

It's OK to speak from notes

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's two most legendary speeches have gone viral and had over 15 million views each. She has also given dozens of other speeches worth watching, including a recent one in which she talked about the importance of intention and what happened when she was introduced as 'Chimichanga'. Her conclusion: it's fine to call her Chimichanga by accident and if you tried hard to pronounce her name. It's not fine if you say it because you're too lazy to bother or you're mocking her. She did add that these things are not that big a deal for her as in her native language, Igbo, her name means: 'My personal spirit will not be broken.' I would suggest that you do not mess with such a person, not even accidentally.

Adichie's highly successful speeches are worth studying because she gives them on her own terms. She is not an improviser; she is not an emotional person; she is highly organized. I don't want to go too far into the realms of speculation but I would suggest from her stance and habits at these speeches – and from some of the insights into her character that she gives in them – she is probably a

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control freak. Many women can identify with that. Why leave an important speech to chance? Or to an autocue that might malfunction?

So, unlike many other TED Talkers, she reads from a lectern instead of pacing the stage. This gives us something to think about when we consider what it means to 'own the room'. You connect with the audience through your energy and excitement and by moving around. Or you can do it by standing your ground. Many speakers will say that you can't 'connect' in a meaningful way by reading something prepared that's in front of you. You need to learn it (and not use notes), you need an autocue or you need to be prepared to improvise. (I think elements of Ellen DeGeneres's commencement speech must have been improvised. She's an example of the opposite of a control freak.) But Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's speech shows you can read aloud (about storytelling and feminism) and still have your words connect with an audience in an incredibly powerful way.

In her talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' she starts humbly and quietly. 'I'm a storyteller . . .' Her speech is serious and, initially, she does not actively seek to get laughs, even though she visibly relaxes – and is surprised – when they come. As well as standing behind a podium relying on her notes, she breaks a lot of other supposed rules of speaking early on: her physical stance is fidgety and wobbly, her eye contact is not consistent, she rushes slightly. She is clearly nervous and takes a few sentences to relax

into her story. And yet. This talk has had over 15 million views and has had enormous impact.

This is another lesson in not needing to be perfect. For despite all these ‘mistakes’, her manner is completely compelling because we can tell that what she has to say matters to her. It feels as if she is taking a risk with what she’s saying and yet she is completely confident precisely because it matters so much. She is also very good at signposting her ideas and clearly spelling them out to us – again, this is the skill of the professional writer: ‘So what this did for me is this . . .’ she will explain, providing absolute clarity. At the end she says, ‘I would like to end with this thought . . .’ There is not going to be an awkward moment when people think, Is that it? She is telling us the end is coming. You don’t have to do this in a speech. But if you are a control freak, it will probably give you a lot of pleasure to do so. Everyone will know where they are.

She takes her time to pause between points and is not put off if she comes to the end of a point and has to look down at her paper to see where she’s going next. This is a real skill and one worth practising. It’s fine to take pauses at the end of thoughts or messages. In fact, it’s necessary for the audience. They are not waiting to hear what you will say next. They are taking on board what you have just said. It’s fine to give them time to do that, while you calmly look down and see what’s coming next. Adichie demonstrates extreme comfort with her written text. She’s not bothered

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that she's using it. She doesn't care what you think about the fact that she's using it. And she is going at her own pace.

Calm authority is the real hallmark of her speaking. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie doesn't seek to impress, she seeks to explain and make her points clear. Nothing is flashy or showy. There is humility to her, even though she is presenting huge ideas about difference, otherness and prejudice. She wears her ideas lightly and brings them in a spirit of openness, not seeking to push them but instead laying them out gently and patiently. She is a model of great self-esteem, right down to letting us see that she is not 100 per cent relaxed about giving this speech. The experience is humbling to her. To be able to show the real confidence that comes with honesty and let your humility shine through is a true attribute.

You don't have to let off fireworks to wow a crowd

By the time Adichie comes to present her second TED Talk, 'We Should All Be Feminists', she has blossomed as a speaker. The first talk was superb. The number of views is proof of that. But with the second, you can see that she is there to enjoy the moment. She's on a bigger stage and she 'owns' it immediately, making much more eye contact with the audience than during her previous talk, which had more of the feel of a lecture. This second outing feels more personal and assured. Once again, she is reading from a

lectern and has her text to fall back on. But with this performance, it feels as if she doesn't need it.

I love this speech because she enjoys it so much and she smiles so frequently. She intersperses ideas with personal anecdotes and takes such pure joy in saying, 'Now here's a story from my childhood . . .' as she leads us gently through moments of reminiscence that reveal something about the theory she wants to tease out. (Summary: it's a good idea to be a feminist.) Adichie succeeds in moving beyond the mentality of 'I am giving a speech.' She makes us forget that she is giving a speech. It feels as if she is talking intimately to us, face to face. Despite the veneer of formality and the cast-iron control she clearly has over the process, that is all stripped away in what feels like a one-to-one conversation.

This is the real knack of great speaking. You have to want to say it. You have to believe you have something worth sharing. You have to be excited about sharing it with other people. There are two sides to this. On the one hand, cultivating these feelings will help you to develop what you want to say, overcome your nerves and remember that it's not about you, it's about the audience. On the other, these feelings are a great way to guide yourself to *finding* something to talk about that really does fire you up. If you could set aside all your nerves, anxiety and reservations about speaking, what is the one thing you would love to share with people, the one thing that makes you feel excited just thinking about it? Let go of the idea that some people might not understand

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you, that it might be difficult, that some people might reject it. Imagine that the speech flies. Imagine that it soars. Imagine people love it. What would you say if that were the case? With every sentence of Adichie's feminism talk, it feels as if this is what she has said to herself beforehand: 'Delight them. That's all you need to do. Delight them. Explain. But do it joyfully.'

She's enjoying herself so much in this speech that when the audience laughs hard at particular points, she goes off script and ad libs, acknowledging that they've obviously experienced some of the things she has. (Going to a restaurant in Nigeria, for example, with a man and the waiter only acknowledging the man.) Yet despite how relaxed she is, she never deviates from the brilliant stillness she has in her posture. She has full control over the room, patrolling the entire audience with a gentle gaze. She holds her hands steadily, linked, in front of her, breaking that only occasionally to turn her pages. She does not lean into the audience or into the podium. She allows her body weight to fall back on to her heels so that we are drawn to her. She goes with whatever emotions come up during this twenty-minute talk. If she gets carried away laughing, she lets herself laugh.

But she's also not afraid of hand-brake turns in emotion. She moves from jokes and sarcasm to a friend who died in a plane crash. She keeps the audience on their toes, almost as if she's trying to keep herself on hers. There's a sense that she's challenging herself at the same time as challenging us.

We all make the mistake of watching a speaker like her and feeling so blown away that we don't examine what she's doing that works so well. It's partly because the content of her speech is so important and so beautifully written that we're completely distracted by it (and rightly so). In terms of learning how to speak, though, and drawing inspiration for ourselves from her performance, it helps to switch off from the meaning of the speech and just look at how she inhabits it. We're predisposed to enjoy the content because she teaches us to do so by how she is standing and holding herself. Of course, the way you genuinely feel can't be faked and the proof of this is the difference between the first speech ('The Danger of a Single Story') and the second ('We Should All Be Feminists'). There were three years between the two speeches and in between something in Adichie has changed: she is fully willing to accept how good she is, how ready the world is to hear her and how easy this is for her.

Let it be easy

One of the reasons it is worth watching and re-watching Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie many times is her ease. She inhabits herself and her ideas in a relaxed and easygoing way, as if to say, 'Take it or leave it. But I think you might find this interesting. I don't mind, though, if you don't.' This is an incredibly rare quality. Instead I constantly see an unwillingness towards the concept of 'ease' in accomplished women.

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They are extremely resistant to the idea that anything might be easy or uncomplicated. They are not keen to relax or to enjoy their speech. They want it to be difficult because they have bought the myth that it has to be difficult. Meanwhile, at work events, they will have watched male colleagues, unprepared and unstressed, bluffing and getting away with it. I'm not saying all men do this but some men do. And it's extremely rare to see a woman do it. Why not be the woman who tries it sometime? Why not be the one who coasts? Why not be the one who says afterwards, 'I didn't even really prepare for that and I found it easy'?

Of course, the real reason Adichie can be so free and easy in herself is because she has prepared meticulously for years beforehand. She has put in the ground work as a writer and a thinker. But this is true for all of us as long as we're talking about the right subject. We all have something we're expert on that others would like to know about. We have all mastered things that others find difficult to master.

What's striking about Adichie's content is that, although it is intelligent, smart, of a very high quality and almost academic, it always remains accessible. Her speeches pass quickly and easily for the audience and we don't feel as though we've sat through a lecture, rather that we've learned something and have somehow been improved by her words – effortlessly. This is a wonderful feeling to give an audience.

How does she do it? She mixes personal stories – which she emphasizes, using a conspiratorial and intimate tone – and theory. She has a number of key points she wants to make about, say, prejudice, creativity, gender, culture, but she does not overload us with facts or ideas. Instead, she intersperses her speeches with stories: ‘Let me tell you about a good friend of mine’; ‘I have a very dear friend . . .’; ‘There was a time in my childhood . . .’; ‘When I was last on a night out in Lagos . . .’. What works brilliantly about these stories is that they are simple, not burdened with detail and believable. We don’t think for a minute that she’s introducing them as a rhetorical device. They feel like real moments from her life that she’s sharing with us. They make you wish she was your friend. Or even half believe that she is.

This is a great trick for any speech, especially one you’re struggling with. Think of something that connects you personally to the idea. A conversation you once had, a person you knew, an encounter, an observation. And find a way to link it into the ideas in your speech. I know this sounds hard if you’re giving a work speech about something like marketing or branding, but there must be something about it that you find entertaining or an idea in the presentation that reminds you of something a friend once said that amused you or a quote you’ve never forgotten. If you’re truly stumped and you can’t find anything personal to connect you to a speech, then I would say – fairly harshly – that you may well be in the wrong job. There is no

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way that, long term, any of us can give presentations we find boring and have no personal meaning to us. Struggling to find personal meaning in a speech is a red flag. It's the very opposite of what is going on in a Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speech where she is explaining the motivation that guides her as a writer and as a human being.

Finding the personal in something is key to so many things. First, it keeps you interested while you're preparing it. In 'We Should All Be Feminists', Adichie clearly wants to honour the memory of her friend who died in the plane crash, even though he is mentioned only very briefly and she doesn't make the whole speech about him. Nonetheless, his memory is clearly a motivator. Second, it gives the audience something emotional to latch on to, which they will remember even if they don't remember anything else. Once we hear a speaker talking about their personal experience or telling us something conversational we relax. We are not at school. This is not a lecture. We are not going to be tested. The speaker is happy to carry us and make it easy for us. You might need to get creative to find out what the equivalents are for you, but we all have them.

Show us what we have in common with you

A later speech by Adichie was even more confident. If you check out the opening of her Harvard Commencement speech of 2018, it's ridiculously brazen in its simplicity. She

begins with a brief 'Hello' and 'Thank you' and gets a round of applause just for that. It's worth watching for her phrasing and how she allows the joy of what she's saying to show in her face. She looks truly honoured, humbled and grateful to be there, and that is what the audience responds to. She barely needs to say anything to open because her status means she doesn't need to.

This is a speech about truth and lies, in our writing, in our speech, and how that relates to politics. Adichie's simplicity is what makes the political content more palatable. She talks about the times she has lied: about her height, about being stuck in traffic when she is really still at home getting ready. She doesn't make herself find outlandish or complicated examples. She is not afraid of the mundane. Of course, you can get away with this if you're Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Her bearing is regal and commands respect. Anything she says that suggests she is a normal human being who is late for lunch with her friends because she can't decide what to wear, well, it makes her seem more approachable. She's a great lesson in finding ways to connect with the audience by showing that parts of your life are just like theirs.

Adichie goes on to talk about developing a 'bullshit detector' not only for others but for ourselves. This is so true for speaking. When we're preparing to say something, whether it's off the cuff or prepared, are we saying what we really want to say? Or are we bullshitting? Is there any way

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you can put something into your words that is emphatically not bullshit? Can you dare to say something that is real and bold? Of course, this is another reason why speeches by great speakers are sometimes not the ideal model for our own speaking because in the real world we have to contend with bosses, colleagues, rivals, the human-resources department. In real-life work situations, your speech may be vetted by others or even written by them and there may be little you can do about it. You may have to accept compromises or include some boring bits because the corporate communications department insists on it. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie does not have to put up with that kind of interference. She is free to say whatever she chooses.

Anyone would be inspired by Adichie, but remember that if she had to give a speech about next year's project investment yield without being able to say what she really thought was likely – but instead what her boss wanted her to say – well, that would probably be as dull as it sounds. (I don't know what an investment yield is, by the way. Just in case that wasn't already clear.) Let her example challenge us all to reach higher than what is in front of us: find something true, find something meaningful. Yes, we can't all reach the standard of a Nobel Prize-winning novelist in our speaking. But we can find one true thing to say that means something to us. And we can find the thing that connects us to those we're speaking to.