



Harvard Extension School Commencement Speaker Prize

Each year, the Harvard Extension School invites graduating students to submit original remarks for consideration as the class address at Commencement. The selected speech should represent the voice, experience, and spirit of the graduating class: authentic, specific, and unmistakably human.

Submission Guidelines & Expectations

In recent years, some submissions have become highly polished but increasingly interchangeable, speeches that could be delivered anywhere, by anyone. Harvard Extension students bring a remarkable range of experiences, and our goal is to hear your story, not a template.

This year, we encourage students to focus on authorship. We want to see the personal details, humor, challenges, insights, and moments of growth that make your journey distinct. While AI tools may be used for light editing or idea organization, your submission must reflect your own perspective, tone, and lived experience.

Our review committee evaluates submissions using a standardized rubric grounded in clarity of message, authenticity, alignment with HES values, originality of ideas, structure and flow, and ability to engage an audience. In short: we want the speech only you could give.

All submissions must:

- Be your own original work.
- Reflect your personal voice, lived experience, and connection to the HES community.
- Convey a clear message with purpose and impact.
- Demonstrate original thinking through story, metaphor, perspective, or reflection.
- Be well-organized, with a natural flow from introduction to conclusion.
- Engage the audience with warmth, clarity, and inclusivity appropriate to a Harvard Commencement address.
- Maintain length, tone, and formality appropriate to a celebratory academic setting. (5 minutes - 700 words/3 pages maximum).

About AI and Writing Assistance

AI tools can be helpful for brainstorming, outlining, or polishing language, but they cannot replace you, your insight, your perspective, or your story.

To maintain fairness and uphold the values of the prize:

- You may use AI for light editing, clarity, or organization.
- The substance, voice, tone, humor, ideas, and lived experience presented must be entirely your own.
- Submissions that read as generic, impersonal, overly templated, or inconsistent with the above criteria, particularly authenticity, originality, and HES spirit, will not advance in the review process.

If you used AI assistance at any stage, please include a brief disclosure at the end of your submission. Example: *This draft was written by me and edited with AI-based language tools for clarity.*

Our reviewers will assess your work on its authenticity, storytelling, and originality, not on whether it sounds machine-polished.

Final Note

Commencement is a celebration of **your** path, **your** voice, and **your** community. We encourage you to write a speech that reflects who you are, what this journey has meant to you, and what wisdom you wish to share with your fellow graduates.

We look forward to hearing your story.