

Two professors share stories of students' excuses, newsroom antics, and backstage dramas.

What Do I Put on My Notecard?

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What Do I Put on My Notecard?

Stories of Students We Have Known

Tom Walton and Lori Norin

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The characters and events in this book are somewhat fictitious. See Foreword for additional information.

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Dedication

To Sherilyn, my wife, who has taught junior high English and been my loving life partner for 29 years, no easy tasks. To Dr. Gil Clardy, my major professor and friend during my years as a Communications major at the University of Evansville who convinced me to shift from becoming a sports announcer to pursuing a career in academia. I have never looked back.

TW

To Kenneth, my husband, friend and companion, who is constantly encouraging and supportive of my efforts. To Alexis, my talented daughter, who offered whole-hearted humor and dedicated support during the process of writing this book. I could not have done it without you.

LN

Foreword

All of the names are changed.

Most of the stories are embellished.

Some of the stories are totally true.

None of the stories are made up.

About the Authors

Tom Walton and Lori Norin, Assistant Professors of Speech Communication at the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith, have 50 years of combined teaching experience in a variety of speech communication, theatre, and journalism classes to college students. The authors have spent many a late afternoon unwinding by sharing stories with each other and with colleagues about students they have dealt with over the decades both in and out of the classroom. Finally, they have put those stories on paper to share with others.

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Jenny, the Closer

Jenny knew about the challenge of passing speech class. She had failed to make it through the first week any of the other three times she had enrolled. “Fourth time will be the charm,” she told me behind a non-convincing smile when she sheepishly visited my office the afternoon after the first class. She confided she had dropped after the first day, the second day, and the third day her previous attempts. No way, she admitted, did she have the nerve to get in front of a group of people and give a speech. But, this time she had to get through the class to graduate. “I just can’t do it,” she cried. “I can’t, but I know I have to.”

For the next few minutes I listened to her story. It was not a happy story. I will spare you the details. After about ten minutes I said what all speech teachers say at this point. “Jenny, you have just put more energy and enthusiasm into the past few minutes than you’ll ever have to give to a speech. Your content had depth and breadth, very impressive.” Jenny then said what all students like her say at this point. “Yeah, but this isn’t a speech. It’s just you and me.”

The first week went by with Jenny in attendance each day. She showed up the next Monday morning, the day introduction speeches began. Everyone knew to have their speeches ready even though it would take all week to get through 25 of them. One never knew, I had told them on Friday, how I would call on speakers. Not being ready if called upon, however, meant dropping the course. Harsh, yes, but if threatened only with a zero, many students would rather take that than have to get up in the front of class and give a speech so soon.

Deciding to let her ease into the situation, I declared that the guys would go first. Now that she had actually managed to survive the first week, perhaps seeing some of her peers struggling to deal with their

speech anxiety at the podium might help her desensitization process. I made sure to acknowledge how each speaker gutted it out despite obvious symptoms. I even let them talk about how nervous they had been and all those other sneaky speech professor tricks. I made sure to keep an eye on her to see if any glimmer of hope revealed itself in her face and demeanor as the speeches continued. All I saw, unfortunately, was a pale young 17-year old, visibly growing increasingly white and withdrawn. “Wednesday, Jenny,” I thought to myself, “please come back to class Wednesday.”

She did. OK. This was going to be it. Since there were only 8 guys in the class we got through all of them Monday. The gals’ speeches would start today. She knew that. She sat in the second row from the door, two desks from the front. I declared, therefore, that we would start with the row closest to the door. That meant she would be the third speaker. Monday had been back row to front row day. Wednesday would be door row to window row day. What little color she had in her face quickly drained like fresh newsprint on a rainy day.

Her moment arrived. Trust me, the biggest moment of her academic life. She laboriously trudged to the front of the classroom. I could feel her terror. Everyone else could sense it too. “Come on Jenny,” I said to myself, “you can and will do this. Come on.” She did. Not well, not long enough, and not loud enough, but she did it. The most positive thing she said about herself was that she hadn’t thrown up since about 4 a.m. The class applauded loudly, and a few of them told her she had done a good job. I remember saying as she passed by on her way to her seat, “Hey girl that wasn’t so bad, was it?” I can’t begin to describe the look she gave me. No simile for this one.

Anyway, time passed and informative speeches began. She had kept pace with all the preparation steps and had a solid speech ready to go. On her speech day, for which she surprisingly had signed up to go first, Jenny arrived a few minutes early. She brought a sack full of visual aids and with her colorless face went to the front of the room to set up. Her speech was about nutrition, and she had boxes and cans of healthy

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and not-so-healthy foods to refer to as she went through her material. Being a few years before PowerPoint, she even had a couple of posters with comparison statistics on them to display. This was the day I learned you can eat nine medium-sized apples before you have consumed the same number of calories as a cheeseburger with no mayo.

All went well, and as she reached her conclusion I felt really good for her and for myself. “Well, Tom,” I thought, “another student saved.” Not so fast my friend. She reviewed her main points (check), restated the relevance of her topic for the audience by reminding us of the consequences of poor nutrition (check), and did her closer (check). And what a closer it was. She promptly and on cue fell to the floor. The audience and I responded with a bit of a laugh and then started applauding. It seemed so realistic. She didn’t even get up right away. One of the guys said, “Wow, what a way to end a speech.” She still didn’t get up. A girl in the front row finally jumped up and said, “Oh my God, that wasn’t on purpose. She’s out cold.”

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