Commencement speeches (CS) are traditionally delivered at graduation ceremonies in North American universities by prominent figures from various fields of endeavour. Originally addressed to a more restricted audience, these days CS constitute an increasingly public moment in the life of an academic institution: they are often widely reported in the national press as well as being available on the Internet.

Part of a larger study, this paper looks at a small sample of CS in order to examine their communicative purposes and discourse features and presents some preliminary findings. In particular it focuses on two aspects of CS that are key factors in their communicative success: their portrayal of identity and their interactivity. Presumably intended to pass on words of advice and wisdom to the graduating students, CS speakers nonetheless appear to have almost complete freedom of license to talk about whatever they choose in their addresses, which can be highly personal and often have a significant autobiographical element.

CS are of course examples of spoken discourse; at the same time they are usually the end product of careful planning and revision. They might even be the result of several hands working on the text (in the case of CS presented by senior politicians). The paper investigates the use of rhetorical strategies and lexico-grammatical devices in the texts, in order to identify underlying patterns in their discourse structure and organization. It also highlights some of the intrinsic dilemmas and ambiguities of CS, as the speakers ‘give the graduates an earful’.