

The speech template

1. Thank the room, about 30 seconds

Open to the whole room before you open to individuals.

"Thank you all for being here. Looking around at who's in this room, we've done quite well out of you lot."

One warm, slightly wry line. Don't open with an apology and don't open with "well, here we are".

2. The thank-yous that aren't a list, about 90 seconds

The trick is grouping and specificity. Never thank people one at a time in a flat sequence. Group them, and give each group one real detail.

"To [partner's parents], thank you for today, and for raising someone who is somehow both the most organised and the least punctual person I've ever met."

"Mum, Dad, thank you for everything, and specifically for the fact that neither of you said a word when I announced I was proposing in a car park."

"To everyone who helped this week: [name] did the flowers, [name] drove four hours with a cake on the back seat, and [name] has been holding a spreadsheet none of us are allowed to see."

Three groups, one specific detail each. That's ninety seconds and it lands better than a two-minute roll call, because a specific detail is a small piece of evidence that you noticed.

Handling money gracefully. If someone paid for the day, thank them for the day, not for the money. "Thank you for today" is warm. "Thank you for paying for today" makes everyone at the table look at their plate.

Absent friends. One sentence, said plainly, then move on. Don't dwell and don't apologise for mentioning it.

3. The turn, about 15 seconds

Move from obligation to the real speech. Don't signpost it. Let the sentence carry you across:

"The best thing any of you did, though, was turn up today, because it means you were all here for this."

4. Your partner, about two minutes

This is the speech. Everything before it was clearing the runway.

Two rules.

Be specific, not adjectival. "She's beautiful, she's kind, she's my best friend" is three words that could be about anyone. One concrete thing she actually did is worth all three:

"Two years ago I was made redundant on a Tuesday. By Tuesday evening she had rewritten my CV, ordered a takeaway, and told me, accurately, that I'd hated that job for eighteen months."

Say one true thing you'd normally be too embarrassed to say. Not a grand declaration. A small honest one. The room can tell the difference immediately, and the small honest one is the line people quote back to you for years.

Humour belongs here too, but the ratio matters: two-thirds warm, one-third funny, and the funny should be at your expense rather than theirs.

5. The toast, about 20 seconds

Traditionally the groom toasts the bridesmaids. Do it if it fits your day, skip it if it doesn't. Nobody is counting.

Whatever you toast, say "please stand", pause, wait for the room, then say the names. The pause is what makes it land.