

# ***SPEAKER SUGGESTIONS***

## **Suggestions for Students**

There is no formula that can sum up what makes a successful Commencement speech, but it is possible to describe some of the qualities of such a speech, and also to specify some approaches that are generally to be avoided.

**Content.** A successful Commencement speech needs to convey a message that is specific to the speaker and that also has significance for a wide audience. It is natural to look to your own experience for inspiration, but while your life story or that of your family may have great meaning for you, it will not automatically resonate with an audience consisting largely of strangers. Similarly, experiences you have shared with the other members of your class or your school will be familiar to you and them, but may need to be explained if they are not to mystify others. Finally, a Commencement speech does not have to consist of personal reminiscences. It can also articulate a thesis or argue in favor of a position, especially one that the speaker regards as unfairly neglected or unpopular.

**Originality.** Some spark of originality is essential, but since genuinely new ideas are rare, originality is often achieved by approaching a familiar thought from an unexpected direction or expressing it in a way that feels freshly created. The original element may be a vivid image or metaphor that stimulates the audience's imagination and keeps their attention.

**Titles.** The title of your speech will appear in the Commencement program distributed to everyone in attendance, and it will also be announced by the University Marshal as she introduces you. A title that gets the audience's attention will make them more eager to listen to your speech; on the other hand, titles such as "The Value of a Harvard Education" or "Serving a Wider World" will tend to make the audience lose interest before you say a word.

**Clichés.** Clichés are expressions that are so often used as to sound trite (e.g., "Rome wasn't built in a day"); examples with a university setting would include "ivy-covered walls" and "the groves of Academe." Such expressions represent the opposite of original writing.

**Quotations.** An apt quotation can enliven a speech or help put across a point effectively. Too many quotations in a short speech, however, give the impression that the persons quoted, rather than the speaker, are doing most of the work. Furthermore, some quotations are so familiar as to constitute clichés (see above); for example, "we have nothing to fear but fear itself" (FDR) or "ask not what your country can do for you" etc. (JFK). Other often-quoted persons include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Winston Churchill; in general it is best to avoid quoting such figures unless you have uncovered one of their little-known gems.

**Humor.** Wit is a component of many successful Commencement speeches, but your role as a speaker is not merely to entertain, but also to prompt thought and reflection. Humor is most likely to be effective when it is inclusive; sarcasm and negative forms of humor will tend to alienate your audience rather than amuse them.