

The speech template

1. Open on the room, about 30 seconds

Acknowledge the range of people present. It's the widest-spanning audience of any speech here, from grandchildren through to people in their eighties.

"There are four generations in this room tonight, and I've been asked to say something that works for all of them. So I'd like to apologise in advance to at least two."

2. The version of them you didn't know, about two minutes

The heart of it, and the reason to do the research on page 5.

Two or three concrete stories from before you existed or before you can remember. Told with real detail: the place, the year, the object, the price.

"In 1978, my mother and [name] drove to [place] in a car that [specific fault]. They had £14 between them. My mother has told this story exactly once, to me, in 2011, and has denied it since."

Why this works: everyone in the room has a version of your parent as a parent, a colleague, a neighbour. Almost nobody has the version from before that, and hearing it makes the person standing there suddenly three-dimensional. It is also, reliably, very funny, because people were more reckless in their twenties and the details are absurd.

3. The turn, about 15 seconds

From the young person to the one in front of you:

"Which is the same woman who, forty years later, will not leave the house without checking the immersion heater twice."

The turn works best as a direct comparison: the same person, two eras, one sentence.

4. What they've been to people, about 90 seconds

Not a list of virtues. Evidence.

The strongest version of this section quotes other people. When you did the research on page 5, three or four people will have told you something specific. Use their words:

"I asked around before tonight. [Name] said [quote]. [Name] said [quote]. And [name] said, and I'm quoting exactly, [quote]."

Three short quotes from three different people is more persuasive than anything you could assert yourself, and it makes the room feel collectively involved.

Then one sentence of your own, plainly. One.

5. The toast, about 20 seconds

"Would everyone raise a glass, please, to [name]. Eighty years old, and still the fastest driver in the family."

Landing on a callback to a story from section two closes the loop and keeps it light.