Unaccustomed as I am

Let’s be honest – no one likes public speaking. Along with sharks, sky-diving and knife crime, it’s something we all have an innate fear of. But if you’re well prepared there’s no reason why it shouldn’t all go swimmingly.
It's the stuff that nightmares are made of: standing up on your own in front of 150 people in a hot suit with clammy, shaking hands and a mouth as dry as the Sahara Desert. Instead of witty, heartfelt, flowing words, the first thing that comes into your head is pure, unadulterated panic.

"Preparation is key. It's essential," says Sean Brickell, author of The Spot-On Speaker: Wedding Speeches & Special Occasion Speeches. "Not preparing for a speech is like bungee jumping from a great height without the safety rope! Firstly you haven't taken into account the whole process of jumping from your platform in front of a horrified audience. Secondly, you ignore your lifeline (the rope) which is your carefully researched and rehearsed notes. Thirdly, it will end in tears and you and your speech will nosedive into a humiliating abyss and you will die on your feet – or head, as it were. And, fourthly, you'll look like a complete and utter nuptial numpty!"

Yes, it all sounds very daunting indeed. But worry not. With this foolproof guide you’re sure to deliver the performance of a lifetime. You may even make your audience laugh.

### Best man’s speech

**1. Kick off with an unforgettable opening line.** If you make your audience laugh or cheer they’ll be on your side from the outset. (See box.)

**2. First of all you should acknowledge the speeches that have come before you.** Thank the father of the bride and the groom. But be sincere about it. Then you can make the groom even more nervous than he already is by telling everyone that he is about to have his character well and truly assassinated.

**3. Traditionally, the role of the best man is to reply to the groom on behalf of the bridesmaids and the maid of honour.** You don’t need to be too formal about this, but whatever you do, don’t forget to tell all the bridesmaids how beautiful they look. They have spent hours, nay days, preparing themselves and sorting out their dresses. A throwaway remark as to how pretty they look will not suffice. Wax lyrical... and sound genuine.

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### Great opening lines

"A warm welcome to everyone here today, at the end of what has been a magnificent week for sales of Immodium."

"Ladies and gentlemen. My wife has given me a short list of topics I’m not allowed to mention in my speech. [Remove a large stack of papers from your pocket and throw it over your shoulder.] So you’ll be glad to know it’s going to be a lot shorter than I originally intended."

"Rest assured. I’m not going to stand here and give you a load of stale, old jokes. I’ll leave that to the best man."

"I don’t mind telling you that I’m just a little nervous. This isn’t the first time today I’ve stood up from a warm seat with a piece of paper in my hand."

"Ladies and gentlemen, I’m only going to speak for a couple of minutes today. It’s my poor throat, you see. My new wife says that if I ramble on too long she’ll throttle it."

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Give your congratulations to the bride and groom. As with so much of the best man's speech, there's a fine line between sounding genuine and sounding cheesy.

You don't need to use nauseatingly lovey-dovey language. However well you deliver cheesy words, they will always sound cheesy. A few simple, but well-meant words will be far more effective. The trick is to look at the couple fondly and with a heartfelt expression as you congratulate them. Everyone else will notice you doing this and hopefully realise the message is coming from your heart.

Remember also to thank them both for the honour of being best man.

If you feel you've perhaps been too schmaltzy then try one of these little quips:

"[Bride's name], treat him like a dog: three meals a day, plenty of affection and a loose leash."

"Hug and squeeze and kiss her daily... and if her daily won't go along with it, try the au pair."

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If it's not your official duty, but another line about how beautiful the bride looks will not be wasted. To avoid the compliment sounding slushy, follow it up with a line about how lucky the groom is to even have been considered as marriage material.

This now naturally brings you on to the subject of how the bride is the perfect person to look after the groom, and how the groom is completely hopeless at looking after himself. Remember that it's always the groom you should be mocking, not the bride. For example: "[Groom] is very responsible. If anything ever goes wrong you can guarantee that he's responsible."

Now you can really go no the offensive. This is your chance to make fun of your best friend in public and get laughs for it. Just make sure your jokes don't end up being too cutting.

Conceited: "[Groom] never has an unkind word to say about anyone. Mainly because he only seems to talk about himself."

Hypochondriac: "When I think of [groom] I think of Champagne. Every pain he has is a sham."

Selfish: "[Groom] has been described as conceited, arrogant, selfish and insensitive. Let's face it, a mother should know."

Lazy: "He's certainly not afraid of work. He fights against it like a tiger."

Inarticulate: "Did you know [groom] was bilingual? Unfortunately, neither language appears to be English."
Always balance the jokes by following them with something serious and poignant. You are, after all, the groom’s best man. Tell everyone what a great friend he’s been to you and that, despite all his obvious faults, he is a terrific bloke.

If you feel it’s all starting to sound too cheesy then you can always follow up the compliments with a witty put-down.

“[Groom]’s a man of hidden talents. As soon as we find one, we’ll let you know.”

“[Groom] could be described as charming, intelligent and entertaining... and perhaps one day he will be.”

“Ahh. Look at [groom]. Isn’t he special? Maybe we can cryogenically freeze him until doctors find a cure.”

Use lots of anecdotes and funny stories from the times you’ve spent together as friends. “If you and the groom grew up together, touch on that,” says Andrew Byrne, in his book The Complete Wedding Speech Guide. “You could even run your stories as if you were recapping his life. Sometimes funny things happen during the wedding preparations and of course the stag night provides lots of ammunition too.”

The trick is to make the anecdotes appeal universally. Private jokes simply aren’t funny.

Read out messages from any of the guests who haven’t been able to attend the wedding. Maybe throw in a couple of spurious ones like this:

“This message is from [groom’s] football team, none of whom could make it today because they’re playing in their league final. They sent the following message of congratulations: ‘In our experience [groom] has been absolutely useless in every position. We hope [bride] has more luck.’”

Wind up your speech with a quotation or a poem. (See box.) But keep it concise.

Finish your speech by proposing a toast. It’s up to you how formal you think this should be. Here are a few suggestions:

- “To the bride and groom. May their marriage be long and always happy. May their children be as beautiful as they are. And may every wedding speech they listen to be shorter than mine.”
- “Here’s to you. Here’s to your future. Here’s to the best thing you both ever did.”
- “May the roof above your heads never fall in. And may you both never fall out.”
- “May ‘For better or worse’ be far better than worse.”
- “A toast to the beautiful bride. A toast to the fortunate groom. A toast to the person that tied. A toast to all in the room.”
- “May the best day of your past be the worst day of your future.”

The groom has got quite enough on his plate without having to worry about his speech. Fortunately for him, he can keep his words very short. And no one’s expecting him to be funny.

1. Your official role is to reply to the father of the bride on behalf of you and your new wife. Remember to thank your parents for all their support over the years, your in-laws for an amazing wedding and all the guests for their gifts.

2. Make mention of any close family members who couldn’t attend or who have recently passed away.

3. Discuss at length what a fortunate man you are to have found the perfect bride.

4. Tell funny anecdotes about how you first met and courted. The night you proposed is sure to offer up some funny material.

5. The four most anticipated words in a groom’s speech are “My wife and I”. Pause before you utter them and pause afterwards for the inevitable applause. It has now become something of a tradition at British weddings for everyone to cheer on hearing this phrase.

6. Remember to thank all the ushers and bridesmaids. Tell the former what great friends they are and the latter how beautiful they look. Just to cover all your bases, thank the pageboys, band, caterers, florist etc.

7. Introduce your best man and acknowledge that he is about to stitch you up good and proper.

8. If you’re giving presents to parents, in-laws, best man or bridesmaids then now is a good time.

9. Finish with a toast to the bridesmaids.
While it’s crucial to deliver your speech well, you don’t want to worry too much about coming across like a professional orator. No one is expecting that.

1. Speech order
In Britain the speeches traditionally start with the father of the bride, followed by the bridegroom and then the best man. They normally, although not always, take place after the meal so that everyone is well-fed, well-watered and less fidgety.

2. Remain sober
A couple of small drinks during the meal won’t do any harm and will help loosen you up. But don’t get tipsy. A slurred speech might get a few laughs at the start but after a while you’ll just look stupid. Have a glass of water nearby so that you can prevent your throat from going dry with nerves.

3. Breathe correctly
Get your breathing under control well before it’s your turn to deliver a speech. “Breathe slowly and deeply, pushing out your abdomen and taking care not to raise your shoulders,” says Phillip Khan-Panni, founder of the Professional Speakers Association and author of Be The Best Best Man And Make A Stunning Speech [Howtobooks]. “Fill your lungs and hold the air for a count of two, then breathe out fully. Do that three or four times.”

4. Smile inside
Just before you stand up, think of a funny incident from your life that always makes you laugh. This way, when you start your speech you’ll feel happy, confident and your audience will notice you’re smiling. They will smile back at you. You’ve already started to get them on your side.

5. Stance
Don’t hide behind a table. Come out in the open, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, one foot slightly in front of the other. One hand in a pocket is forgivable (and may help you relax), but two hands in pockets aren’t. It’s best to hold your hands in front of you, with palms facing the audience.

6. Eye contact
Make the wedding guests your friends. Keep looking around the room as you speak. Engage your audience and make them think you’re very much in control. Eye contact is a great way to get them on your side.

7. Cue cards
It’s just not worth trying to deliver your speech from memory. It’s wise to use cue cards, but make sure you don’t simply read your speech from them. Glance at them occasionally and then look up again at your audience as you speak.

8. Speak slowly and clearly
“Pretend you are speaking directly to those furthest away from you,” says Andrew Byrne in The Complete Wedding Speech Guide [New Holland]. “If there are people at the back, your voice should be loud and clear enough to be heard by them. Don’t raise your voice to the point of shouting.”

Make sure you articulate every word by opening your mouth wider than usual. Keep your head raised as much as possible.

9. Microphone
“If you have a microphone available, use it, even if you have a strong voice,” says Phillip Khan-Panni in Be The Best Best Man & Make A Stunning Speech. “At a wedding reception there will always be background noise, and the bodies in the room will also absorb a lot of the sound you make.”

If you’re feeling nervous then a microphone on a stand can act as a crutch, both psychologically and physically. For best results, stand with your mouth about eight inches away from it.

There is of course a chance that the microphone will succumb to technical problems, but since the father of the bride is the first to make a speech, he’s the one who will have to deal with them.

10. Don’t fidget
Jiggling coins in your pocket, shuffling your feet, fiddling with your cuffs (like Prince Charles) or constantly pushing your glasses up your nose (like Sir Cliff Richard) looks awkward and annoys the audience. Try to avoid it.