



What To Say When You Don't Know What to Say

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 53

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner](#)" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

Formal public speaking is when people are invited to come to hear what you have to say and for which you usually have plenty of time to prepare. Impromptu public speaking is when you are asked to say something of consequence at a moment's notice. For example, as a student during a class, as an employee during a company meeting, as a participant in a public forum, etc.

On the internet, you can find loads of tips and tactics for successfully handling impromptu speaking. Here we present a tactic you won't find on the internet because it was invented (or rather discovered) by Philip Yaffe, Ubiquity's very own communication consultant, and has never before been published.

What To Say When You Don't Know What to Say

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 53

by Philip Yaffe

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of public speaking: 1. the formal kind where you usually have plenty of time to prepare; and 2. the informational kind where you must speak impromptu (extemporaneously) where you have little or no time to prepare.

The conventional wisdom for properly structuring most formal public speeches is:

- Tell them what you are going to tell them
- Tell them
- Then tell them what you told them.

In other words, quickly let your audience know what you are going to talk about, then talk about it, then tell them what you said.

If you check the internet, you can find tons of principles and tips on how to do this to best advantage. However, if you look for principles and tips on how to speak impromptu (extemporaneously), you may find very little. Why? Because much of the advice you will find is not really about impromptu speaking at all. Almost all the suggestions assume that you have at least a bit of time (perhaps only a minute or two) to prepare yourself before you open your mouth. In such situations, other than counseling that you quickly make notes and try to define a structure before you get to your feet, the advice is often about general presentation skills, such as:

- Exude confidence
- Speak calmly and unhurriedly
- Keep good eye contact with the audience
- Use appropriate body language

What I am talking about is truly "impromptu," i.e., when you are called upon to instantaneously stand up and give your opinion on a topic just introduced or give your evaluation on what someone else has just said. This is an entirely different proposition.

Some years ago, I found a more germane approach. I wasn't looking for it; it just happened. On every occasion I have used it, it has worked a treat. I don't claim that it will work in all impromptu situations, however, it is worth bearing in mind.

But first, some background.

For a number of years, I was a member of Toastmasters International, a worldwide club with 360,000 members, dedicated to people helping each other improve their speaking skills.

At each meeting, we did a session of what are called "table topics." Basically, you are chosen at random and given a topic to speak on for a minimum of one minute and a maximum of two and a half minutes. You must begin speaking immediately; there is no preparation whatsoever. As a novice member, I dreaded the prospect. The first time it happened to me, I was lucky. The topic was something I already knew quite a bit about. I did my piece and then sat down.

There were usually eight table topic impromptu speeches given at each meeting, each with a different topic. At the end of the meeting, the members were asked to vote on who gave the best impromptu speech. To my surprise, I was voted No. 2 out of the eight. The next time I was called on to do a table topic speech, again I was lucky because again the topic was something I knew quite a bit about. This time I was voted No. 1.

Then my luck ran out. This time the topic was something about which I had very little knowledge. So, when I stood up, I just started talking, hardly aware of what I was saying. After about two minutes, I finished my speech and sat down. When the members were asked to vote for the best table topic speech of the evening, I assumed that I would come far down on the list. To my amazement, I was again voted No. 1.

The same thing happened the next time I was asked to speak. Again, the topic was something about which I had very little knowledge. And once again I was voted No. 1.

The pattern continued. When I was given a topic I knew something about, I was not surprised to be voted the No. 1 or No. 2. However, when I was given a topic about which I knew very little, I was still voted No. 1 or No. 2.

So, what was happening? I analyzed this strange phenomenon as follows. When I was asked to speak on a topic about which I knew very little:

1. I simply started talking. It didn't really matter what I was saying, because most of the time I really didn't know what I was saying.
2. During this initial 30 seconds or so, my mind was searching to give the speech some direction.
3. Having decided on a theme, I began trying to turn my speech in that direction.
4. As I moved closer and closer to the end, the speech became clearer and clearer.
5. Whenever possible, the last thing I said appeared to be a ringing summation of everything I had said from the very beginning.

In short, my strong ending gave the impression that I knew what I was talking about from the very beginning, even when at the beginning I had no idea of what I was going to say.

I can't remember a time when this approach didn't work. In fact, I was once jokingly accused of somehow having learned what my topic would be in advance "because such a well-crafted presentation simply could not have been impromptu."

In short, in an impromptu speech, if you come to a clear, strong conclusion, people will likely forget how much you rambled at the beginning. Better yet, they will think that you knew exactly what you were doing from the very beginning even if they didn't immediately see where you were going (their fault, not yours).

I am not certain if this approach is a function of the individual or if it could work for everyone. All I know is, it has worked for me—sometimes with results well beyond any reasonable expectation.

For more conventional tips on how to handle impromptu speaking, I suggest the following resources:

- ["Impromptu Speaking in Business May Be Your Most Important Skill"](#)
- ["How to Give an Impromptu Speech, with Examples"](#)
- ["10 Top Tips for Delivering an Impromptu Speech"](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

DOI: 10.1145/3584952