

## **Anatomy Of A Humorous Speech**

*An analysis by John Zimmer. This is a speech education zinger! After John Zimmer won Toastmasters 2009 District 59 (Continental Europe) Humorous Speech Contest he decided to analyze it and share his findings. I am delighted he did for it's an extremely helpful analysis of a humorous speech.*

*By John Zimmer ([www.mannerofspeaking.org](http://www.mannerofspeaking.org))*

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### ***John wrote...***

Following my victories at the Toastmasters District Humorous Speech and Table Topics Contests in Hamburg, many people have asked me how I go about preparing for a contest. In particular, they have asked how I crafted my humorous speech once I got the idea for the subject. I've given the matter some thought and decided that a good way to explain might be to analyze the speech here on my blog.

Below I have set out the final written version of my speech with comments added. Black is the text of the speech; **red** is commentary that gives some insight into why I wrote something a certain way when drafting the speech; **blue** is additional commentary, particularly things that were going through my mind while on stage.

For those of you who wish to compete in a contest or just give a humorous speech, I hope that this analysis is helpful and that you come away with some ideas and inspiration for your own speeches.

Before reading further, I recommend that you watch the video of my speech (on YouTube) which can be found by [clicking here](#). Then read the analysis. You might also find it helpful to watch the video a second time and follow with the text...

## "A Way Out"

(Note that the Contest Chair finished the introduction at 0:15. Yet I did not start the speech for another 9 or 10 seconds. Always wait for the Contest Chair to be seated before beginning. Time does not start until you speak; you get a few more seconds to get used to the setting; and you look poised.)

In 1697, the English playwright William Congreve wrote those famous words: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." (Starting with a quote is a classic way of opening any speech. This one was particularly good given the subject.) Today ... not much has changed. (The pause after "today" is important. It sets up the light humour that follows and did get a chuckle.)

A year ago, I was having a beer with two friends. (Note that I did not give any introduction. I go straight to a story.) We were depressed. My first friend spoke, "Last night my wife and I had a big fight and when it was over she locked me out of the bedroom."

My other friend said, "Last night my wife and I had a big fight and when it was over she locked me out of the house!"

I looked at them, "Last night my wife and I had a big fight and when it was over she came crawling to me on her hands and knees." My friends were astounded. "That's incredible! What did she say?" (A few points about the last three paragraphs: (1) Repetition of the phrase "Last night my wife and I had a big fight". Repetition is a powerful technique, especially in humorous speaking. (2) Escalation: locked out of the bedroom; locked out of the house . . . it gets people wondering what I will say that will top that. (3) Surprise on the last point - she came crawling on her hands and knees. This is so unexpected that it is funny. But in fact, it is only a set up for what follows, which is even more unexpected.)

She said, "You can't hide under that bed all night you coward! Come out and fight like a man!" (This was the perfect place for my biggest physical gesture of the speech.) (I got a

good reaction to this line and while I was still on the floor, I was thinking "They are into it, which is great, but watch your time!" For the contest, I had a maximum of 7:30. One second more and I would be disqualified.)

Contest chair, fellow Toastmasters, and all you men out there who know just how tight it is under a bed. (Playing on the joke about the bed.)

For centuries, (links back to the 1697 quote by Congreve) we men have been powerless in the face of a woman's fury. Our logic is shot down; our arguments are ground into dust; our reasoning melts like butter on toast. (Another set of three, each with a different gesture and each using a vivid metaphor or simile.) (Note the mistake when I tripped up on the word "logic". I had started to say "reasoning" and should have just continued with it and used "logic" next. The correction was not major but could have been avoided. Often when you make a mistake, your audience will not notice it - unless you correct yourself like I did!) We've had no defence. We've found no way out. (Linking back to the title of the speech.) Until now. (This last line creates a bit of suspense about what is to follow.)

That night, after the beer with my friends, I lay in bed pondering our predicament. I mean on top of the bed. (Again, playing on the joke about being under the bed.) Where did we go wrong? What was our mistake?

Then it occurred to me. Maybe men aren't the problem. Maybe women just don't know how to argue properly! Maybe all they need is a little direction. (This is where the audience gets the first clear idea of where the speech is going.)

But how to give it? Then I had a mad idea. At Toastmasters, we evaluate each other all the time. The next time my wife got angry, I'd evaluate her. (One of the keys to delivering a good humorous speech is to pick a topic with which everyone can identify. I had already set the stage for the age-old subject of conflict between men and women, but here I added a second element, Toastmasters, because most of the 300 people in the audience were members of Toastmasters. So now I had two hooks that brought together two subjects with which the audience could identify. Of course, the idea of evaluating your spouse when she is fuming is outlandish, but that is what made the speech funny. I took a common event - speech evaluations - and applied it in an uncommon way.)

I was able to test my theory the following week. I'd gone out, lost track of time and came home very late. And I forgot to call. When I opened the door, she was waiting.

"Have you lost your mind?" (A chance for some vocal variety and gesturing.) And she proceeded to tear into me for 10 minutes. (Emphasizing the 10 minutes with my hands was intentional. Later, I come back to the 10 minutes with a good line and having the audience remember the time is important for setting up the laugh.)

I watched, I listened, I took notes. (There is something about the "rule of 3" in humorous speaking. People just find it funny. The idea is to have three sentences or phrases, each with the same cadence or rhythm. But where the first two are serious, the third is unexpected. Think of phrases like "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" or "I came, I saw, I conquered" or others. How could you change the last item to make the whole thing funny? Here, it is one thing to watch and listen to your spouse when she is angry. But to take notes? It was so outrageous that it got a huge laugh.) (I got a bigger laugh on this than I expected - 9 seconds - and this confirmed my earlier concerns. I realized that I was at risk of going overtime. It was here that I made the decision to cut certain bits out. You will see where. In the end, I finished in just under 7 minutes and so had 30 seconds to spare. Still, much better to be in that situation and be able to finish leisurely than to see that red light flashing and have to rush the conclusion.)

When she finished, she looked at me: "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

I took a deep breath and began: (This is one of my favourite lines in the speech. But it got no laughs and I did not expect any. It was a transition line. So why was it one of my favourites? One of the best things you can do on stage for your voice is to breathe. It gets the blood flowing and relaxes you. I realized that I had the chance to work in a line that fit perfectly and that would actually allow me to take a really deep breath and have it look completely normal for the occasion. So I took the deepest breath I could and immediately felt refreshed for the second half of the speech.)

Honey, that was a terrific performance. (I should have paused more here.)

Great content and delivered with lots of emotion. I really enjoyed it. I'm going to tell you some things that I particularly liked (I was all set to keep going, but I caught myself in time to let the laughter run.) and then I'll point out some areas where I think you could improve. (Playing on a common opening in a Toastmasters evaluation.) (Here I got laughs and applause. Laughter is great; applause is even better. There was no way I was going to stop it, so I let it run and kept thinking about where I could make cuts.)

Your opening was terrific. You asked a provocative question: Have I lost my mind? It's

been said that a mind is a terrible thing to waste, and I certainly don't want to waste mine let alone lose it. I was intrigued and wanted to hear more.

Second, your facial expressions were fantastic! At one point, your eyes were bulging out to here. (I should have paused more here.) I thought your head was going to burst into flames. Well done. (I cut the last sentence.)

Finally, (I'll let you in on a secret. I actually blanked here for a couple of seconds. I could not think of the next line. But this is a good example of the power of pauses. The word "finally" lends itself naturally to a pause because it signals that something is coming. I took advantage of that, and of the last bits of laughter from the previous line, to look down, find the point and continue. It happens very fast, but on stage it felt as though time had stopped while I was trying to think of the line. I suppose adrenaline will do that to you.) excellent use of props. When you threw that dish at my head ... I was engaged. (The pauses after "props" and "head" were planned. The pauses here really make the joke as they let the audience visualize the moment.) You had my attention. (I cut the last sentence.)

Now, how could you make that diatribe even more effective? (I should have paused more here.) I have three suggestions.

First, stay on topic. You were berating me for staying out so late and that was good. But you got off track and started complaining about my job, my friends, the way I leave my dirty socks on the floor. I found it a bit confusing. Leonardo da Vinci (I could not remember da Vinci and so went straight to the "simplicity" point) said that the simplicity is the ultimate sophistication, so remember to keep your message simple and stay on topic.

Second, use more vocal variety. You screamed the whole time. (The laughs were great. People got the point. No need to expand so I cut the next two sentences.) You need to lower your voice now and then. It's much more effective and also easier on your listeners.

Finally, the time. Ten minutes is too long. (Coming back to my earlier point about emphasizing the time.) When we're angry, we see red, so you probably didn't notice this card after 7 minutes. (This worked very well as all Toastmasters know what it is like to see the red card or light when giving a speech. But what made the joke even better was that nobody expected me to pull something out of my jacket. Props are great; to the extent that you can keep them hidden until you use them - which is sometimes just not

possible - you get the bonus of a surprise.)

But as speakers we must stop talking before our audience stops listening. (I cut the next line; the previous sentence was funny enough without it.) I can only absorb so much, so when you see this card, you need wrap up and move on.

But overall, a great performance and I look forward to our next fight. (A play on the well know "I look forward to your next speech".)

My wife looked at me with this odd expression and then said: "Um, OK. Are you coming to bed?" Was this for real? I told my two friends. They tried it and it worked for them too!

I was like a caveman who had discovered fire; an alchemist who had invented gold; a prisoner who had found ... a way out! (Both a tricolon and again linking back to the title of the speech.)

This discovery had to be shared with men everywhere. But how? Again, Toastmasters provided the answer. (Continuing with the theme of Toastmasters.)

Six months ago, I chartered a special club for couples only: Me Tarzan, You Jane Toastmasters. The women give all the speeches; the men do all the evaluations. It is thriving. (In earlier versions of the speech, I formed three clubs and they were for men only. But I wasn't happy with the structure. I much prefer the single club for couples approach as it flows better with the core idea of the speech.)

The men are delighted that the women are getting to the point in less than seven minutes. The women are thrilled that the men are listening.

Those couples that complete the programme will receive their DCA - Distinguished Couple Award. And, like the DTMs in mainstream Toastmasters, they too will have the privilege of being able to wear a shiny gold badge the size of a flat screen TV. (A final play on some well-known aspects of Toastmasters and a good-natured ribbing of our DTMs who have reached the pinnacle of Toastmasters success.)

So guys, the next time your spouse or partner gets angry, there is a way out and it's not under your bed. Listen to her. Evaluate what she's saying. And never forget that she just might have a point. (A humorous speech is particularly effective if there is a serious message in it. I wanted to get across the idea that, in fact, we should listen to our

partners when they are angry and that they are sometimes right. In previous versions of the speech, I had a much more syrupy ending: my wife and I did not, in fact, talk to each other that way; we love and respect each other; we listen to each other; and so in that respect, we are like Toastmasters. But I was not happy with it as it brought the whole speech down after all the fun to that point. So, with some great insights from my friends and fellow Toastmasters Alistair Scott (Lausanne Toastmasters), Ben Parsons and Kevin McKenna (both of International Geneva Toastmasters), I reworked the ending, making it shorter and much cleaner.)

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*Brian Woolf's Comments: What more can I say about this clever hilarious speech? Its commonality with the whole audience was a key part of its success. And for readers, especially Toastmasters, it provides a humor format and great ideas to draw from when considering a future humorous speech. On a separate note, if you are serious about improving your speaking skills (either humorous or serious), I suggest you also visit John's excellent website (<https://mannerofspeaking.org>).*

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