

## 4.2.2: Choosing a Topic

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify the general purpose and specific purpose of a speech

Now that you have a clear idea of your general and specific purpose, the allotted time, your audience's expectations, and the amount of information available, you are ready to commit to a topic. We have several strategies you can use to help select and narrow the topic appropriately.

### Know Yourself and Your Audience

The first strategy is to identify an area of knowledge or an issue that deeply interests you. If you have not already completed the first of the Note 10.1 "Introductory Exercises" for this chapter, please work with it, identifying as many activities, areas of interest, places you've traveled to, and things you find interesting as possible. Once you have completed the exercise, identify three broad subject areas where you have some knowledge or experience and consider at least one link to business and industry for each area. Talking about what you know will make you a more credibility speaker but it must clearly connect with your employer's goals for your presentation. If, for example, you like doing a scrapbook, what kind of glue do you prefer and why? That may make for a natural speech topic that calls on your previous experience while requiring you to learn more about the glue and its properties. You may need to compare and contrast several types of glues as part of your preparation. Your in-depth awareness of scrapbooking and glue as a necessary ingredient will make you a more credible speaker.

In the first of the Note 10.1 "Introductory Exercises" for this chapter, you were asked to choose three questions from the list and then survey people you know to find out which of the three they prefer to hear about. Make sure you keep score by writing down factors like age, gender, and any other elements you think your audience may have in common. This exercise serves to reinforce the idea of being audience-centered, or tailoring your message to your specific audience. Our third of the Note 10.1 "Introductory Exercises" for this chapter should highlight that our perception of the world is not always accurate, and there is no substitute for thorough, objective research when preparing a speech. The more you know, about yourself and your audience, the better you can prepare to meet their needs and accomplish your goals as a speaker.

You have now utilized the Note 10.1 "Introductory Exercises" to help identify some broad topic areas that might work for you. If you find the topic interesting, your enthusiasm will show and your audience will become interested, too. Next, you will want to decide which of these areas would work best for your speech, and how to narrow it down.

### Saving Time

Here are some strategies you can use to save yourself time in selecting a speech topic.

First, consider the information you already have close at hand. Do you already have a project you are working on, perhaps in another course? What are you currently studying in your other classes? What topics do you want to know more about? Which issues or aspects initially drew you to this topic or area? Chances are that whatever piqued your interest the first time will also get your audience interested.

Next, conduct a search (online, in the library, or interview people you know) in your subject area to get an overview of the subject. Explore topics, issues, places, or people that fascinate you.

### Appeal, Appropriateness, and Ability

These are three main factors to consider when choosing a topic. All three factors are related to one another, but by systematically focusing on each one you will help address the strengths and weaknesses of your chosen topic.

**Appeal** involves the attractive power of arousing a sympathetic, stimulated response from the audience. Your audience will have expectations of you as a speaker and of your purpose for speaking. We all tend to seek novelty and find interesting, attractive, or appealing, or something that is not part of everyday life. A good example is the melting ice cream used in the speech on global warming. The elements are nothing new. We've all seen plates, brownies, and ice cream before, but how many of us have seen a speaker use them together to symbolize the melting ice caps associated with global warming? There is an inherent novelty present when we adapt something from its original purpose in order to make it appealing. You will need to consider an appealing way to start your speech, and will look for ways throughout your speech to reaffirm that appeal to the audience. When considering a topic,

also think about the visual or auditory images that come to mind, or how you might represent it to an audience in ways other than your words. This can guide you as you proceed to select your topic, thinking about what you can make appealing to your audience.

It also follows that appeal applies to the speaker as well as the audience. You may find the prospect of discussing global warming not very interesting, and if you feel this way, it will come through in your speech. You need to be attracted, interested or find your topic appealing in order to convey this appeal to your audience. Find something that catches your interest, and that same spark is what you will cultivate to develop ways to stimulate the spark of curiosity in your audience.

**Appropriateness** involves a topic that is especially suitable or compatible with your audience's interest, expectations, norms, or customs. Everyone will have expectations about roles and outcomes associated with your speech. Some may be looking for information, while others may already know something about your topic and want to learn more. You will need to reach both groups within the audience. As we saw earlier in the Ford Mustang example, a highly technical speech may lose the more novice members of your audience.

Appropriateness is important because some topics do not work as well in a classroom setting as others. Will everyone find a new rust treatment product interesting? Will everyone find a car speech interesting? Whether you are in the classroom or business office setting, consider your audience and the appropriateness of your topic.

Regardless where you give a speech, you should always choose topics that will not promote harmful or illegal actions. It is also important to consider whether your topic might offend members of the audience. If this is a possibility, can you find a way to present the topic that will minimize offense? Similarly, if your topic is controversial and you know that your audience has strong feelings about it, consider how you can convey your message without alienating or antagonizing your listeners. Finally, it is usually wise to avoid topics, which the audience already knows a lot about.

**Ability** involves the natural aptitude or acquired proficiency to be able to perform. If you have a lot of prior information on flying, gained over years of experience being at the controls of an aircraft, you may have a natural aptitude and knowledge base to use to your advantage. If, however, you've never flown before, you may need to gather information and go visit an airport to be able to approach a proficient level of understanding to discuss the topic.

In addition to your ability to draw on your natural strengths, you'll also want to consider your ability to research a topic where you are located. If you want to develop a speech on a particular topic but you find information hard to come by, this will make your job even harder and could possibly have a detrimental impact on your speech. You may find that two similar topics interest you but your ability to gather information from more diverse sources, from places that are more readily available, or from your background and experience make one topic more attractive than the other.



Figure 4.2.2.2: Consider your audience and the appropriateness of your topic, product, or service for success. Steve Jurvetson – Audience – CC BY 2.0.

Consider topics that are,

- new,
- possibly controversial,

- clear,
- supported by information you can find in outside sources,
- interesting to you.

Individual course guidelines vary, so make sure that your instructor approves your topic, and that your topic is appropriate for your audience. At some colleges and universities, broad topics are designated as part of the curriculum including, for example, environment, diversity, and technology. In your class, you may be challenged to link any of those topics to business, and to prepare an informative or persuasive speech. Some colleges and university instructors may also encourage you not to choose topics that have been done repeatedly over the years, like abortion or the death penalty, unless you can connect the issue to a current event or new perspective. Don't avoid all controversial topics, as they often intrigue your audience and help maintain interest. Just make sure to consider the pre-existing attitudes of your audience when attempting to create an effective, engaging speech.

In a business setting, you will rarely be given complete freedom to choose your topic. You may even have a script and visual aids prepared in advance. In the real world the luxury of time for preparation and topic selection are rare, but in a classroom setting you are often given more of an opportunity to choose. That choice should not be taken lightly, and should be viewed as an opportunity. The classroom is a training ground, and your freedom to explore and experiment is designed to build skills and strengths. When you join an employer, you will be asked to prepare a presentation as part of the job; more often than not, there are clear guidelines on what is acceptable and your professionalism is expected.

### Use Your Self-Inventory

Choosing a topic can be difficult, but your self-inventory of things you already know should get you started. By doing a little exploring, you can often help yourself come up with several possible topics. The topic itself will not exclusively make a "good" or "bad" speech. How you develop that topic and discuss its points and issues, however, will make a significant impact. Before moving on to the next step in this chapter, make sure you have a topic in which you are relatively confident. If you have trouble selecting a topic, take your self-inventory to your instructor or librarian. They may be able to help guide you to a topic that works for you.

Here are some examples to get you started. Let's say your self-inventory response from the first of the Note 10.1 "Introductory Exercises" for this chapter to the question, "**What do you play or do for fun?**" is to play sports, and it also happens to be one way you are earning your way through school on a scholarship. You could consider a topic like the history of your sport for an informative speech, or how to tell the difference between three classic types of pitches in baseball, and which you can involve an audience member for a demonstrative speech. You could also consider stereotypes of athletes in college and some of the common misperceptions and persuade the audience that athletes often handle the issues of time management well, can get good grades (provide statistics as evidence and ask a coach for examples), and are actively developing both their minds and their bodies through participation in sports. You might even take on a topic of why basketball is more interesting than football, or vice versa. You might decide instead to entertain the audience, and tell stories associated with game travel, buses breaking down, or road trips gone bad. Finally, you might put together a ceremonial speech honoring an Academic All-American player, recognizing his or her excellence both in academics and in athletics.

If you are not a student athlete, but a college student, you may have answered that same question by indicating you are taking classes for a degree as well as for fun. You could put together an informative speech on the steps involved in applying for financial aid, or produce a demonstrative speech on how to gather the information required and complete the application process. You might persuade the audience to apply for financial aid, even if they think they might not be eligible, and cover the options within the program. You might entertain the audience with funny stories about the challenges of registering for classes, completing financial aid, and completing the classes you need to graduate. (There is always just one more class, right?) You might also draft a ceremonial speech as if you were presenting the commencement speech at your graduation.

These two scenarios should stimulate some ideas, or you might already have a clear purpose and topic in mind. It's important to be clear on both your purpose and your topic as you begin to put pencil to paper, or keystroke to computer, and begin the process of writing your general purpose and thesis statements.

### Writing Your Thesis Statement

Earlier in the chapter you wrote a statement expressing the general and specific purpose of your speech. Now that you have explored further and identified a definite topic, it's time to write a thesis statement. This [thesis statement](#) should be a short, specific

sentence capturing the central idea of your speech. Steven Beebe and Susan Beebe recommend five guiding principles when considering your thesis statement. The thesis statement should

1. be a declarative statement;
2. be a complete sentence;
3. use specific language, not vague generalities;
4. be a single idea;
5. reflect consideration of the audience.

For example, if you plan to inform a general audience about the Ford Mustang, a good thesis statement might be, “Ford produced five ‘generations’ of the Mustang, each with a distinctive body style that audience members can learn to recognize.” If you plan to persuade a group of investors that a beachfront property could be threatened by rising sea levels, a good thesis statement might be, “Sea levels are predicted to rise because of global warming, and if these predictions are correct, the beachfront property my audience is considering investing in may be threatened.”

The thesis statement is key to the success of your speech. If your audience has to work to find out what exactly you are talking about, or what your stated purpose or goal is, they will be less likely to listen, be impacted, or recall your speech. By stating your point clearly in your introduction, and then referring back to it during your speech, you promote the cognitive strategies of emphasis, clarity, and conciseness, and help your audience to listen while meeting the expectations of the rhetorical context.

## Key Takeaway

Choosing a speech topic involves knowing yourself and your audience; using efficient strategies; and understanding appeal, appropriateness, and ability. When you have accomplished these steps, you will be able to write a good thesis statement.

## Exercises

1. Which of the following qualify as good thesis statements? Take any that are faulty and rewrite them to remedy their weaknesses.
  1. Living in the desert as we do, my listeners and I can grow many beautiful and interesting plants in our gardens without using large amounts of water.
  2. To inform patients about how the medical insurance claims process works.
  3. Because recent research suggests children develop positive self-esteem through recognition for their achievements, not from indiscriminate praise, I will persuade the parents and teachers in my audience to modify their behavior toward children.
  4. Tourists can learn a lot from visiting the European battlefields of World War II, and unexploded land mines from past wars are a serious problem throughout the world.
  5. As a student attending this college on an athletic scholarship, I lead a very busy life because I am responsible for working hard at my sport as well as being held to the same academic standards as the nonathlete students in my audience.

Answers: Examples a, c, and e are good thesis statements. Example b is not a complete sentence. Example d contains more than one main idea.

2. From your list of possible topics, write several sample purpose or thesis statements. Share and compare your results with classmates.
3. Write a general purpose statement and thesis statement for a speech to inform. Now adapt these statements for a speech to persuade.

## References

Beebe, S. [Steven], & Beebe, S. [Susan]. (1997). *Public speaking: An audience-centered approach* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

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