



Finding the Funny

Prospect your past to dig up humorous stories for future speeches.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM

“Laugh and the world laughs with you.”

— ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

As a professional speaker and co-founder of the Toastmasters specialty club LaughLovers, I am often asked about how to find funny material to put in future speeches. People always say, “Nothing funny ever happens to me.” And yet when I’m coaching them, as we explore their lives we find myriad experiences that are, in retrospect, funny. Even better, the humor found in their unique stories is universal. We can *all* relate to their seemingly personal experiences.

What about you? Can you readily recall experiences that would make for

humorous speeches? Even past travails and traumas may now be ripe for comedic retelling. After all, that classic comedy formula often rings true: Tragedy + Time = Comedy.

For you as a speechmaker searching for humorous material, I recommend you eschew using other peoples’ humor, the retelling of apocryphal stories or recounting of clichéd jokes. Instead, I invite you to become a raconteur of your own stories.

You are seen as a confident speaker when you can tell humorous stories that are self-effacing, making light of your own weaknesses, foibles and mistakes. We’ve all fallen short, said the wrong thing, meant well and messed up, and made boneheaded mistakes. Laughing at them is actually therapeutic.

Laughing at the Man in the Mirror

“You endear yourself to listeners when you share vulnerability,” according to Mr. Jollytologist®, Allen Klein, a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP). Klein is the author of *The Healing Power of Humor* and *Learning to Laugh When You Feel Like Crying*. “Poking fun at yourself in stories and speeches shows your humanity,” he says, “and helps listeners relate to your experiences, which they relive with you when you retell your stories. When we laugh together, like crying together, we bond!”

Interview Yourself

Next are some questions to ask yourself (or have a partner ask you) to identify

personal material from which to fashion humorous stories for speeches.

- ▶ Describe a time when something went wrong! What was it? Give us the gory details. What were the ramifications? Were the stakes high? Were the penalties painful? Do tell!
- ▶ Have you ever been in the wrong place at the wrong time? What was that like? How did you feel? Describe the inner dialogue that accompanied those fateful moments. Did you experience dread, trepidation or consternation? We want to know.
- ▶ Faux pas! Did you ever put your foot in your mouth by saying the wrong thing to the wrong person, or say something inappropriate at the wrong time? Were the authorities involved? In-laws? Parents? Children? Recreate that dramatic dialog!
- ▶ How about the *first* time you did something? The first time you drove a car, traveled overseas, went on a blind date, met your boss or cooked a soufflé. Relive the experience and all that it encompassed.
- ▶ Did you survive a traumatic experience you can now look back upon with a

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— LARRY WILDE

fresh perspective? Once we’ve had time to accept or understand what happened, we can share the horror and its humor with others.

- ▶ Ever gotten really, really lost? Oh, it can be a matter of degrees! Were maps involved? Landmarks? Misunderstandings? We want to know the choices and consequences.
- ▶ Ever broken something expensive, rare or sacred? Did someone see you? Did you try to fix it? Did you make it better or worse? There’s nothing like calamity compounded by ineptitude. Share your foibles!

Congratulations, you’ve now uncovered great stories to tell in your presentations. Now what?

Developing Your Stories

After answering the questions above, take a particular experience and now, close

your eyes and relive the experience in all its rich detail. According to humorist Ray Engan, ACB, of **SenseiHumor.com**, and member of Toast of Petaluma club in California, people often fall down on remembering and relating the story details. “They leave out details that would make something funny. They’ll just say, ‘I drove a car to the bar.’ Yet if they really went back and remembered, they’d recall that they were driving a *pink 1972 Ford Pinto* that had half its side caved in ‘cause it *rolled three times* and it really looked like *a terrarium on wheels*, and they walked up like a human *gecko*.” These details delight the audience and add to your presentation’s humor.

You may choose to record your reminiscences into a microphone, or perhaps recount the experience to a friend or family or club member. You may want to tell it a few times to different people to see what *else* you remember, and also to gauge

how others react to it. Consider telling it at a local story swap or gathering where tales are told. For some, this may be at a café; for others, a tavern!

Crafting Your Content

Now, write your story down for telling conversationally. Details are key here. Remember, specific is terrific! Answer the following questions about each particular experience:

- ▶ What was the context for a given story? (Where and when did this experience take place? Describe it with adjectives to paint the picture for the listener.)
- ▶ Who were the characters? (Describe them by their physical attributes: the way they sounded, thought, dressed, stood and carried themselves.)
- ▶ Can you attach distinctive voices and appropriate accents to key characters? (This helps the listener track the story effortlessly and adds richness to the tale.)
- ▶ What were the stakes? (The more severe, the more dramatic!)
- ▶ Can you remember key dialogue? (Recreate it.)
- ▶ What were the pivotal plot points?
- ▶ Are there surprises in your story? (Understand them, where they fit, and how and when they are to be revealed for maximum impact, whether comedic or dramatic.)

Finding the Funny

Through the use of this process I've reviewed experiences in my life and uncovered numerous events that helped me complete the *Entertaining Speaker*, *Humorously Speaking* and *Storytelling* speech manuals:

As a child I erected my lemonade stand—during the Berkeley (California) riots of the late '60s, with tear gas and mayhem in the air.

For a junior high school English assignment to write original poetry, my friend and I instead plagiarized lyrics from popular songs—only to be undone when our instructor asked us in class to recite our poems and other kids who knew the

songs started to recite along with us. (I've since embraced honesty unconditionally!)

As a college student, a summer job at an industrial factory saw me ill-equipped to operate heavy equipment. Calamities ensued as I dropped a forklift load of supplies on nearby railroad tracks as a train approached, ran out of gas while driving a flatbed truck—only to learn such trucks have *two* gas tanks—and unintentionally learned multiple ways to jam and ruin expensive radial arm saws.

The Why in Funny

What makes such stories funny? I asked Engan, a past District 57 Humorous Speech Contest winner, about his definition of humor. He cited the work of HuRL, the Humor Research Lab (humorresearchlab.org) and the definition put forth by Peter McGraw

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and Joel Warner, the authors of *The Humor Code*: “Humor is a benign violation of a norm that surprises you.” As Engan explains it, “If I fall down and don't hurt myself, it's hysterical to you. If I've hurt myself then it's not funny, but if there's no pain, then that's funny.”

No doubt you, too, have stories that can be funny when related to others. We've all had bad hair days, bad school days and bad work days. We've all had family functions that flopped or performances that fell flat. It's what makes us human! If we can laugh at it, our audience can too.

Keeping Your Audience Safe

According to standup comedian, actor and motivational speaker Larry Wilde of Carmel, California, audiences would rather laugh at your foibles than their own! The author of 53 books on humor, Wilde contrasts the attack approach of comics like Don Rickles, who insult their audiences, with the ways in which most comedians


and entertainers will serve themselves up as the subject for laughter. “Audiences need to feel safe,” he says. “They come to be entertained, not attacked. Protect your audience by making yourself the butt of the jokes and humor in your presentations and they'll laugh more, and more genuinely.”

Horror to Humor

Missteps, accidents, lapses of judgment, naïveté and bad luck tend to be funny to others when they listen to stories. Your personal story has universal implications. And remember, audiences love stories!

Engan cites a London Business School study about what audiences remember. “If I fill my speech with statistics, my audience remembers 3 percent. If I show a pretty picture behind me (the PowerPoint effect), it goes up to 15–20 percent. If I tell a story, the rate of retention rises to

50 percent, and if that story is funny, retention skyrockets to about 70 percent.” And that's the story of why personal stories of a humorous nature trump studies and statistics, win contests, and get told and retold.

It's time to go prospecting in your past to uncover hidden story treasures from your own life, and share them with the world! To paraphrase a popular quote, “When you can laugh at yourself, the world laughs with you.” So sharpen your pencils, sharpen your wit and story on! 

Craig Harrison, DTM, PDG, of Berkeley, California, believes in recycling. As a professional conference speaker and storyteller, Craig retells tales of humor and humanity from his childhood in his keynote presentations and training programs. For more on Craig, please visit www.SpeakAndLeadWithConfidence.com.