

4.2.1: Before You Choose a Topic

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the steps in the process of planning a speech.

As you begin to think about choosing your topic, there are a few key factors to consider. These include the purpose of the speech, its projected time length, the appropriateness of the topic for your audience, and your knowledge or the amount of information you can access on the topic. Let's examine each of these factors.

Determine the General and Specific Purpose

It is important for you to have a clear understanding of your purpose, as all the other factors depend on it. Here's a brief review of the five general purposes for speaking in public:

1. *Speech to inform.* Increase the audience's knowledge, teach about a topic or issue, and share your expertise.
2. *Speech to demonstrate.* Show the audience how to use, operate, or do something.
3. *Speech to persuade.* Influence the audience by presenting arguments intended to change attitudes, beliefs, or values.
4. *Speech to entertain.* Amuse the audience by engaging them in a relatively light-hearted speech that may have a serious point or goal.
5. *Ceremonial speech.* Perform a ritual function, such as give a toast at a wedding reception or a eulogy at a funeral.

You should be able to choose one of these options. If you find that your speech may fall into more than one category, you may need to get a better understanding of the assignment or goal. Starting out with a clear understanding of why you are doing what you are supposed to do will go a long way in helping you organize, focus, prepare, and deliver your oral presentation.

Once you have determined your general purpose—or had it determined for you, if this is an assigned speech—you will still need to write your specific purpose. What specifically are you going to inform, persuade, demonstrate, or entertain your audience with? What type of ceremony is your speech intended for? A clear goal makes it much easier to develop an effective speech. Try to write in just one sentence exactly what you are going to do.

Examples

To inform the audience about my favorite car, the Ford Mustang

To persuade the audience that global warming is a threat to the environment

Notice that each example includes two pieces of information. The first is the general purpose (to inform or to persuade) and the second is the specific subject you intend to talk about.

Can I Cover the Topic in Time?

Your next key consideration is the amount of time in which you intend to accomplish your purpose. Consider the depth, scope, and amount of information available on the topic you have in mind. In business situations, speeches or presentations vary greatly in length, but most often the speaker needs to get the message across as quickly as possible—for example, in less than five minutes. If you are giving a speech in class, it will typically be five to seven minutes; at most it may be up to ten minutes. In those ten minutes, it would be impossible to tell your audience about the complete history of the Ford Mustang automobile. You could, however, tell them about four key body style changes since 1965. If your topic is still too broad, narrow it down into something you can reasonably cover in the time allotted. For example, focus on just the classic Mustangs, the individual differences by year, and how to tell them apart.

You may have been assigned a persuasive speech topic, linking global warming to business, but have you been given enough time to present a thorough speech on why human growth and consumption is clearly linked to global warming? Are you supposed to discuss “green” strategies of energy conservation in business, for example? The topic of global warming is quite complex, and by definition involves a great deal of information, debate over interpretations of data, and analysis on the diverse global impacts. Rather than try to explore the chemistry, the corporate debates, or the current government activities that may be involved, you can consider how visual aids may make the speech vivid for the audience. You might decide to focus on three clear examples of global

warming to capture your audience's attention and move them closer to your stated position: "green" and energy-saving strategies are good for business.



Figure 4.2.1.1: Visual aids may make this speech vivid for the audience. [Wikimedia Commons](#) – CC BY-SA 3.0.

Perhaps you'll start with a brownie on a plate with a big scoop of ice cream on top, asking your audience what will happen when the ice cream melts. They will probably predict that the melted ice cream will spread out over the plate in a puddle, becoming a deeper puddle as the ice cream continues to melt. Next, you might display a chart showing that globally, temperatures have risen, followed by a map of the islands that have lost beaches due to rising tides. To explain how this had happened, you may show two pictures of Antarctica—one taken in 1993 and the other in 2003, after it lost over 15 percent of its total mass as the Ross Ice Shelf melted, cracked, and broke off from the continent. You may then make a transition to what happens when water evaporates as it goes into the atmosphere. Show a picture of the hole in the ozone over Chile and much of South America, and hold up a bottle of sunscreen, saying that even SPF 45 isn't strong enough to protect you. Finally, you may show a pie graph that illustrates that customers are aware of the environmental changes and the extent of their purchase decision is based on the perception of a product's "green" features or support of related initiatives. In just a few minutes, you've given seven visual examples to support your central position and meet your stated purpose.

Will My Topic Be Interesting to My Audience?

Remember that communication is a two-way process; even if you are the only one speaking, the audience is an essential part of your speech. Put yourself in their place and imagine how to make your topic relevant for them. What information will they actually use once your speech is over?

For example, if you are speaking to a group of auto mechanics who specialize in repairing and maintaining classic cars, it might make sense to inform them about the body features of the Mustang, but they may already be quite knowledgeable about these features. If you represent a new rust treatment product used in the restoration process, they may be more interested in how it works than any specific model of car. However, if your audience belong to a general group of students or would-be car buyers, it would be more useful to inform them about how to buy a classic car and what to look for. General issues of rust may be more relevant, and can still be clearly linked to your new rust treatment product.

For a persuasive speech, in addition to considering the audience's interests, you will also want to gauge their attitudes and beliefs. If you are speaking about global warming to a group of scientists, you can probably assume that they are familiar with the basic

facts of melting glaciers, rising sea levels, and ozone depletion. In that case, you might want to focus on something more specific, such as strategies for reducing greenhouse gases that can be implemented by business and industry. Your goal might be to persuade this audience to advocate for such strategies, and support or even endorse the gradual implementation of the cost- and energy-saving methods that may not solve all the problems at once, but serve as an important first step.

In contrast, for a general audience, you may anticipate skepticism that global warming is even occurring, or that it poses any threat to the environment. Some audience members may question the cost savings, while others may assert that the steps are not nearly enough to make a difference. The clear, visual examples described above will help get your point across, but if you are also prepared to answer questions—for example, “If the earth is heating up, why has it been so cold here lately?” or “Isn’t this just part of a warming and cooling cycle that’s been happening for millions of years?”—you may make your speech ultimately more effective. By asking your listeners to consider what other signs they can observe that global warming is occurring, you might highlight a way for them to apply your speech beyond the classroom setting. By taking small steps as you introduce your assertions, rather than advocating a complete overhaul of the system or even revolution, you will more effectively engage a larger percentage of your audience.

How Much Information about My Topic Is Readily Available?

For a short speech, especially if it is a speech to entertain, you may be able to rely completely on your knowledge and ideas. But in most cases you will need to gather information so that you can make your speech interesting by telling the audience things they don’t already know. Try to choose a topic that can be researched in your college or university libraries. You may need to do some initial checking of sources to be sure the material is available.

Putting It All Together

When you have determined your general purpose, the amount of material appropriate to the time allowed for your speech, and the appropriateness for your audience, then you should be well on your way to identifying the topic for your speech. As a double-check, you should be able to state your specific purpose in one sentence. For example, the specific purpose of our “Classic Cars” speech could be stated as, “By the end of my speech, I want my audience to be more informed about the three ways in which they can determine whether a classic car is a rust bucket or diamond in the rough, and be aware of one product solution.”

Key Takeaway

Speech planning begins with knowing your general and specific purpose, your time allotment, your audience, and the amount of information available.

Exercises

1. Complete the following sentence for your speech: By the end of my speech, I want the audience to be more informed (persuaded, have a better understanding of, entertained by) about _____.

If you can’t finish the sentence, you need to go back and review the steps in this section. Make sure you have given them sufficient time and attention. An effective speech requires planning and preparation, and that takes time. Know your general and specific purpose, and make sure you can write it in one sentence. If you don’t know your purpose, the audience won’t either.

2. Make a list of topic that interest you and meet the objectives of the assignment. Trade the list with a classmate and encircle three topics that you would like to learn more about on their list. Repeat this exercise. What topic received the most interest and why? Discuss the results with your classmates.

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