



Step-by-step guide to

Making a brilliant
Best man's speech

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Demystifying The Best Man's Speech

Let's start with the basics. In your speech you have to:

1. Say what a great guy the groom is
2. Say how wonderful the bride is
3. Say how pleased you are that they have found each other
4. Propose a toast

You can do that, right? That's all you have to do.

Bear in mind that your speech doesn't have to be long. In fact, it shouldn't be. Aim for five minutes, and certainly no longer than ten or twelve.

There is a common misapprehension about the role of the best man's speech. Type "best man speech" into Google and one of the first auto-complete options is "best man speech character assassination". This is not why you have been chosen to be best man. You are there to commend the groom to the guests and celebrate his marriage to the bride. This doesn't mean, of course, that you can't point out his foibles and eccentricities, or even embarrass him a little – that's what friends do – but the speech, like the day itself, is all about love.

Where to begin

Talk to the groom

The type of speech you give will be governed by the wedding. Talk to the groom to find out how formal an occasion it is likely to be. Ask him who else will be making speeches, what he wants you to include and, even more important, what he would prefer you didn't mention.

Don't start at the beginning

When writing anything, the toughest bit to get right is often the beginning. The beginning introduces what follows, both in terms of content and tone. But at the start of the writing process, you don't yet have the main body of the text; writing an introduction first therefore, is almost impossible.

Every writer has a fear of the blank page, but once you get going you'll soon realise that it's not a question of what to say, but what to leave out.

But how do you get going? You mine your raw material.

Gathering material

Start working on the speech as soon as you can. Keep a notebook or piece of paper with you at all times. If you work at a computer, keep a file on your desktop so you can jot down ideas as they come to you.

At this stage, no ideas are bad ideas, no matter how random they may seem. Don't worry if you can't see how or where a joke, fact, observation, or story might fit in the speech, just write it down. Gather as much material as possible.

Some ways to get started

Below are some ways you can get started. Use them as a way to look at the groom and his bride in a new way.

Name search

You're not digging for dirt here, but a LinkedIn or professional profile might provide an amusing contrast to the friend you met as a teenager. Also, a Google search will reveal anyone with an even vaguely similar name. Among them there's bound to be an interesting character you could "confuse" for your friend.

Name definitions

Look up first and surnames, the results might show up something interesting. If the groom's surname means, say, "powerful and god-like", you could always claim his first name means "not very".

Newspaper search

Look up the newspaper headlines for the day that the couple were born, met, or the day of their engagement.

- Look at "this day in history" for the same dates. Check out <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday>
- For an alternative take on the news on any given date, look at www.theonion.com or <http://newsthump.com>

Horoscopes

Horoscopes, depending on how seriously you take them, can provide an amusing or insightful take on people and dates.

- Look at the couple's birth charts
- See what the stars say about the couple's compatibility
- Make one up

Don't be afraid to bend or exaggerate the results to suit your purposes; don't let the literal truth get in the way of a good story.

Investigate – don't assassinate – the groom's character

Your speech should paint a true – if exaggerated – picture of the groom. Think about what makes him who he is; what makes him tick. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What's he like, both physically and as a character? List five words that describe him
- When did you first meet?
- What were your first impressions?
- What nicknames has he had – now and when he was growing up?
- What embarrassing things have you seen him do?
- What are the worst decisions he's made? It could be a dodgy haircut, unfortunate fashion phase, ill-thought-out prank, poor choice of holiday destination etc...
- What are his defining habits?
- What are his most common catch-phrases?
- What are his favourite things and obsessions? Think about his hobbies, favourite football team, bands, clothes, food, pastimes. (Think also how these have changed over the time you've known him.)
- To what lengths has he gone to pursue these enthusiasms?
- How has he changed since you've known him, and since he met his bride?
- What is he really good at?
- What noble and generous things has he done?
- What makes you proud to call him your friend?

Widening your search

You may well know the groom better than most people, but it will definitely enrich your speech if you ask other people for their impressions too. If you're a friend from school, talk to his friends from university, football or work. If you know the groom's family, talk to them; they are bound to know things about him that you don't.

Use the stag night

The stag night is a great opportunity to speak to the groom's other friends and family. Think in advance about what you want to ask; people's minds can go blank if you just say "tell me about Dave". Prepare some simple questions, including ones that look for positive attributes. If you ask several people the same questions the responses can give you a very quick impression of how your friend is seen by those who know him.

Also, be realistic. If it's like most stag parties, drink will be involved. Ask the questions early in the day and write the answers down.

Cross the aisle

If you know the bride, talk to her. Her perspective on the groom is likely to be insightful, and very different to your own. She can also give you interesting

behind the scenes information about the preparations for the wedding. If it's easier, talk to the bridesmaids.

The bride's point of view is likely to be very different not only to your own, but also to the groom's. You can make the most of this by playing a game of "Mr & Mrs". Ask them both, separately, obviously, the same questions, then compare and contrast their responses. Here are some examples:

- "Where did you first meet?"
- "What were you both wearing?"
- "What was your first impression?"
- "What was the first thing that you said to each other?"
- "What first attracted you?"
- "What sealed the deal? What made you fall in love with them?"
- "What is your favourite thing about them?"
- "What is their favourite thing about you?"

If their answers match perfectly it will be very sweet; if they don't, the comic possibilities are endless.

Talking about the bride

Your main focus in the speech is expected to be the groom, but telling stories that involve the bride will make the speech more inclusive. Two words of caution: firstly, the father of the bride and the groom will also talk about her, as will anyone else who is making a speech, so find out what they intend to say. Secondly, and I cannot stress this enough, do not embarrass her. It is her day and it is in no one's interest, least of all yours, to show her in anything other than the most flattering light.

The telegrams

Okay, so no one sends telegrams anymore but messages from those unable to attend the wedding can provide you with another great source of material.

People generally don't send messages until just before the wedding so if you can, get in touch and ask them specific questions that might reveal something about the bride or groom and their relationship with them.

Additional material

Jokes

If you come across a joke you find particularly funny and that you feel comfortable delivering, see if you can adapt it, changing the situation and the names to the wedding protagonists' so that it's more pertinent to the occasion.

While self-deprecation always goes down well, avoid jokes that put you or your public speaking ability down. Jokes like "You've just heard two excellent speeches; now I'm afraid you've got me," are not very funny and merely undermine your speech before you've even begun.

Quotes

Whether poignant or funny, a well-chosen quote can enhance your speech (see the links on the Resources page on www.weddingspeechguru.co.uk). However, as with any additional material, quotes work best if they complement the rest of the speech and are used sparingly. A speech that overly-depends on off-the-peg jokes and quotes will come across as lazy, and the audience will react accordingly.

Taste

While it's okay to be cheeky, you don't want to offend. Your speech must appeal to everyone in the room, or at the very least, not alienate anyone. Think about the sensibilities of the different ages and cultural backgrounds in the audience. It should go without saying that racist, sexist and homophobic jokes are not acceptable and will only make you look stupid.

Need more help?

If you would like one-to-one coaching on how to gather the material for your speech, please get in touch by email robin@weddingspeechguru.co.uk or via the website.

Writing the speech

Now you have gathered most of your material, it's time to start arranging it into some kind of order. Pull out all your notes and create a narrative. The word narrative is important as it reminds us that we are telling a story here.

Just as in any form of writing, the first priority is to get the first draft done. Don't concern yourself with grammar, sentence structure or spelling, just get it down.

Don't worry if the speech doesn't immediately jump off the page. In the words of one master storyteller, Ernest Hemmingway,

“The first draft of anything is shit”!

Once you have a first draft packed with raw material, it's time to expand and start structuring your speech.

One of the first things to do is to decide what to include and what to take out. You will want to keep the funniest stories, but be sure to consider how they illustrate what you want to say about the groom. Even if you have the world's most hilarious anecdote, if the groom comes across in a negative light, or includes inappropriate material like, for instance, mentioning the groom's ex-girlfriends, leave it out. Remember: there are no points for cruelty.

Let's revisit the basics, but now you've gathered your material you should be able to expand it a little.

1. Say what a great guy the groom is

This is the main body of the speech, where you use the stories and observations you have collected to paint a picture of the groom. Of course, much of your material will reveal embarrassing and ridiculous things he has done or said, but the subtext should be that he is a great guy.

The legendary US comedian, Richard Pryor, used to give the following advice to up and coming stand-ups: “Don't try to be funny; be truthful and funny will come”. It's the truths you can reveal about the groom that people will recognise and respond to with laughter.

Though you may well bend or exaggerate the truth for comic effect, the speech must be emotionally true. If the groom is hopelessly disorganised, the audience will react with laughter to a story about how, on his first important work trip abroad, he went to the wrong airport... on the wrong day ... without a passport... not just because it's funny but because they recognise it as saying something true about the groom's character.

2. Say how wonderful the bride is

Your friend is a lucky guy; he has convinced this amazing woman to marry

him. What makes her so special? What has he said to you about her? What (positive) changes have you noticed in him since they got together?

3. Say how pleased you are that they have found each other

This bit will probably be very short and will come at the end of the speech, but it needs to be heartfelt. You don't want to be reading it out. As well as saying how pleased you are that the couple have married, you might also add what an honour it is for you to be the best man at their wedding.

4. Propose a toast

You have already made the speech; the toast should be short and sweet: "Ladies and gentlemen, the bride and groom".*

**It is traditional for the best man to toast the bridesmaids. But bearing in mind that you will have spent most of your speech talking about the groom and his bride, it has always struck me as rather odd to suddenly toast the bridesmaids. That said, the bridesmaids do need to be thanked. Check with the groom what he wants from you. If he is okay with it, I would recommend including them in the early parts of the speech. Pay tribute to their beauty and the job they have done and rather than proposing a toast, ask for a round of applause. (This is also a good way of warming up the audience.)*

Speech opening

There is a school of thought that a best man speech has to start with a killer joke or one-liner. If you have one, great, but it's much more important that you have an opening you feel comfortable delivering.

Don't worry if it takes a while for a suitable opening to come to you; it may well be the last element of the speech to drop into place.

Telegrams

You may be able to incorporate the messages into the body of the speech, but I normally recommend doing them separately, after you have finished your speech and before the toast.

Whatever messages you receive, and wherever you decide to include them; it is your prerogative to edit. Often there will be a particularly poignant, insightful or funny sentence or two. Edit everything else out. Use the same editorial discipline as you do with the rest of your speech: include only what has to be there.

One time when I was best man, my cousin sent some Mexican advice on marriage... two pages of it. I edited it down to one short passage:

“Women should take all the important decisions such as how to solve the world economic crisis, how to tackle the problem of climate change or decide whether or not countries go to war.” All the women cheered. I read on: “Men should make the less important decisions, like when is a good time to have a beer, and who does the ironing and washing up.” All the men cheered. Everybody loved what he’d said and no one complained that I edited out 90% of the original message.

It may be that the messages you receive are all sincere but boring. In that case, keep them short and enliven them by making one or two up.

A spoof message needs to obviously be a spoof. If you have revealed that Dave’s first crush was Kylie Minogue, she would be a good candidate. Maybe you had a story about the groom stealing library books and giving them as birthday presents when he was a kid. Make up a message from the head librarian saying she wishes him well on his marriage but he has sixteen library books overdue and she looks forward to him paying his fine of £12,463.

Props

A prop can bring a story to life and help to make it memorable. A picture, so the saying goes, is worth a thousand words. If the groom, who is now a successful chartered accountant, once had a green Mohican, this is a photo that the audience (if not the groom) would love to see. It’s easy enough to get an old photo blown up to A3 size, which should be big enough for most in the audience to see.

If the couple are management consultants and only seem to communicate with their colleagues and clients via PowerPoint presentations, then a speech delivered as a mock management seminar might work brilliantly. Make sure however, that you prepare thoroughly and test all equipment. Ensure you have a plan B and can still deliver if technology lets you down. It would be galling to have spent months preparing a brilliant speech only for a projector, monitor or computer to undermine all your efforts.

Honing, editing and rehearsing

Imagine you are a band preparing for a big tour; this is the bit where you decamp to a remote Welsh farm house to fine tune your set.

Take the first draft and rewrite the speech, paring it down to its core elements. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are these the best stories? (Not just the funniest, but the most appropriate.)
- Do they lead from one to another logically?
- Are you saying all that needs to be said?

Rewrite it again if necessary

Just like the band holed up in their isolated rehearsal studio, the secret to the success of your speech is practise, practise, practise.

Read it out loud

Remember that you are writing a script to be spoken. Some things look great on the page but don't trip off the tongue. The only way to find out is by reading it out loud. How does it sound?

Road test stories

If you find yourself swapping stories with friends down the pub, (ideally, friends who won't be at the wedding) tell a story from your speech. The environment will be very different to the reception, but you'll learn what bits of the story work and where attention tends to wander. Cut any bits you don't need.

Record it

Read out the whole speech and record it on your phone, iPad or computer. Use the recording to listen to the flow, intonation and rhythm of the speech. Listen for how clearly you are enunciating, and how quickly you are delivering your words. Nearly everybody new to public speaking speaks too quickly – you should aim for about 100 words per minute, which is 25-50% slower than normal speaking speed.

Give yourself notes, edit the speech, and record again. Use this recording to help commit as much of the speech as possible to memory. Listen back as you're going to work, doing the washing up etc...

Film it

Most people hate seeing themselves on film, but a video can help you identify quirks in your posture, hand gestures and body language. This is obviously just a rehearsal, and your delivery will be more dynamic when you're in front of a live audience, but you may spot ways in which you can improve your delivery.

Second opinion

If you'd like me to have a look at a rehearsal video and give you some pointers, please send it to **robin@weddingspeechguru.co.uk**

Final preparations

Now you have a well-practised speech, you're nearly ready. But not quite.

A speech has to engage an audience. To do this effectively, you need to be looking at them, which it's very difficult to do if you are reading from a sheet of paper.

Instead, buy index cards - every stationer will have them - and turn your script into a set of brief notes with key words acting as prompts. A card might look something like this:

DAVE SUIT – Linda's comment

Clare, Linda & Sam (HEN PARTY BINGO) – applause for BRIDESMAIDS

Dave at SCHOOL – P.E lesson... Mr Grimshaw smoking

DAVE MOTORBIKE

Dave and Rachel FIRST DATE - Wallet

You'll know all the stories backwards, but having cue cards provides you with a safety net – something to jog your memory should you need it.

When you glance down and see FIRST DATE, you'll remember instantly the story about how Dave was so nervous on their first date he forgot his wallet and had to borrow Rachel's taxi money home to pay for dinner.

Just as you practised reading out the speech before, you should now practise with the cards, keeping your head up and looking at your notes as little as possible. You may wish to film yourself at this stage too.

The Big Day

Come the day of the wedding you will be so busy helping everything go smoothly that you won't have time to ruminate. However, you should try and do a few things to ensure you are good and ready when it's time for you to speak.

Know the room

Make sure you see the room where the speeches will take place. If you're using a microphone, test it. Double and triple check that any other technology you need is working. Appoint someone you trust to make sure it comes on at the right moment. Practise with them.

Work the room

Use the time before the speeches to talk to the guests you don't know. It's good to look up at friendly faces when you stand to make your speech, and if they've met you they'll get behind you all the more. You may also get some gems of last-minute material.

Be the MC

The best man's speech is usually the last of the day. See if you can act as Master of Ceremonies, introducing the other speakers. This will allow you to see how your voice sounds in the room, and establish your authority before you even give your speech.

Dealing with nerves

People often misunderstand the role of nerves in speech making. The first thing to realise is that nerves are inevitable and, this is the important point, they are not a bad thing. Ask any performer – actor, comedian, TV presenter or sports star – and they will tell you that they are always nervous before a big occasion, and that they use nerves to raise their game.

However, nerves have to be kept under control, and the best way to do this is to know your speech. The definition of confidence is to have faith in something; if you know your material and how you want to deliver it, you'll have confidence in yourself.

Another reassuring fact about nerves is that, to a great extent, they disappear as soon as you begin your speech.

It is tempting to try and banish nerves with alcohol but I would strongly advise against it. Having more than a couple of drinks will seriously impair your ability to deliver the speech.

Glass of water

Before the speeches begin make sure you have a glass of water in front of you, alongside your champagne, of course. As well as being essential to moisten a dry throat, taking a sip from a glass of water can give you a good excuse to pause if you need to collect your thoughts.

The Speech

At the beginning of your speech, it won't just be you that feels tension; the audience will too. They want to release that tension by laughing. This is important to remember: they want to laugh. They're on your side.

Stand. Smile. Speak.

It's your stage, it's your time. Enjoy it – it'll be the best gig you ever get!

**I'd love to hear from you. If you have any questions
or would like help with your speech, please get in touch:**

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