

## 4.9.15: Developing an Effective Speech

### Learning Objectives

- Identify the five steps of developing an effective speech

Let's assume you see the value in developing public speaking as a skill. Where do you start? A good warm-up exercise is to watch a few [TED Talks](#), organized by topic and popularity, among other categories. If you prefer to proceed straight to the cream of the crop, [Steve Jobs' classic "How to Live Before You Die" speech](#) delivered at Stanford University's 2005 commencement is excellent inspiration and perspective—for life as well as for speaking. If you watch a few talks, you'll notice that each presenter has a unique message and style that makes him or her compelling. This is a key point. While we all learn process and technique by copying the masters, as legions of artists have done before us, the artistry (and magic, from the audience's standpoint) is in finding your own voice and developing your personal style. In practical terms, this means that you also have to develop and curate your own material using your life experience, insights, and observations to illustrate your points.



U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor giving a speech.

Whether you're facing a blank sheet of paper or a blank screen, the start is always the hardest part of a speaking project. We're going to work through that obstacle by following this five-step jump start.

1. Choose your topic
2. Develop your benefit statement
3. Develop your positioning statement
4. Derive your title
5. Create your content

### Choose Your Topic

For perspective on topics, you can scan the 194 topics used by the National Speakers Association (click on "Browse the complete topic list"). If there's a conference or Chamber of Commerce or professional association event you want to speak at, scan the associated website(s), social media posts, and publications to get a sense of what topics might be a good fit. In choosing your topic, consider your experience and expertise. That's not to say that you need to be an acknowledged expert on a particular topic—that's where research comes in—but you do need to have an interest in the topic and a base level of credibility. Although there are hundreds of potential topics, it's very likely that a particular topic has already been covered a number of times by a number of people. Given that, the essential question is what can you bring to the topic that others haven't? That is, how can you approach an exhausted topic with fresh eyes to make it feel new and engaging?

### Develop Your Benefit Statement

Once you've decided on a topic, the next step is to develop a one to two sentence benefit statement that supports your credibility as a speaker on that topic. The benefit statement should answer the question: *why you?* This is similar to the process you would go through in pitching an article to a publisher. What is the unique value—experience, expertise, point of view—that you bring to the topic? For different frames of reference on benefit statements, scan the speaker bios and bylines of writers that cover topics of interest to you.

### Develop Your Positioning Statement

The positioning statement is an expansion of the last step that tailors your benefit statement to a specific audience. Working through this step helps you clarify who your audience is and what you will be presenting to them. Although the positioning

statement is for internal purposes, the focus is external—what’s the ROA (return on attention) for the audience? Don’t skip this step; it will help you focus your thoughts, minimize interesting but off-point digressions, and help maintain a coherent structure and flow through the research, writing, editing, and ultimately, speaking phases.

## Develop Your Title

In moving from your positioning statement to the speech title, think of your speech as a product or service—what would prompt someone to “buy” what you’re offering? Your title is a pitch—or your bid for the audience’s attention. To get to that pitch, select a few key words from your positioning statement and brainstorm a compelling headline. For additional insight and exercises, read Larry Kim’s *Inc* article, “30 Ideas for Super Clickable Blog Headlines,” explore the [BBC News resources on writing headlines](#), or watch the “How to Write a Hook” [YouTube video](#). You may also want to browse the titles of articles and blogs posted to your target audience’s (i.e., industry or professional association) websites and publications. Remember that as you develop your content, your title might need some adjusting. If you don’t need to submit your title far in advance (to be printed in a brochure or program), revisit it once your content is complete to make sure it still fits. If you do need to submit it before your content is fully developed, try to leave a little wiggle room and not make it too specific regarding the conclusions you might come to.

## Develop Your Content

Once you have your title and framework from your positioning statement, you’re ready to start developing your content. Of course, you’ve been building useful content all along through your life experiences. Reflect on the relevant lessons you’ve learned, and make note of some of the experiences—a key quote or visual, an emotion or insight, people or places. Use these events as possible connections to consider and, if applicable, work them in to your speech to illustrate your points. Research is a skill, and art, unto itself (refer to the [Washington University librarians’ Conducting Research pages](#) for additional tips and resources), but a good jumping-off point is doing an internet search of your keywords. If you have lead time, you can set up a Google Alert to monitor relevant news and developments. It can also be helpful to find and follow subject-matter experts for your topic and tune in to current trends. To do this, conduct “best of” searches to find thought leaders. You may achieve both objectives in one search, as in this *Forbes* article: “[Top Shopping Trends of 2018: Retail Experts Share What to Watch for Next Year](#),” one of the results in a search for “best retail marketers.”

**Reminder:** Remember to document your sources! Include citations in your written speech in order to give credit where credit is due and to be able to follow-up on any related audience questions.

There you have it! A simple process for sidestepping writer’s or speaker’s block. Next, we’ll discuss another common sticking point: how to open your speech.

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