OSU COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

R.L. Stine

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Truly honored. I want to thank everyone for inviting me. I am so excited to be back at Ohio State and to be able to share your special day with you. Especially glad to be here. Why am I especially glad to be here? (Tell about librarian.)

That's why I'm especially glad to be here. But I want to apologize. As you can see, I'm not too scary. People always expect me to wear a black cape or have fangs or something. A few years ago, I gave a talk here in Columbus. And the next day, the reporter for the Dispatch wrote: In person, R.L. Stine is about as scary as an optometrist. (That's not very nice, is it.)

Now, here's something I know you won't believe. I graduated from OSU in 1965. When I was here, the tuition was $125 a quarter. That's right. $375 a year. I thought that was a pretty good deal.

But my family was so poor—this is true—I had to take out a student loan to pay the $375 tuition. (I'm hoping to pay it off real soon.)

Well… let me start out by asking you this: Has anyone here ever seen a ghost? I mean a real ghost—not a TV ghost. I think maybe I did. Let me tell you a true story. It happened to my brother Bill and me when we were kids here in Columbus.

(Ghost story.)

Do you think maybe I made up some of that true ghost story? Maybe a LOT of that true ghost story?
Well, the real question is: why did I come here on your graduation day and tell you a ghost story?

I'll tell you. While I was preparing my speech, I thought about my own graduation. My graduation was a little different from this. It was in June and it was held in the football stadium. It was a very intimate event, only about 50,000 people graduating. The sun was beating down. It felt like a hundred degrees. And we were in these heavy black robes. And we were all sweating and getting hotter. And a lot of kids had been partying the whole night before and they weren't in very good shape. I think you get the picture. And I survived somehow. But later, I realized I couldn't remember who the speaker was or a single thing he said.

My son graduated from college a few years ago. And I realized I couldn't remember a single thing about what his commencement speaker said. I've been to a lot of graduations, and I never remember a word that was said.

So I thought if I came here today and told a ghost story... maybe 30 years from now, you'll say, hey, I remember my graduation speaker. He came and told us a ghost story. What was his name??

But to be serious, I'm truly touched you thought I might have something worthwhile to say to you. I've been very lucky. I've had an amazing career. It turns out you can make a really good living by scaring children. Who knew?

I've been doing my job for so long, I've learned a lot about work and careers, which may be a help to you as you start your careers. (This is the Advice Part.)

Oh, wait. I've already given you plenty of advice, haven't I?
I told you to STAY OUT OF THE BASEMENT, remember? And BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR and DON’T GO TO SLEEP. Beware of snowmen and ventriloquist dummies and lawn gnomes… All good advice.

Here are some other ideas I had:

One. Every job you take can be helpful to you. Even if it's the farthest thing from what you want to be doing. After I graduated from here, I moved to New York City to become a famous novelist. Oddly enough, I couldn't find any job listings for famous novelist.

But I did get really good lessons in fiction writing from my very first job in New York. It was writing for movie fan magazines. This woman had 6 movie fan magazines to fill up every month. So my job was to make up interviews with the stars. I'd come in in the morning, and she'd say, do an interview with Diana Ross. Do an interview with the Beatles. And I'd sit there and type… type… type make up an interview. I never really interviewed anyone. We made it all up.

Now this wasn’t at all what I wanted to be doing, but I really learned a lot that helped me later on. For one thing, I learned to write really fast. I had to make up 3 or 4 interviews a day. I learned how to follow an assignment. And I learned how to put myself in the mind of the reader. I had to get in the heads of my readers and write for a specific audience.

Very valuable for later on—and actually, my first lesson in this was right here on campus as editor of the Sundial magazine. When I was in school, every college had a humor magazine. The OSU magazine was called the Sundial. It was around for over 100 years. James Thurber was the editor of the Sundial in 1917. And I was editor of the Sundial for three years in a row. That's all I did in college.
I almost never went to class. I just stayed in the student union and put out this magazine 6 or 8 times a year. It was filled with jokes and cartoons and swipes at campus life. Our big rival was the Lantern. Every year we published a satire of the Lantern called The Latrine. (High-class humor.)

One month, we published very sexy photos of a really attractive girl from one of the sororities. And we said, If you'd like to win a date with her, call this number. And of course it was the Lantern's phone number, and they got thousands of calls. It totally messed them up.

We were snarky about everything at Ohio State. We just made fun of everything. And it wasn’t until much later that I realized how valuable my time as the magazine editor was and how much I learned about writing and editing and managing a staff and a business. What an amazing opportunity the university gave me by allowing us to publish with such freedom. I've always been so grateful. And I think that's what this place is about—it's about opportunity.

Which brings me to my next bit of advice, which is… Just say YES. Say yes to everything. When I was starting out as a freelance writer, an editor would call and say, Can you write a teenage romance novel? I always said, of course. No problem. Then I'd run out to a bookstore and buy a bunch of teen romances to see what she was talking about.

When I started out, I never said no to anything. I wrote GI Joe books. I wrote Rocky & Bullwinkle coloring books. I wrote the novelization to Spaceballs—and to the Pee Wee Herman movie. I wrote the little jokes you get in bubblegum. Really.

I had one job I wasn’t proud of. It was writing stories for a men's magazine. The stories were filled with sex and sadistic violence. They'd give me a really nasty photo,
and I’d have to write a story to go with it. I was embarrassed to write this stuff. So I didn’t sign my name to the stories. I signed my brother’s name… and the name of my high school principal.

But I said yes to everything. And I think I learned something from every project. Besides that, I was earning a living as a writer. And each project led to other writing work.

In fact, saying yes to everything is how I turned scary. This was my big break, and I didn’t know it. I’d been writing joke books for kids and doing a humor magazine. Then one day I was having lunch with a friend of mine, the editorial director at Scholastic.

Tell Jean Feiwel story.

I’ve been scary ever since. It’s kind of embarrassing that it wasn’t my idea to write scary stuff for kids. But it changed my life and I think it was because I wasn’t afraid to say yes to everything that came along.

Finally, my last piece of advice is to keep your sense of humor. You really need it—not just when you’re starting out but even later. And it’ll help you recover from any mistake or setback.

I need a sense of humor when dealing with critics. And you know, my toughest critics are my readers. Sometimes my mail from kids can be brutal—and sometimes the letters really do require a sense of humor. Here are a few examples I thought you might enjoy. These are all REAL letters.

Dear R.L. Stine…

I really enjoy your books but I’m having trouble keeping up with them. Do you think you could stop writing for a while?
I am a big fan of your Fear Street books. I have one question for you: Why do they end without making any sense?

You are my second-favorite author.

I'm your biggest fan. I read your books so much, I need my parents to escort me to the bathroom.

I'm a big fan. You know, your friends and family are proud of you—no matter what anybody says.

Tell favorite letter.
I started this talk by saying no one ever remembers a graduation speech. But I remember the speaker at my son's high school graduation very well. The graduation was held outside behind the school. It was a beautiful day, and the speaker was Joss Whedon. You know. He created Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Firefly.

Joss was giving a funny and interesting speech. He was about halfway through it—when a big gust of wind came up—and blew the rest of his speech away. I mean, the pages just went flying all over the place. He stood there for a moment. Then he said, Thank you very much—and he walked off. That was it.

I remember thinking, what an eloquent way to end a graduation speech. Because frankly, no one knows how this is all going to work out for you. There are so many moments when the wind changes or something totally unexpected happens. And all your planning and all your figuring isn't the whole picture.

All of you have come very far to get to this day. You have worked and dreamed and planned. You've learned so much and you've achieved so much. You have a real, solid foundation which will help you after you leave this wonderful place.

But as you continue through life, let me urge you to think about those white pages flying up to the sky. And remember that life is full of surprises—surprises that can take you somewhere you never dreamed.