# Speech writing for library conferences

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*A whimsical look at the art of research paper presentation.*

It has long been suspected that only a restricted number of words occur in speeches given at library conferences. The facts have now been clearly established and it is possible to publish a definitive list of those words. This list should prove to be of great value to young librarians who are about to prepare their first speech as well as to seasoned speakers who in the past have encountered difficult moments during question-and-answer periods because the wording of their talks left them open to argument or criticism. Analysis shows that the words can be categorized into two short closed lists and one list which, while open-ended, consists of a narrowly defined category of terms.

These lists appear in print for the first time in this article. Speakers, and indeed writers of articles for library journals, should study these lists carefully in preparing their contributions. The lists, and the accompanying suggestions for their use, should prove an invaluable aid, especially to young people in the field who are still "feeling their way" into the literature.

The key, the cornerstone, of any talk is the title. The title should sum up in a few words the scope of your remarks, enabling others to decide, as they scan a program, whether they wish to attend your presentation. Up until recently, all research on the words used in conference speeches concentrated upon the examination of titles alone. A recent breakthrough in theory, however, has led to the expansion of the investigation into the actual text of speeches. This has opened up exciting new ground which will be discussed later in this article.

Let us look first at the construction of titles and discuss the word lists one at a time. The first list contains the words occurring with the highest frequency as compiled by researchers monitoring speeches at ALA conferences over a period of years. It might be termed the "common list," although for a time researchers referred to it as the "CP" list, referring to the extraordinary frequency with which words beginning with the letters "c" and "p" occur. Expansion of the list to include words beginning with a limited number of other letters has necessitated the name change. The list is as follows:

### Common list

| | |
|---|---|
| communication | organization |
| cooperation | participation |
| coordination | planning |
| development | procedures |
| decision-making | program |
| goals | project |
| management | standards |
| objectives | survey |

The key to creating a title using this list is simply to connect strings of the common words with prepositions. You will quickly get the knack for it. Here are some samples to give you the idea.

- Communication and Cooperation in Program Development
- Planning for Participation in Management and Decision-Making
- A Survey of Standards for the Organization of Management Goals and Objectives
- Coordination of Procedures for Project Development

Do you get the idea? Sure you do.

Now, if you wish to be perceived as one of the Young Turks in the library field, if you wish to be perceived as moving up fast, as "someone to watch," you will also want to use terms from the second, or "buzz" list:

## Buzz list

| | |
|---|---|
| access | information chain |
| automation | network |
| bibliographic control | online environment |
| collection develop- | paraprofessional |
| ment | resource sharing |
| database | utilities |

Try stringing a few of these together just as you did with the common list:

• Automation of Bibliographic Control: A Key Link in the Information Chain

• Resource Sharing through Access in an Online Environment

• The Involvement of Paraprofessionals in Collection Development using Database Networks Other Than the Utilities

Are you getting the idea? Now try combining the common list with the buzz list for some real knock-outs:

• Planning for Participation in Cooperative Collection Development through Network Resource Sharing

• A Survey of the Participation of Paraprofessionals in the Automation of Bibliographic Control

Are you in the swing of it? Now we come to the clincher list, the list that separates the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys, the librarians from the educators. The list of library-specific terms, or ACROLIST. Unlike the previous two lists, this one is open-ended. A small sample is given below. Use those you see here and add to the list freely. You can never have too many.

## ACROLIST

| | |
|---|---|
| AACR | LC |
| AACR2 | LCS |
| ACRL | LITA |
| ALA | LS2000 |
| ANSI | MARC |
| ARL | RASD |
| BLS | RLG |
| BISAC | RLN |
| CLR | RTSD |
| CLSI | UTLAS |
| CRL | WLN |
| LAMA | etc. |

Try to work in as many ACROLIST terms as possible into a framework composed of words from the other two lists.

• Survey of Collection Development Projects in ARL Libraries using the OCLC, RLN, and WLN Utilities

• The Participation of Paraprofessionals in CLSI Development among SOLINET Libraries

• Do the ANSI Standards Impact on AACR2 Records in MARC Format? And What about BISAC?

Your aim in constructing a title is to avoid all words that actually convey meaning. If you must refer to a concrete entity that exists in the real world, always try to use a term from the ACROLIST. You will find that the nouns in these three lists, combined with a handful of connective words, will suffice for the title of almost any paper you might wish to present. Now, it is true that this rhetorical technique has been known for some time. A recent discovery, however, offers exciting possibilities for the expansion of the concept. Recently it has been shown that if you allow the use of dates in addition to words from the lists, this technique will serve for the *entire text* of your speech.

The use of dates is crucial to your opening remarks. You will want to begin your speech with a "brief historical perspective." Always begin this perspective at least ten years in the past, and make heavy use of the ACROLIST and specific dates. (You will want to save the bulk of the common list for the body of your talk, and to use the buzz list for the real fire.) Aim for something like this:

"In the fall of 1972 UTSHLC received an NEH grant to survey the cooperative development objectives in selected NULCNET libraries, including NLCU and NTU. By the spring of 1973 a Title II-C grant was met with matching funds from the CTLC division of NTU and the project was renamed NLCUCTLCLINE. In October of that same year..."

Watch your audience. The eyes of the majority should have begun to glaze over by now as people realize how long it is going to take you to get to 1986 at this rate. You will notice a flurry of activity as many people appear to begin taking notes. Actually they are drawing rows of little snowmen and elaborate mazes around the edges of their yellow pads, but each one thinks he is the only doodler and that everyone else is really taking notes. Anyone coming in at the back of the room will notice the writing activity and hasten to find a seat and get out his own yellow pad.

This is what you are aiming for. You wish to stun the audience within the first three or four minutes so that they stop listening, and yet you must appear to be making an impressive impact. By the time you get to what we laughingly refer to as the "meat" of your presentation, no one will be paying attention and no one will be able to catch you out in a mistake or realize that in fact you have nothing to say.

The "brief historical perspective" part of your speech should last about ten minutes, but you can go on longer if you are enjoying yourself. Some speakers are quick enough and clever enough to grab the "backgrounder" slot on panels. ("Beverly, can we ask you to set the stage for the other speakers with a kind of background talk on the whole proj-

ect?") These lucky ones hardly need to use the common or buzz lists at all—the ACROLIST and a set of dates are all they need. Unfortunately, it is usually people who have been around a while who are able to pick off the backgrounder assignments. You and other neophytes will be expected to move on to your "topic" after the first ten minutes.

Your topic can either be a description of how some task is performed at your institution (commonly called the how-I-did-it-good speech), or it can deal with something that you have counted (commonly called research). There are advantages and drawbacks to each type. The how-I-did-it-good speech requires less work, but has somewhat less prestige. The research type has greater prestige, but it does require that you go to the trouble of counting something and then tallying the results.

A how-I-did-it-good talk should practically write itself unless you are too stupid or too unobservant to notice what goes on around you at work, or unless you have unwisely agreed to describe a part of the task you are not actually involved in. Do not agree to give an overview of your institution's dealings with a regional cooperative microfilm preservation project if you in fact spend all your time cataloging German philosophy books. Instead, cut your cloth to fit yourself. Title your talk "Decision-Making in the Coordination of Procedures for the Development of Online Access to Selected Subject Areas" and then talk about cataloging German philosophy books.

Think about the graduate student that your boss assigned to you half-time to help you catalog "all that stuff that's been sitting on the floor behind you for six years." Speak of this event as a "project" and refer to the "coordination" and "cooperation" necessary to it. Speak of the development of procedures to meet the organizational objectives of the project. Mention the desirability of standards, and stress the need for communication (even though in reality your only communication to the graduate student during the last six months was a shouted "You dumb nit!" when he spilled a can of Tab over a three-volume set of Hegel).

Make use of the fact that every day some student takes your worksheets away to be typed into a computer. You can point out that resource-sharing is one of the goals of bibliographic control in an online environment. Be sure to refer to cataloging philosophy books as "providing access to bibliographic data," and assert that being part of the information chain excites you. Or, alternatively, you can focus on the personnel aspect. Refer to complaints by the typists that they cannot read your handwriting as "the involvement of paraprofessionals in achieving the goals and objectives of the project," and speak of the need for participation and decision-making in management. Do not fail to conclude with a statement of the percentage of time that you and the graduate student and the typist each spend on the "project." If possible, state the same data in hours, dollars, and percentages.

A research paper requires more preliminary work on your part than a how-I-did-it-good talk. That is why so few are presented. It is necessary to find something to count and then to count it. The common practice is to send out a questionnaire and count the responses to it. This can take some time, and often presents problems of presentation. Explaining what it is that you have counted is not too

## Your summary should stun the audience in the first 3–4 minutes.

difficult, but the effort to explain what the resulting tallies mean is often so embarrassing that many people prefer simply to graph the tallies on colored paper and present them in a poster session rather than making the effort to write a speech. There is no need for you to avoid a speech on a research topic if you make full use of the lists and techniques described above and below.

Your problem is essentially in deciding what you want to count. The most common formula is to tally how many libraries perform some task one way and how many perform it some other way. It is then usual to follow up by asking how many like doing it the way they are doing it as opposed to how many would do it some other way if more time and money were available. This basic formula can be applied to almost any aspect of library work and you should not hesitate to use it.

The first ten minutes of a research talk should be devoted to describing how you got grant support to pay for things like stationery and stamps, and in filling in the audience on the need to ask for funding for secretarial help, a graduate student, and time on the university computer to perform the statistical analysis. During this part, do not omit to name the fund sources and the type of computer used, using the ACROLIST. Explain in detail how many responses you got to your first mailing, and how many reminder mailings you had to send. Never apologize for the fact that your final figures are based on a response of 36 out of a mailing of 825. Explain about chi squares. You may get some sympathetic knowing chuckles from the audience during this part, as fellow researchers recognize what you have gone through. Researchers and non-researchers alike recognize the tiresomeness of the task and do not hesitate to honor those who undertake it. That is why a research presentation is regarded more highly than a how-I-did-it-good presentation.

The next twenty minutes of a research talk

should focus on what you counted. Lavishly use the terms from the common and buzz lists to define for the audience what it was you thought you were doing. You should then go on to read the questionnaire to the audience. At this point you have a real opportunity to show that you know how to do more than talk. In addition to passing out copies of the questionnaire as handouts, you should use an overhead projector to splash the questionnaire up on a big screen. You can then use a pencil to point to the lines you are reading. It is considered visually exciting to have highlighted some questions with a yellow marker pen beforehand. You should then project one or two of the colored graphs of your tallies that you were going to use in a poster session.

You will find that the request to darken the house lights and turn on the projector will create a stir of interest, or at least a stir, among the audience. When the projector is turned off and the house lights come back up there will be a further increase in this stirring as the audience senses, like a puppy who hears your car in the driveway, an end to its captivity. This is a crucial time in your talk.

You must be alert to this audience reaction because your final task, and the last ten minutes of your talk, should be devoted to a detailed summing up, using every list word you can, of what the results of your study mean. Your aim is to restore apathy so that only two people will get up and ask you boring questions during the question period,

after which the rest of the audience will walk away saying, "I liked so-and-so's talk. At least she offered some hard data." "Yes, and those colored charts really showed you at a glance what the story is."

Your aim in giving a speech is probably threefold: to share information and insights with others, to create another entry in your dossier, and to be able to answer people who ask you if you are going to the conference with something offhand like, "Yes, I can't get out of it—I'm on the program, you know." Impressing your friends with your world-weary modesty, showing your boss that you are a go-getter who is developing a "national reputation," and sharing your knowledge with others are the goals. The objective is to achieve all this with as little embarrassment to yourself as possible. Therein lies the beauty of this technique of rhetoric and the reason for publishing the word lists at this time. If you learn to make really effective use of the lists and keep in mind the importance of dates, you will find that you can keep ideas to a minimum and you will never suffer the embarrassment of having your facts challenged or your points ridiculed.

*Editor's note: Satire can often get the point across more effectively than serious exposition. Susan Matson's article first appeared in the June 1986 issue of* Southern Exposure, *the library staff bulletin of Southern Illinois University.* ■■

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### Are You a Member of a
### Non-Library Professional Association?

The ACRL Professional Association Liaison Committee needs to know who you are and which associations you belong to in order to effectively focus its activities.

Name _____

Position _____

Library _____

Address _____

I am a member of the following non-library professional associations:

_____

_____

_____

I_____attend their meetings,_____publish in their journal,_____am a committee member or officer,_____have made a program presentation,_____would be interested in serving as an ACRL Liaison.

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