

Carnegie Mellon University

Student Commencement Speaker Writing Guide

A commencement speech is a uniquely difficult speech to write. It needs to speak to a variety of audiences at once. It needs to be both broad enough for a diverse student body to see themselves in it, but also concrete enough that your own personal journey shines through. It has to feel specifically and identifiably “CMU.” Below are some best practices to keep in mind as you draft your commencement speech application.

1. Know your why

Be able to articulate why you are seeking to represent the university and its graduating class. Strong commencement speeches are written with a **clarity of purpose**. Is there a specific message that you want to share with the student body? Did you have a widely relatable experience at CMU that you want to express? Or conversely, did you have an atypical experience at CMU that you want to share? Before putting pen to paper, clarify your purpose to yourself. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: Is this speech embodying my why?

2. Speak to Multiple Audiences

A commencement speech must be able to communicate at one and the same time to a number of **distinct audiences**. A strong commencement speech will dialogue with fellow students as a peer, will embody the students to the university staff and faculty, and will represent the university to visiting friends and family. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: How will each of these diverse populations hear and experience my words?

3. Tell Your Story

A strong commencement speech will reveal the experiences, character, and values of its author. Don't write a speech that could be written by anyone; we want to **see you** in your speech. Personal anecdotes are powerful. Highlight moments of growth and resilience or identify a key turning point that others can relate to. You should highlight experiences that are unique to you, but frame them with lessons or takeaways that can resonate with others. Even if they

haven't experienced a buggy breakdown — they can identify with overcoming adversity. Even if they've never won a hackathon, they can understand the joy of success after hard work. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: Is my particular story visible in this speech?

4. Establish your tone

A strong commencement speech will establish and maintain a clarity of tone. Is your speech exuberant? Solemn? Hopeful? Challenging? Inspiring? Know what tone you want to set and craft your language to evoke it. This doesn't mean that your speech needs to be one-note. A strong speech might start with a light opening, turn solemn as it reflects on challenges, and then end with a call to action. It might open with difficulties, inspire through narratives of overcoming, and end with a message of hope. What matters is that the journey of your speech is **tonally coherent** and that your tone helps relay your narrative. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: How do I want the audience to feel after they hear this speech?

6. Be Authentic, Avoid Clichés

Commencement speeches are well-worn territory. You can find a thousand commencement speeches on youtube. And while we wouldn't discourage you from learning from others, don't try to sound like everyone else. Avoid clichés and trite lessons. Use **your own authentic voice**. As you draft your speech, be honest with yourself and ask: Do I really believe what I'm writing or is it just something that sounds graduation-y?

7. Look forward and backwards

Commencement speeches both look backwards at **where you've come from** and forwards to **where you are going**. A strong speech will attempt to balance these two trajectories. Taking the opportunity to reflect on where you've been and how you've gotten here. But also look forward to where you are going. Embrace the risk, uncertainty, and hope of the moment. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: Does my speech help launch the graduating class into their future?

8. Be CMU

A strong commencement speech will reflect the context in which it is given. Write a speech that highlights the values, ethos, and **vibe of Carnegie Mellon**. This doesn't mean that the speech should pander, but a generic speech that could be given at any university will not have the same force or impact. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: Could this speech be given at another university or does it truly represent what makes CMU a unique institution?

9. Celebrate Accomplishments

A strong commencement speech should be meaningful. It might reflect on lessons learned or obstacles overcome. But it doesn't need to be a downer. Avoid being preachy—**aim to uplift**, not instruct. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Many family members have traveled long distances to share this moment; don't turn it into a dispiriting lecture. Use this as an opportunity for joy. As you draft your speech, ask yourself: Is my speech empowering, celebratory, or hopeful?

Final thoughts

- Write your speech, write it again, write it even more. Multiple drafts will help you craft a clear tone, structure, and pacing.
- Rehearse out loud, ideally in front of others.
 - Work on pacing, tone, and pauses—don't rush.
 - Be mindful of body language and eye contact.
 - Time your rehearsals. Your speech should be 4-6 minutes.

Additional Resources

1. [Student Academic Success Center 1-on-1 Consultations](#)
2. [Student Academic Success Center Workshops](#)
3. [2025 Student Commencement Speaker — Michael Acquah-Harrison](#)