

How to use this

These aren't finished jokes. Finished jokes are the problem: a complete gag about a colleague nobody has met is exactly what makes a speech sound downloaded.

Every line has a **slot** in it, marked [like this]. The line gives you the shape; you supply the detail that makes it true. A workplace joke with a real detail in it gets a laugh from people who were there. The same joke without one gets a polite noise.

Four rules that matter more than the lines.

One: the room's shared irritations are your best material and they're free. The car park. The coffee machine. The system everyone complains about. The meeting that recurs forever. Nobody's feelings get hurt and everybody recognises it instantly.

Two: aim at yourself, at the organisation, or at the situation. Rarely at a person, and never downward. If you manage the room, a joke at a named individual's expense lands differently than it would from a peer, because the power difference does something to it that you can't undo afterwards.

Three: no jokes about age at a retirement. It's the laziest material available and it makes the subject feel the room only sees a number.

Four: two to three across a whole speech. More than that and you're doing a set, which is a different job.

What's not in here. Anything about them putting their feet up. Anything about golf, gardening, or "what will you do with all that time". Anything about them being ancient, obsolete, or a dinosaur. The "they're not retiring, they're just moving to a different sofa" construction. All excluded on purpose: they're the lines every retirement speech already has.

Openers

Fifteen lines for the first thirty seconds. Pick one.

1. For those who don't know me, I'm [name], and I've worked with [name] for [number] years, [number] of which I've enjoyed.
2. I've been asked to say a few words. I've prepared rather more than a few, so settle in.
3. I was told to keep this short, warm and free of anything actionable. I've managed two.
4. I've worked here [number] years and this is the first time anyone's given me a microphone, which tells you something about the risk assessment.
5. I want to start by acknowledging that we are all standing up, holding paper plates, at [time] on a [day]. Corporate hospitality at its absolute peak.
6. I've been writing this for [number] days, which is [number] days longer than I spent on [work thing].
7. There are people in this room who've worked with [name] longer than I have. I'd ask them to keep quiet for the next four minutes.
8. Right, I'm told the buffet opens when I stop talking, so I'm aware of the incentive structure here.
9. I asked [name] what [he/she/they] wanted me to say today. The answer was [quote], so I've ignored it entirely.
10. I've got four minutes, three jokes and one nice bit. We're currently at zero for three.
11. Thank you all for coming, and particularly to those who've come from [place], which involves [specific journey detail].
12. Before I start, [name] has asked me to remind everyone that [genuine housekeeping detail]. That's the last useful thing I'll say.
13. I want everyone to note that this event started on time, which in [number] years is unprecedented.
14. I did offer to do this as a slideshow. I was talked out of it by [number] separate people, all of whom I'd like to thank.
15. I'm the warm-up. [Name] is on next and has assured me [he/she/they] has prepared nothing, which I believe as much as you do.