

Chapter Four
Topic Selection
from
Public Speaking: An Idea Focus
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[Return to Table of Contents](#)

General Educational Objectives: This chapter helps you to:

1. see a relationship between topic selection for classroom speeches and topic development in speeches beyond the classroom.
2. understand factors in selecting a topic.
3. appreciate a narrow and manageable range of ideas in speech creation.
3. consider ways to reduce the scope of your topics.

Specific Testable Objectives: As a result of studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. define and provide examples of four types of speeches.
2. state the general requirements of special-occasion speeches.
3. distinguish among and provide examples of four types of persuasive objectives.
4. state the general requirements of special-occasion speeches.
5. illustrate how a topic can be reduced in scope.

Admittedly, considerations of topic selection are primarily pedagogical/practical; that is, these thoughts are directed toward your successfully completing a course in public communication. Outside of classrooms, few opportunities permit the speaker to select a topic. In other settings, someone or the situation dictates the topics for us.

Still, many principles that you use in selecting a topic have implications for relevant decisions in situations where the topic is predetermined. If the topic is assigned within a professional or organizational context, you must pay close attention to the expectations of those making the assignment, just as you need to adhere to the requirements of your instructor in the classroom. Similarly, with a defined topic, you will need to be inventive in your approach to the topic in ways that are suggested below.

Nature of the assignment

Most teachers of public speaking divide types of speeches into (1) entertaining, (2) informative, (3) persuasive, and (4) special-occasion. Like the flat-earth theory, as long as we realize they are not absolutely true categories, they provide useful distinctions. They also allow for variety in assignments and, as a rule, variety in speech experiences produces a meaningful course.

Speeches to Entertain

The clearest category is the speech to entertain. A speech that has a purely entertaining goal may easily be found in a comedy show or on late night TV, but, then, the better comedy routines often have the goal of changing minds; and, many of us learn of the events of the day from Letterman or Leno. If your professor assigns a speech to entertain, you will want to select a topic that you can treat in a way that the audience will enjoy the discussion, but unite the material alone a theme from which you can leave them thinking. The speaking/writing of people such as Will Rogers and Mark Twain provide good examples; just remember that their delivery added greatly to their effectiveness.

The Informative Assignment

The expectation for an informative speech is typically one where the emphasis is on providing new information to the audience. A generally consideration as a listener is termed the 80/20 rule: You must expect four bits of information that you already know for every bit of new information. If the actual body of the speech is five-minutes long, it is worth listening to if it has one minute of new information. Class speeches for the informative assignment should well exceed the 80/20 rule in new information: you will want to ensure that more than 20% of what you say is new ideas/data for the audience! Still, you will be wise to consider that new information needs to be placed in a context of present understanding for the new insights to be clearly understood and retained.

The purpose of an informative speech, in this context, is simply that: to make the information clear, significant and relevant to the audience so that they can and will want to remember it. While the speaker should show enthusiasm, even passion, for the content, the focus should not be on that passion in terms of using it to change the audience's attitudes or behaviors in any specific ways.

The Persuasive Assignment

In contrast, for a persuasive-speaking assignment, you will want, throughout the speech, to make it clear that your goal is to influence their way of thinking (as least) and actually change their behavior (at least eventually). Your passion may well then be part of the message which influences the audience. However, your passion, and inciting the passion of your audience, should be only one part of the persuasion. You will want to link to their present beliefs in ways that are reasonable and supported by evidence.

Three types of persuasive speeches

Persuasive speeches are said to be of three types. The first type, the speech to **stimulate** is given when the audience already agrees with you and knows what they need to do to help, and actually want to be encouraged to be more involved. Examples of speeches to stimulate are political rallies, lock-room talks, and focus meetings for sales personnel. It's safe to say that it would indeed be a rare situation where a speech to stimulate would be appropriate in a public-speaking class. The second type of persuasive speech is one to **convince**. Here, on key issues, the audience's attitudes are different from what the speaker thinks they need to be. The third type of persuasive speech is one to **actuate**. Here the audience may well agree in general with the speaker, but

the behaviors of its members do not reflect either the nature or intensity that is desired.

Four types of persuasive objectives

In creating persuasive goals, you may find that you have one or more of the following four types of objectives:

1. To **deter**: You want to prevent the audience from doing something that they aren't now doing. For example, you want a group of grade-school children to never start smoking.

2. To **discontinue**: You want a group to stop doing something they are currently doing. For example, you want a group know for their drinking parties to stop sponsoring those parties.

3. To **continue**: You want the listeners to do more of the things they are currently doing. For example, you want a class of nursing students to complete their degrees in nursing.

4. To **adopt**: You want an audience to start doing something that they are not currently doing. For example, you want your fellow students to plan on a vacation to Victoria, Canada for spring break.

The typical advice is that while your objectives may, in their basic form, be one or more of the first three, you are best served to cast them in terms of a speech to adopt. If you want to prevent children from smoking, help them to begin anti-smoking behaviors; If you want a group to stop having drinking bashes, encourage them to participate in other group activities; if you want nursing students to complete their degrees in nursing, get them to be active in nursing activities beyond the classroom.

Special-Occasion Speeches

Within the ceremonies that help us to maintain our civilization, special-occasion speeches serve useful functions. In the course of your life, you are likely to be required to present many of these speeches. Each of these times, you will want to perform well because the occasion will be special in the eyes of some if not everyone involved.

Introductory Speech

The explicit purpose of an introductory speech is to educate the audience about another person, generally the next speaker. This purpose may be the most important one in educational or youth settings. Sometimes, when the person is generally known, you may be able to focus on aspects of the person's accomplishments most relevant to the occasion.

In addition, the introductory speech, much like an opening act at a concert, provides a transition time for the audience. As you introduce the next speaker, you allow the listeners to settle into place and focus as an audience.

Third, the introductory speech may highlight dimensions of the sponsoring agency which has paid for the event. This is particular true when the agency is not-for-profit or a volunteer organization. The sponsorship of the event, while primarily a service to the greater society, may also help to raise funds and attract new members.

Presentational Speech

Presentational speeches, also, have educational functions. They tell the audience about the award or recognition that is to be bestowed. They tell or remind the audience of the organization granting the prize and its selection process and highlight the potential winners.

Clearly, these speeches go beyond providing information. In giving a speech of this type, you will want to build excitement and strengthen the honor of the prize and in so doing build the suspense for learning who is the winner.

Acceptance Speech

When you receive an award, you clearly want to express your appreciation for the award. In so doing, you pay tribute to the organization that is responsible for funding the award for all the work that it does. Of course, you'll also want to recognize individuals that have helped you to gain the recognition.

Tribute Speech

The speech of tribute presents praise for another person or group. This speech is similar to the introductory speech above. However, it differs in both the depth of compliments paid and the breath of activities discussed. You may in most of these speeches, feel comfortable in presenting personal anecdotes. In addition, you can be less concerned, generally, with recognizing of the agency hosting the event.

Eulogy

The eulogy is most often given at a funeral or memorial service. Its goal is best to reflect on the value of life as manifested by the deceased. In so doing, you can help the living to reflect on their relationship with the person and better cope with her or his passing.

Keynote

The keynote address is the predominant presentation at any event. It should set the tone and establish the theme for the proceedings. Typically, it functions as a persuasive speech that stimulates the listeners to continue in their support for the organization/community by adopting additional relevant behaviors.

Toast

Toasts are short speeches given to highlight the enjoyment and festiveness of the occasion. In giving a toast, you should remember that the need is to highlight the positive and contribute to the fun. While toasts sometimes are given at times of great sentimentality, any heavy reflections should clearly be offset with merriment.

Focus on the audience

Once you have a clear understanding of the general nature of the assignment, you should think in terms of your audience. What do they know, what are their interest, in what activities do they participate, how are they similar to and dissimilar from you? Some of the answers to these questions are obvious enough from daily observation of their behaviors since you are in the same course. Then, you can refine the answers by listening to them in class discussions and remembering what they said in introducing themselves to the

class. Further, you can practice your interpersonal listening through interacting with them during periods before and after class. These answers can be gold mines of clues to what topics in which they would be interested and would like to learn more as well as topics where you might want to help them improve by changing their behavior. This focus on others will serve you well in other public speaking situations. A meaningful way to consider your purpose in all communication is relating to your listeners so as to achieve shared goals.

Focus on yourself

Do consider what is important to you in selecting a topic for a classroom speech and in shaping a topic in other speaking arenas. Reflect on your beliefs and attitudes because every speech needs to reflect the speaker. Look at the activities in which you are currently and have previously been involved. These experiences are sources of information and support for the ideas in your speech. While you will want to expand on this knowledge in preparation for the speech, you will also want to share your experiences with your audience as part of content of the speech. While to a degree it is true that if you know it, others in the class also know about it, your perspective and your experiences are unique.

Limit the topic as much as possible

Probably the biggest mistake of beginning speakers is to attempt to cover too much. Some of this is because they are accused to writing essays. The written mode is much less redundant than the spoken mode; so, more can be covered and indeed more can be left for the reader. A reader can stop and reflect, a listener can not do so.

The other concern of the beginning speakers is that they want to ensure that they have enough material to fulfill the time limits. The solution to this concern is found within the previous paragraph. To meet time limits, you need to build the speech by structuring additional redundancy within the speech. You need to find alternative ways, probably as many as three different ways, of illustrating each point or idea.

One example to illustrate: A student who had spend several summers building decks for residential houses wanted to give a speech on building decks for his 5-7 minute informative speech. Certainly, it met the criteria of considering himself. He had also considered the audience. He told me that many in the audience needed summer jobs, some were already home owner and all of them were likely to be home buyers and owners in the future. They might buy a home with a deck and knowing about its construction would help them evaluate its quality; or, they might want to build or have a deck built for them.

I pointed out that he could speak for hours about all that was involved in building a deck. He quickly agreed saying he just wanted to give them a flavor of what it involved. I asked if that flavor would be sufficient to help any of his fellow students get a summer job or a home owner to judge the quality of her deck. He was quick to see that it would not.

Had he attempted to cover the whole process, he would have been frustrated in attempting to manage that many ideas (even though he was well

familiar with the process), the speech would have been either confusing (if he tried to jam in most of the needed information) or vague (if he did not) and the audience would have been quick to see they would not benefit from the speech. Given that, he adjusted to speech to a topic of three quick checks for quality of a deck, he was able to illustrate each check in several ways. The speech was thus manageable for him and he made his ideas clear to the audience.

Selecting a good topic can make the whole process easier and more enjoyable for both the speaker and listeners. Reducing its scope can permit the desired level of communication.

The need to limit the scope of a speech applies to speeches beyond the classroom for exactly the same reasons as in the classroom. Professional audiences may be more familiar with the topic than a class of students; still, their ability to process information is no greater. In the professional situation, there may be more need to cover information or concepts. The wise professional selects what ideas are best presented in the spoken mode and what details are best covered in written mode through emails, handouts or visual media.

Summary

This chapter provided information to help you determine and shape topics for your speech. No doubt, the most important is meeting the requirements of the assignment. The speech needs to conform to the instructor's expectations in terms of type and objectives of the speech and its length. You should consider the audience and yourself in selecting the topic. Finally, you need to limit the scope of the topic so as to permit sufficient redundancy to make the speech clear and meaningful to listeners.

Key Sources:

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