

THE GRADUATION SPEECH: EDITING FOR A REAL LIFE RITUAL

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We are standing at the top of the mountain, watching the rock roll back down to the plain. This graduation is our moment of consciousness. It's a celebration that we've gotten rid of our rock, but it is also a realization that we're going to have to walk back down the slope, brace ourselves, and start rolling it right back up again. It's neither an ending nor a beginning, but that moment in between ending and beginning again where we stand back, look at what we've done, and then go on.

That was the opening of a speech given by a student in the class of 1986 at our high school graduation ceremony. She was one of six speakers in her graduating class of fourteen, but there was a time, a few years ago, when our school was so small that every graduate made a speech. That's how "The Graduation Speech" became part of the second semester senior English curriculum. Since the students were actually going to deliver their speeches in front of a live audience of family and friends, their motivation toward perfection was intense. They created, they edited, they revised, they proofread. The speeches were invariably a success.

Our school is an English immersion school located in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. Very few of our students speak English as their first language, but on the night of graduation, their ability to express themselves in fluent English and, what is more, to say something appropriate, original, and meaningful makes all their fami-

ly, friends, and especially their teachers feel that it has all been worthwhile.

Although we now have only six student speakers at graduation ceremonies, *every* student writes and delivers a graduation speech as part of the senior English requirement. In fact, every student takes part in the process of planning and developing the entire series of speeches to be delivered. When the ritualistic last evening finally comes, each student feels represented by his or her classmates' speeches.

The first step in this process of graduation speech-making is to decide on a theme which can be divided into various stages or seen from various perspectives. Since student suggestions are the most common source of ideas, simple list making usually starts the process of selection. I ask each student to bring to class two specific suggestions for a graduation theme. Sources can be literature, movies, music, or anything else that strikes the students' fancy. Their suggestions are written on the blackboard, and we explore each one for appropriateness and effectiveness as a controlling idea for a set of interrelated graduation speeches. At times, a suggested theme is immediately liked and approved by the entire class. At other times the process of selection is gradual, involving extensive discussion and debate until a final vote establishes a class consensus.

The second step of the speech-writing process analyzes the chosen theme to establish its subtopics and to provide a variety of concrete examples. The class of 1983, for instance, chose "the meaning of success" as their theme, and through a process of full-class brainstorming, they narrowed their categories to three: small, then large, and finally transcendental successes. Brainstorming again, they began to develop some initial ideas and further define the scope of each of the three categories. We then broke into smaller groups to list as many specific examples as time would allow. During the next class period the full group reconvened to compare, delete, and refine ideas. The final list of subtopics, with their relevant examples, was written on the board, and using a word processor, I produced a copy for each student.

Specific examples in the category of small successes focused on the details of life, such as "recording a song before the tape runs out" or "getting the newspaper in the morning before your dad does" or "having a policeman help you with car trouble" or

“finally deciding to do your homework.” Big successes grew in importance: “having a first child” or “getting accepted at the college of your choice” or “meeting Mr. or Mrs. ‘right’” or “being named *Time’s* Man (or should we say ‘Person’) of the Year.” Transcendental successes were more ethereal: “feeling in control of a situation” or “looking forward to a totally new experience” or “figuring out what went wrong” or better yet “being able to fix what went wrong.” Most transcendental of all was “being able to die with no regrets.” The success lists were then woven into a set of speeches which expressed the philosophy of that senior class in a very specific and memorable way.

A second illustration of the process of analyzing a theme to find the necessary subtopics may be seen in the experience of the class of 1988. They chose as their graduation theme some lines from “Memories,” the most famous song of the musical *Cats*. On the blackboard I wrote the lines:

When the dawn comes,
Tonight will be a memory too,
And a new day will begin.

As a class, we analyzed the sentence both for grammar and content so that the essential ideas could be isolated. The nouns “dawn,” “tonight,” “memory,” and “new day” stood out, and the final verb “begin” seemed like the perfect word around which to construct the concluding speech. After all, a graduation ceremony is both an ending and a new beginning.

The third step of the process involves developing an organizational pattern so that one speech leads nicely to the next and so that they all form part of a whole. We decided to begin with an introduction which would explain the general idea to the audience. The order of the words was rearranged to fit the graduation theme. The “tonight” speech came after the introduction and discussed the significance of the evening; “memory” followed and elaborated on some of the outstanding moments of the class of ’88; “dawn” stressed the demarcation of the moment—the end of one stage and the beginning of another; “new day” reveled in the excitement of the independence and adventure to come, and “begin” described the action of taking that big step into the future.

Writing rough drafts is the fourth stage in the overall process. I usually allow a week for the production of a first draft which

is assigned as homework. Once the overall theme is understood, and the topics are divided and arranged, every individual writes a rough draft of a three to five minute speech. In the example from the class of 1988, there were eighteen people in the class so each of the six topics was assigned to three people who were independently to develop a speech.

The editing group process is stage five. People with the same topics listen to each other's speeches and make observations and suggestions for improvement. In 1988 the senior English class met in the computer room several days per week, so a number of class periods were allocated to revising on the computer. All the students were already familiar with the Applewriter word processing program and knew how to revise their work using a word processor. These classes were active and informal with students soliciting comments from each other and trying different ways of expressing ideas. Everyone had the advice of several critics before printing out a final draft of his or her speech. In other years I have not had access to the computer room for my English classes, but I find that the students are still very motivated to revise their work since this is a "real life" writing assignment.

The sixth stage is the actual presentation of the speeches in front of the class. As a group, we discuss criteria for judging the speeches, eventually settling on typical categories such as originality, clarity, organization, language use, and oral delivery. The students are given index cards to record the points which are awarded on a ten point scale (two points for each one of the criteria). We bring a podium into the classroom, and each person formally presents his or her speech to the rest of the class which serves as both audience and critic. Each member of the class privately records the score for a speech *immediately* after it is presented. After two or three class periods, all the speeches have been delivered and the results are tallied. For each student speech, I use the average of the group ratings (including my own as part of the group) as my official grade for the student's project.

Since the ultimate goal of this assignment is a formal oral presentation of a piece of writing, I do not collect or grade the final written copies of the speeches. However, there is a great deal of exchanging among students of written critical comments during the composing process, and I also comment extensively and informally on the writing both in editing groups and in individual conferences with students.

During the public rating process, students comment on the techniques which contribute to effective speech writing and delivery. They become astute observers of public speaking. Since the “real” public speeches are yet to be delivered, this discussion remains meaningful, especially for the six students who will deliver the speeches on that fateful evening. This phase of critical comment about the speeches and their delivery, along with the student grading procedure, forms the seventh stage—peer evaluation.

The final stage of this activity is, of course, the actual presentation of speeches during the ceremony. Essentially, the choice of speakers for graduation comes down to choosing those who most want to speak. Most importantly, the class itself selects the speakers by consensus. This selection is sometimes accomplished at the outset of the speech-making process, and sometimes it is decided after the classroom presentations have been made. The choices usually depend on a blend of personality and effective writing. Regardless, the chosen speakers benefit immeasurably from working on their speeches as a class project. They are able to try out ideas and to revise until they are completely satisfied with their creations. After their class presentations, the six graduation speakers practice together outside of class, working on transitions between speeches and polishing their written and oral presentations.

Those who did not speak at the 1988 graduation felt quite sure that they could have done so. One student commented as he left class on the final day of presentations, “All the speeches were good.” Indeed they were.

To end where we began, let us return to the class of 1986 and their rock. The students had already read Albert Camus’ “Myth of Sisyphus” in their English class, and they chose the last line of the essay as their theme: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.” The topic was divided into six parts. An introduction explained the “Myth of Sisyphus” both in its Greek form and in Camus’ reinterpretation. Three speeches described the various stages of student struggle up to the point of finishing high school. The fifth speech foresaw them, a few months later, as they watched their rock (of hard academic work) roll down again to lie at the foot of the mountain of college, another new struggle before them. The final speech of the series saw the class on the night of their graduation at the top of their present mountain. Basking in that moment of accomplishment, the speaker delivered the closing paragraphs of her speech:

'The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.' That's the theme of our graduation. Yes, we've been struggling, and this year especially, what with 'senior slump' and three term papers, it hasn't been easy. So it's really great of you all to hold this ceremony to celebrate the end of our struggle, or at least of this particular part of our struggle. But what this graduation finally comes down to is a piece of paper and a pat on the back. No matter how nice those proofs that we've been struggling may be, we don't need them. The happiness, joy, what-have-you, that we feel now, at the top of the mountain, can never compare to the addition of all the little satisfactions we've felt along the way, as we put the last period on a term paper, read the last sentence of an assigned novel, figured out a difficult mathematical proof, or finally understood a concept that had been eluding us. All these moments, too, have been moments of consciousness, moments of 'Okay, that's done; now let's go on to the next thing.' We know we've struggled; we know the struggle will not end with this graduation. We, like Sisyphus, are aware of our rock.

And so we will again make our way down the slope to join our rock. We will brush a little area clean, place our hands gingerly against it, and balance ourselves for the climb. It'll be at least another four years before anyone stops to pat us on the back again, we think. However, 'This rock,' we collectively say, 'is mine and I'm going to keep it rolling.' So the rock will roll again. And again, and again. Our rock and our struggle will be, *must be*, enough for us. We must imagine the Class of '86 happy.

The process of arriving at excellence in creating speeches, such as the one you have just read (in part), takes from ten to fifteen hours of class time. Along the way, students learn how to mold words, to analyze themes, to arrange ideas, to criticize constructively the work of others, to edit, to revise, to proofread, and to deliver a speech. "The Graduation Speech" has a permanent place in my senior English curriculum. And I must imagine—from the results I have seen—that my students are happy.

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