



Commencement Speech Guidelines

The Extension School Commencement Speaker Prize competition is open to AA, ALB, and ALM graduates. The speech committee will review all submissions received at the beginning of April (check website for specific deadline) and choose a winner by the end of April. The prize recipient will receive \$1,000 and have the honor of delivering the prize-winning speech at the Harvard Extension School diploma awarding ceremony to an audience of 600+ fellow graduates, faculty, administrators, and guests.

In addition, ALB and ALM graduates are also eligible to compete for the Harvard University Commencement Parts Speaker Prize and deliver the prize-winning speech at the morning Commencement exercise in Harvard Yard to an audience of 30,000+. The application process begins February 1 and ends April 1. The University offers an Orators' Workshop in February (*Applicants are encouraged to attend this workshop even if they are only considering the Harvard Extension School speech competition*). For more information on the Commencement Parts Speaker Prize and the workshop, go to www.commencementoffice.harvard.edu.

If you are interested in participating in either or both competitions, you should seriously approach the task of preparing a speech by (a) starting early (e.g., December) and (b) reviewing the commencement speech guidelines. Starting early is imperative. The months before commencement are filled with final exam preparation or final thesis changes leaving little time for extracurricular writing. In addition, speech writing is not an easy or natural task; it has a style of its own. The guidelines supply pertinent information about this particular writing form and break down the writing tasks into manageable sections.

We encourage your participation and we hope you find the guidelines helpful. View copies of previous speeches published in our alumni magazine, the *Alumni Bulletin*, at www.extension.harvard.edu/alumni/publications/. Good luck.

Identify the Subject

Make sure your speech reflects your unique experience at Harvard Extension, including specific examples and vivid images. This does not mean that your speech must reveal extremely personal details; on the contrary, a topic that is too personal may make your audience uncomfortable. Do not choose a subject that is so broad that you cannot address it well; but also do not choose one that is so narrow that you run out of things to say about it. The Harvard Commencement Office suggests a subject that contains "reflections on important Harvard experiences, particularly ones which—for you—acquire a larger significance."

Shape Your Idea

Write down all the key words connected to your subject, then evaluate them and circle the words that are most legitimate as subtopics. Be sure you care enough about the subject to gather any additional information you may need and objectively analyze your findings—you must have a clear understanding of the subject in order to share your message with others.

Remember Your Audience

Your audience consists of people with disparate knowledge and experiences: students, alumni, professors, parents, spouses, siblings, grandparents, and children. Your responsibility is to keep all of them interested in your subject. Be aware of your word choice—don't speak too loftily. Also, you cannot assume that everyone knows all aspects of the University as well as you, so be mindful of your references.

Identify Your Goal

What do you want your audience to remember about your speech? How do you want them to feel at the conclusion of your speech? What action do you want to inspire them to take as a result of hearing your words? Keep these questions in mind when developing the style and message of your speech.

Write a Rough Draft

(Parts of the following outline are taken from *B's and A's in 30 Days*, Eric Jensen, Barrons, New York, 1997.)

Introduction (10% of speech)

- Grab the reader's interest with an unusual story, pertinent statistic, provocative question, or quotation. Do not make obvious statements that refer to what the essay is about, do not make apologies or use clichés. Avoid the following words/phrases, as suggested by the Harvard Commencement Office: crisis, crucial, realm, high calling, challenge, opportunity, dawn of a new day, on this planet, critical, decision, and incumbent upon.
- Introduce the topic. Be sure to cover the point of view you will take.

Background (20% of speech)

- Give a brief history of the topic, relaying only the most interesting and important aspects. Stick to the point.
- Explain any key events, terminology, or people.

Main Body (40% of speech)

- State important information and key arguments. Limit arguments to three or fewer.
- Use accurate, strong, passionate language.
- Present arguments in order from strongest to weakest, least controversial to most controversial, or some other standard order (e.g., chronological).

Strengthen your position (20% of speech)

- State other theories or viewpoints.
- Assess their weaknesses or strengths.
- Build a case to further strengthen your ideas.

Conclusion (10% of speech)

- Restate your theme or opinion.
- Do not introduce new ideas.
- Be clear and concise and conclude with a positive statement.

Practice

Read your speech aloud. You'll be able to hear awkward wording or moments when your sentiments don't ring true. Read it to others and ask them to comment on the content, too. Get feedback and rewrite the parts that need polishing.

Length

Your speech should be about 5 minutes in length. Keep in mind that you must read slowly and articulate your words clearly since you will be using a microphone. This means you must write concisely about your topic. Rewrite the speech to keep it within the acceptable time limit.