

# How to Give Your First Speech

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## Introduction

Fortunately, giving your first speech sounds a lot harder than it is . . . The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide the information you need to do a good job on this assignment: how to select a topic, how to focus your speech, how to make your speech more interesting, how to organize your speech, how to prepare and practice your speech, how to behave during the presentation, and how to cope with stage fright.

### How do I select a topic?

There are many other approaches to the initial speech. . . No matter what the assignment for your introductory speech, do your best to understand precisely what your teacher requires. In order to do well in the course, you must fulfill the speaking assignments exactly. If something is unclear about the expectations for your speech, be sure to ask for clarification.

### How do I focus my speech?

Whether your instructor assigns a specific topic or provides a number of options, you will need to gather material to include in your talk. After you have settled on a particular subject, be certain the focus of your speech is narrow enough to conform to the time limit. One of the most common mistakes students make on their first speech is to try to cover too much material. Not only does this cause the speech to go over the time limit, but it results in content that is too general or superficial. So you should select a limited amount of focused material that is illustrated thoroughly.

### How can I make my speech more interesting?

You should strive to make your introductory speech as creative and interesting as possible. But how do you select material that will please the audience? We know from experience that certain general traits tend to make a compelling speech. While your talk need not include all of these traits, it would be helpful if it incorporated some of them.

. . . [A] way to make a speech interesting is to use colorful, descriptive language that appeals to your audience's senses. . . Colorful and concrete illustrations are invariably more interesting in a speech than dull language and abstract generalizations.

Students often ask about using humor to make their speeches more interesting. Audiences love witty remarks, jokes, and funny situations, but humor is only effective when done well. It should flow naturally out of the content of the speech, rather than being contrived.

If you are not normally a funny person, you are better off giving a sincere, enthusiastic speech and leaving the jokes out. All speakers should refrain from humor that is tasteless or not directly relevant to the topic. It almost goes without saying that you should avoid jokes that embarrass specific individuals or negatively stereotype groups of people. The best kind of humor pokes fun at ourselves or at universal human foibles. Everyone in the audience will be able to enjoy that kind of humor.

### **Now to give your first speech**

Regardless of the subject, your speech will have three main parts—an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. What should a good introduction do? First, it needs to engage the attention and interest of the audience. You can attract your classmates' attention simply by walking to the front of the room and beginning to speak in a loud voice. The hard part is arousing their interest. Your first few sentences are vitally important. There are many methods you can use in the opening lines of a speech to engage the interest of your audience. You can tell a story, state the significance of your topic, open with a quotation, pose a question, present a startling fact or statistic, or relate how the topic affects the audience directly. The purpose of all these methods is to create a dramatic, colorful opening that will make your audience want to hear more.

In addition to gaining attention and interest, the introduction should orient your audience toward the subject matter of your speech. In longer speeches, your introduction might need to add some brief background information or define key terms, but your first speech will probably not need to do either.

Near the end of the introduction, you should clearly state the specific purpose of your speech. Immediately after announcing your specific purpose, you should provide your audience with a "road map" for the rest of your speech by previewing or forecasting the major points. . . Once you have completed these steps, it is time to move on to the body of your speech.

The body should follow a distinct organizational format such as chronological or topical. In your first speech, usually all you need to worry about is keeping your major ideas related to each other and clearly focused. The main points should directly illustrate or explain the overall topic, yet each point should develop different aspects of it. Suppose you were introducing a classmate. All of your points should provide interesting biographical information about that person. Relevant subjects might include his or her family, relationships, academic major, home town, hopes for the future, special talents, preferred food, favorite music, job, hobbies, and the like.

Remember to limit the number of main points. If your speech has too many points, your audience will struggle to recognize the most important ideas. In a two-minute speech, you probably won't have time to develop more than two or three main points. Once you have selected those points, make sure each one focuses on a single aspect of the topic. For example, if your first point concerns your classmate's home town, don't introduce irrelevant information about her job or favorite music. Save this material for a separate

point, or cut it from the speech altogether. Try to make the structure of the body stand out by introducing each main point with a transition statement. In a hypothetical speech of introduction, you might begin the first main point by saying: "Megan grew up on a farm in the southern part of the state." The second point might commence along these lines: "Living and working on a farm led to Megan's great love of animals, especially horses. In fact, her favorite hobby is Western-style horseback riding." You have now let your audience know that the first main point is over and that you are starting the second one. The third main point might begin as follows: "Horseback riding is more than just a hobby for Megan. Her academic major at the university is equine science, which concerns the care, management, and business of horses." When you have completed your final point, you are ready to move into the conclusion.

In the conclusion, you will need to accomplish two tasks. First, let your audience know you are about to finish your speech. Second, review the main points. If possible, try to end on a dramatic, funny, or thought-provoking note. . . Such an ending ties up the presentation and allows the speaker to finish on a strong note.

### **How should I prepare my speech for delivery?**

Once you have selected an appropriate subject and organized the content into a clear structure, it is time to prepare your speech for delivery. A common impulse of many students is to write out their speech like an essay and read it word for word to their listeners. The other extreme is to prepare very little for the speech-to wing it by trusting to your wits and the inspiration of the moment. Neither approach, however, is appropriate for your introductory talk. Reading your speech from a manuscript runs the risk of poor eye contact with the audience and a stiff, unenthusiastic delivery. On the other hand, ad-libbing the speech is a recipe for disaster. The outcome is usually a disorganized talk that is embarrassingly short.

The best approach for your first speech is called the extemporaneous method, which combines the careful preparation and structure of a manuscript presentation with the spontaneity and enthusiasm of an unrehearsed talk. Your aim in an extemporaneous speech is to plan out your major points and supporting material without trying to memorize the precise language you will use on the day of the speech.

The extemporaneous method requires you to know the content of your speech quite well. In fact, when you use the extemporaneous method properly, you become so familiar with the substance of your talk that you need only some brief notes to remind you of the points you intend to cover. The notes should consist only of key words or phrases that jog your memory, rather than of complete sentences and paragraphs. This way, when you stand up in front of the audience, you will tell them what you know about your topic in your own words.

Prepare your notes by writing or printing key terms and phrases on index cards or sheets of paper. Some instructors require students to use index cards because they are small and

unobtrusive, don't rustle or flop over, and can be held in one hand, which allows the speaker to gesture more easily. Other teachers recommend sheets of paper because you can get more information on them, there are fewer objects to handle, and it is easier to print out computer files on paper. If you are unsure what your instructor prefers, be sure to ask well before your speech is due.

Whether you use index cards or sheets of paper, your notes should be large enough to see clearly at arm's length. Many experienced speakers prefer to double or triple space their notes because this makes it easier to see the notes during the speech. Write or print only on one side of the sheet of paper or index card, so you don't have to flip it over before moving on to the next one. Number your notes in case you accidentally drop them. Finally, use the fewest notes that you can manage and still present the speech fluently and confidently.

At first, the extemporaneous method may seem very demanding, but when you think about it, you use aspects of this method all the time in your personal conversations with friends. Do you read from a manuscript when you tell your friends an amusing story or relate the events of a date or a trip? Of course not. You recall the essential details of your story, and you tell the tale to different friends, on different occasions, using somewhat different language each time. You feel relaxed and confident with your friends, so you just tell them what is on your mind in a conversational tone. You should try to do the same thing in your first speech.

### **How should I practice my speech?**

Delivering a speech extemporaneously calls for significant practice to get it right. Because most of the speeches you will give in your public speaking course require the extemporaneous method, you should make a concerted effort to use it well in your introductory assignment. When you become truly proficient at extemporaneous speaking, your audiences will be amazed at your excellent eye contact and sincere, spontaneous delivery. But, of course, you need to practice in the proper way. The first time you rehearse your speech, you will probably struggle. Words may not come to you easily, and you might forget some things you planned to say. Don't become discouraged. Every time you practice, it will get easier.

Rehearse the speech in a loud voice. This is more inconvenient than silently looking over your notes, but the physical process of speaking the words out loud will aid you in mastering the content of your talk. Once you have a fairly good grasp on the speech, practice in the presence of other people and ask for their reactions. You will get a much better sense of how well you know the speech if you can deliver it to friends or family members. Giving the speech to a live audience when you practice will also make it easier to present it later in class.

As you practice, time your presentation with a stopwatch or clock. Many instructors enforce strict time limits on speeches. Be sure you understand the minimum and maximum times allowed for your presentation. Because of nerves, most people talk faster

during their first speech than when they practice it. When you rehearse at home, make certain your speech runs longer than the minimum time limit. That way, if your speaking rate increases when you present the speech in class, you will not end up with a speech that is too short. Don't be surprised, however, if the timing of your speech varies somewhat as you practice. It would be a bad sign if your speech took exactly the same amount of time during each rehearsal, because that would indicate that you were reading the address from manuscript or had memorized it verbatim.

### **How should I behave during my speech?**

When it is your turn to speak, move to the front of the room and face the audience. Assume a relaxed but upright posture. If you are standing, plant your feet a bit less than shoulder width apart. Allow your arms to hang loosely by your side or in front of your body. Before beginning your speech, carefully arrange your notes. Then take a moment to look over your audience and to smile. This will begin to establish rapport with your classmates from the start.

Once you are into the speech, feel free to use your hands to gesture, but don't worry overly about planning your gestures ahead of time. If you are not a person who ordinarily uses your hands or body expressively during informal conversation, then don't try to fake it while speaking in public. It is particularly important during your first speech to allow your hand gestures and facial expressions to flow naturally and spontaneously from your feelings.

You should do your best to avoid nervous mannerisms such as twisting your hair, wringing your hands, shifting your weight from one foot to the other, rocking back and forth, tapping your fingers on the lectern, or jingling coins in your pockets. No matter how nervous you feel, try to appear calm and relaxed. Your instructor does not expect a flawless performance. If you have some nervous habits, she or he will help you identify them and suggest remedies for later speeches.

During your talk, try to look at your classmates as often as you can. One of the major reasons for speaking extemporaneously is to maintain eye contact with your audience. In your own experience, you know how much more impressive a speaker is when she or he looks at the audience while speaking. If you have practiced the extemporaneous method of delivery and prepared your notes properly, you ought to be able to maintain eye contact with your audience most of the time. In a small public speaking class, try to look briefly and evenly at each person in the area. Be sure to look to the left and right of the room, as well as the center, and avoid the temptation to speak exclusively to one or two sympathetic individuals. When you are finished speaking, your classmates should have the impression that you tried to use your eyes to establish a personal connection with each of them.

Beginning speech students typically make three kinds of mistakes with their voice: they

speak too softly, they speak too quickly, and they do not pronounce their words distinctly. Therefore, the most important elements of voice that you should practice for your first speech are loudness, rate, and articulation. If you do well on these, most other aspects of vocal delivery will fall into place.

For your first speech, concentrate on projecting your voice to the back of the room. Unless you see your audience cringing and covering their ears, you will probably not be too loud. Second, fight the temptation to race through your speech. Speak slowly enough that your audience can comfortably comprehend your sentences. Third, try to articulate each word clearly, but don't over-enunciate, which might make you sound snobbish or odd. If you make a conscious effort to speak up, slow down, and speak clearly, you are on the right track to an effective presentation.

### **What about stage fright?**

Although we don't feel nervous conversing with our friends in private, many of us are anxious about giving a formal speech to a group of strangers in an unfamiliar situation. Most students experience stage fright before giving their first speeches. This is entirely normal. You can be sure that your fellow students share the same fears. In fact, one way you can help your classmates with their nervousness is by being a friendly, receptive listener. When others are speaking, look at them, smile and nod encouragingly, laugh at their jokes, and, in general, show that you are interested in what they are saying. When it is your chance to speak, you will appreciate similar behavior in return.

As your speech class progresses, you will get to know your classmates better, and you will become increasingly comfortable addressing them. As you complete your public speaking assignments with success, your confidence will grow. If you are like most students, by the end of the class you will feel considerably less anxious about speaking in public.

You are probably thinking, "All of that is fine for the future, but what about now?" First of all, realize that a certain amount of stage fright is actually a good thing. Many actors, musicians, and athletes believe that nervous energy enhances their level of performance. In fact, there are many stories of such people performing poorly on occasions when they are not nervous. The more experience you gain as a speaker, the easier it will be for you to use your nervousness to give an energetic, enthusiastic, animated speech.

Even then, however, you may still feel unpleasant physical symptoms on the day of your speech. Sweaty hands, dry mouth, blushing, dizziness, and upset stomach are some typical symptoms of speech anxiety. Fortunately, most of these symptoms will subside once you are into your speech.

In addition, you are likely to be in better physical condition for speaking if you follow a few commonsense tips. Get plenty of rest the night before the speech. Avoid dehydration by drinking water throughout the day of your presentation. If possible, try to eat a solid

meal a few hours before class. If you have butterflies in your stomach before delivering your speech, sit quietly in your chair and take several slow, deep breaths. This will relax

you and reduce your discomfort by getting more oxygen to your brain. The best advice for stemming stage fright has already been discussed-practice, practice, practice. Rehearsing your speech the proper way is the single most effective way to build confidence and to combat stage fright.

## **Conclusion**

This pamphlet has attempted to provide the basic information you need to have a good experience with your first speech. . . Do your best on the assignment, but don't be afraid to have fun with it. One purpose of this speech is to learn more about you, so let your personality shine through. Plan what you want to say, organize the material clearly, practice thoroughly, and use the extemporaneous method of delivery. You may be surprised by how much you enjoy giving your first speech.

\*\*This page contains the text of a supplement to *The Art of Public Speaking*, by Stephen E. Lucas. The information below can be found at [http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/comm/lucas/first/first\\_speech.htm#Introduction](http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/comm/lucas/first/first_speech.htm#Introduction)

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