, Zimmer recommends choosing topics that audiences can identify with, such as relationships, raising children, financial issues, moving to another home and awkward travel experiences. But be aware that these topics are common. "The challenge is to come up with a unique angle," Zimmer says.

Comedy in Current Events

American humorist Will Rogers found his best material by reading the morning paper. He said a joke can be half as funny but still get a laugh if it's true. Toastmasters can use topical humor, too. In the fall of 2009, Canadian

Toastmaster Peter Roundhill of Seymour Speakers in Vancouver, British Columbia, saw the approaching Vancouver Olympics as an opportunity for a humorous speech that was too good to miss.

From behind the lectern he donned a fake pig's snout and delivered a pun-filled speech titled "The *Olimpigs* are coming!" He promoted a suspiciously similar sporting event soon to take place in the city of *Hamcouver* featuring ice *boggy* games and *pigure* skating competitions. Roundhill's offbeat style made him the winner of his district contest. How did he get the idea for the speech? "I like cartoon-drawing," he says. "In August of last year I started to work on ideas for a pig-themed cartoon. The club contest was in September so I decided I would try out some of my humor in the contest."

As Roundhill's example shows, combining personal interest with a topical subject can result in a very successful speech. Steve Cerve of the Talk of Lincolnshire club in Carol Stream, Illinois, is another member who went that route. "My speech was about my old car," he says. "My wife and kids have been pleading with me for years to get rid of it and they really put the pressure on me during the recent Cash for Clunkers program. So my speech was about the little quirks of my car, and how I had become so emotionally attached to it that I couldn't trade it in."

Cerve ended his speech in a memorable fashion. After concluding that Cash for Clunkers just wasn't for him, he ripped off his shirt in Superman fashion to reveal a T-shirt underneath with a big red heart that read: *I Love My Clunker!*

Cerve has given many humorous speeches since joining Toastmasters in 2003. “All of my speeches are based on personal stories that I’ve shared with family and friends,” he says, “events that occur at home, at work or on vacation. If something funny does happen, make a note of it, so you don’t forget what it was. Then you can begin to craft a story around it. My stories have one theme – like the one about my old car – and I’ll limit the story to three or four main points so I don’t get too detailed and overwhelm the audience.”

Show Them You’re Funny

Anything can be funny if you give it a twist. One way to do this is to use visual aids. Peter Roundhill donned a plastic pig snout, Nga Nguyen twisted a hair tie and Steve Cerve wore a customized T-shirt.

A humorous speech can be organized entirely around visual aids. Bob Chikos of Crystal Lake Toastmasters in Crystal Lake, Illinois, gave an award-winning speech on an unusual subject. “I really am a map nerd,” he says. “I’ll gaze at maps of a random state and dream about how I would change things if I drew them.” At the start of his speech Chikos unveiled a colorful series of posters to illustrate his plan to improve the United States by re-drawing its state borders. For example, he would donate a bit of West Virginia to Maryland to keep its panhandle from falling off and create the new state of Yoopee from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

Chikos finds his best ideas come when he goes for walks. “I don’t take a radio or an iPod,” he says, “but I do take a mini tape recorder. The solitude, combined with the oxygen intake, is a breeding ground for ideas.”

Chuck the Joke Book

Good humorous speeches don’t come from the Internet or joke books. A familiar joke isn’t funny. And if *you’ve* read it or heard it, chances are that people in the audience have too. Imagine giving a humorous speech and then sitting down and watching the next speaker give a speech with the *same* jokes. I’ve seen this happen. “I never use a joke book,” says Angie Palmer. “The most successful part of the speech, in my opinion, is in the originality.”

“I didn’t need a joke book,” adds Roundhill. “Things just kept popping into my head. Once I started thinking about pig jokes and porcine word puns, they just kept coming.”

Keep it Clean

None of the speakers interviewed for this article use “blue” humor, profanity or jokes that might be in questionable taste. Humor of this sort really has no place in Toastmasters or a speech contest. Although it’s acceptable for a speaker to make gentle fun of an ethnic group




she or he belongs to, anything beyond that is risky. The fundamentals of telling a joke – timing, set-up and delivery – are the same whether the gag is clean or dirty. The speech competition gives everyone a chance to develop these techniques in a non-threatening environment.

Reap the Rewards of Contests

The benefits from Humorous Speech Contests are many. For one thing, they’re fun. They are also challenging, offering speakers the chance to use their skills and imagination to craft and deliver the sort of speeches that will afford instant feedback. Humor is a tool worth honing, because it adds great value to speeches.

The skills developed in these contests can be applied in settings outside of Toastmasters, as Melanie Ghazarian of the Conejo club in Thousand Oaks, California, discovered. “I give sales presentations at work,” she says. “When you are the first presenter after lunch it can be a challenge to keep the audience awake. Using humor helps.”

Enjoy yourself trying a few of these techniques. Many subjects can serve as fodder for your material. There are also many ways to construct and deliver your speech. Don’t be afraid to try storytelling narratives and parodies of serious speeches – just two of the forms that can shape and organize a really funny presentation. And when you take part in a Humorous Speech Contest, you’ll realize that all the effort was worth it. These events give us a chance to have fun, experiment and discover a style that works. 

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