



Jeff Davidson

How to Chop a Speech by Minutes at the Last Minute

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You're ready to give your 45-minute, after-luncheon keynote presentation. Lunch will be done in about 10 minutes and you're fully prepared, feeling energetic and rarin' to go. Then the host leans over to say the organization's president is going to make some unscheduled comments before you go on. The host thinks the president's remarks will last six to eight minutes, perhaps as long as 10 or 12 minutes. Keeping your best professional smile on your face, you realize that six or eight, even 12 minutes often becomes 15 or 20 minutes.

Lunch ends and the president stands up. He concludes his remarks 18 minutes later. The host is about to introduce you. You now have 27 minutes. Of course, you've had the previous 18 minutes to realize your time would be severely truncated — and to determine how to make the best of the situation.

1 First, don't make excuses when you're in front of the group. Don't say, "If I had more time," or, "Well, I had prepared for 45 minutes." This doesn't help you, the audience or your host. Simply use the time allotted in the best manner you can.

2 Well-prepared and seasoned speakers have already timed the different segments of their presentations, using a modular

approach that enables them to customize speeches for various groups. With this approach, they also know that if the "a-b-c" story is eliminated, they can save five minutes, and if the "d-e-f" suggestions are pulled, they'll save another three.

If you're not prepared in this manner, you can decide to simply give broader-brushed treatment to all the elements of your speech. In many instances, that will work just fine.

3 The situation is tougher if your speech is sequential in nature; in other words, the listener has to hear "a" and "b" stories to reach "c" and "d" conclusions and a powerful climax is based on everything preceding it.

In this case, carry a display timer with you (not a bad idea at any time), preferably one with a magnetic base you can attach to the lectern or table in front of you. I learned the hard way that a wristwatch just doesn't do the trick. It is hard to see — and you don't look good sneaking a peak at it during your speech. You can set a timer for any length of time and it will count down, showing how much remains, then beep. To avoid the beep, I set my timer for five minutes more than I have, knowing that I need to finish by the five-minute mark.

4 If it's within your desire and resources, during the course of your presentation, tactfully offer to make an additional handout available to cover the points you no longer have time to address or detail.

5 Strive to be the one speaker at the meeting or convention who gets the meeting back on schedule. If you were scheduled for 45 min-

utes but you're given 27, end on the button. Few speakers are penalized for speaking too little. Many lose the respect of their listeners for speaking too long. You can become a hero to the host or meeting planner, and possibly the larger group, by getting things back on track.

6 After the speech, don't mention the time truncation to the meeting planner, to audience members or in correspondence. Chances are your ability to make do with less time will be the subject of praise you receive from others. Dallas-based Patrick O'Dooley has spoken to many groups after lunch or dinner and on occasion has had his time cut short. He believes you should give your best, even if it's for 27 minutes. Often the audience doesn't realize the time difference.

7 Be compassionate. Maybe the president's 18 minutes bored people. People may need to use the restroom. Perhaps the morning activities were draining. Your 27 minutes — and the fact you finished on time — could be the bright spot in a person's day.

Don't underestimate the value of handling this situation well. You could experience a response similar to one I once received. I gave the post-luncheon keynote address at a national association's annual convention in Raleigh, N.C. Originally scheduled for 45 minutes, I effectively had 32 minutes. I quickly cut a few items and remained upbeat. Afterward, I was rewarded when the meeting planner stepped up to the microphone and said (on videotape, no less), "Well, I guess that was about the best after-lunch speech I've heard." ■