

Chapter Seven

Structuring Information
from
Public Speaking: An Idea Focus
W. Clifton Adams
© 2012

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

General Educational Objectives: This chapter helps you to:

1. approach the construction of a speech with an idea focus.
2. follow the appropriate steps in constructing a speech.
3. understand patterns of organization.
4. distinguish three types of transitions.

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

1. list and explain the steps in speech construction.
2. list, define, differentiate and provide examples of seven types of organizational patterns.
3. list, define, differentiate and provide examples of three types of transitions.

“What is written can always be reread. One can return to all the links in communications, something that is impossible to do in oral speech.”

Alexander R. Luria

Sentence production is linear: one word follows another. So, to many, it seems to follow that you should start constructing a speech at the beginning, or the introduction. However, starting at the beginning places too much emphasis on wording. In preparing a speech, it is best to keep the emphasis on ideas through the early phases of constructing the speech. In this regard, *it is best, when thinking about the organization of a speech, to think in terms of its body as the speech. The introduction and conclusion are extra; they serve as transitions into and out of the speech.*

Similarly, structuring a speech is seldom as systematic, even, as planning a trip. It is a dynamic process where pieces are placed together as they emerge, and then often rearranged as other parts are discovered. So, the following, “Steps in Organizing a Speech,” is presented as guidelines to be used as you might use a map. Consult it when you need more direction. The steps are presented as if you already have all the necessary supporting material for your speech. In all likelihood, as you arrange material, you will find that you’ll need to find an additional example or a quote in a section of your speech due to the need for balance or variety.

Steps in Organizing a Speech

1. Select a pattern.

Our minds arrange and retrieve information by categories in order. By arranging a speech in a sequence that makes sense, we probably help the audience to follow and retain our message. More importantly, the sequence also helps your mind, as the speaker, to recall each section. Needless to say, with everything you have to manage, your mind needs all the aid it can have. While there is a pattern, named “topical” that has no sequence, I recommend selecting one that has a sequence to gain whatever assistance it might provide. Toward that end, I discuss seven patterns here that lend themselves to informative speeches and develop others that apply more directly to persuasive speeches in Chapter 18.

a. *Chronological or time* – All topics permit an arrangement in terms of when something happened or when something might or should happen. Certainly tracing historical events across time serves as a chronological pattern whether we start in the past and move to the present or start with the present and move to the past. It is also a chronological order to discuss ideas according to when they occurred during the course of a day or in the acts of a play. By the same token, cooking and woodcraft shows are typically arranged according to a time sequence, from beginning to completion.

b. *Spatial* – All topics also permit a spatial pattern in arranging events according to where they occurred or are located. If you were discussing crime in the USA, you could arrange its occurrence from west to east or from north to south; or you could discuss it from the inner city to the rural areas in one location. If you were talking about anatomy, you could start with the head and move downward or vice versa.

c. *Size or scope* — Many topics can be conceived of in terms of how large, how encompassing, or how forceful they are. The arrangement can move from small to large, or vice versa. Discussions of merchandise are often arranged this way with the smallest (or largest) item presented first. Speeches dealing with impacts, such as factors that affect the economy, generally are more effective when the least significant factor is analyzed first and the one with the most impact is developed as the last point. Arrangement from least to most impact is termed a *climatic order*.

d. *Importance* -- When a speaker adds a value judgment as the measure of scope, it becomes a pattern of importance. Top-ten lists are typically designed according to this pattern. The results of talent show and beauty pageants are presented in ascending (climatic) order of importance. It is good in informative speeches for the scale to be based on some recognized standard, such as votes in talent shows, which can be applied to all the categories. The use of the standard, or abstract criterion, helps to maintain the objectivity needed to categorize the speech as informative.

e. *Comparison-contrast* – This pattern is an extended analogy in that, first, the similarities of two things are examined and, second, their differences are explored. This pattern produces a quality informative speech when something

not well understood by the listeners is discussed in terms of something they understood well. An audience can be aided in understanding the grammar of a foreign language by relating it to English. Typically, as in this case, it is best to do the comparison first, but there may be situations where a contrast-comparison pattern would be more effective.

f. *Cause-effect* – In this pattern, factors which contribute to a situation are examined, followed by a consideration of the extent and nature of the situation itself. Economic issues such as demand pressures on inflation or company efficiency as it relates to stock value make good fodder for this pattern. More common topics, such as maintenance and automotive breakdown, also lend themselves well to this pattern. The pattern may also be reverse, often producing more suspense. Also, it can be extended to include a solution stage. Presented as an effect-cause-solution pattern, the speech can quickly acquire the quality of a persuasive speech; however, as long as the information is presented in a neutral way, it should pass for an informative speech.

g. *Advantages-disadvantages* – This pattern lends itself best to consideration of a course of action. The action in question can be a proposal or an undertaking already underway. Obviously, the speech separates the positive aspects of the procedures from its drawbacks. Medical procedures lend themselves to this approach, but so does the consideration of art, music or drama. The pattern can be extended to include a section on recommendations; however, for an advantages-disadvantage-recommendations sequence to qualify for an informative speech, the recommendations would need to come from a recognized authority on the subject.

Inset 7-1

Useful Information Related to Organization

Miller's Magical Number Seven

In 1956, George A. Miller established that our ability to process information is limited, resulting in the now classic rule of 7 plus or minus two. The rule has been a determiner of how phone numbers and pass words are established. We can process more than nine bits of information if they are grouped, as in area codes and as in sentences.

Semantic Network Model

Our mind stores information in clusters, probably arranged hierarchically according to the level of abstraction. Bits from these clusters then can be accessed in terms of their association with similar items within that level of abstraction.

Inset 7-2

SELF-INSTRUCTION BLOCK FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS

Q: What is the arrangement of the following ideas?

- a. Children need time alone.
- b. Teenagers need time to themselves.
- c. Adults need time for private reflection.

A: Chronological/time

Q: How many ways could the following be arranged in a logical spatial order?

- a. Crime remains stable in Kansas City.
- b. Crime is down in New York City.
- c. Crime is increasing in Phoenix.

A: At least four.

Q: What are the four ways?

A: (1) West to east: c, a, b. (2) East to west: b, a, c. (3) North to south: b, a, c. (4) c, a, b. It probably would not make sense to cross the U.S. boarder in the sequence.

Q: What would be a climatic arrangement in terms of the increase in crime?

A: b, a, c.

Q: What pattern is reflected in the following set of ideas?

- a. State funding to education is limited.
- b. The nation is rapidly becoming undereducated.
- c. The central government needs to fund education.

A: Cause-effect-solution

2. Divide the material according to the pattern

Having arranged your supporting material according to the approach you selected, you will divide the material into sections that make sense in two regards: The sections should be approximately at the same level of abstraction and each section should require about the same amount of time in coverage. Of course, the latter requirement is likely to be true given the first and can be accomplished by doing more research or eliminating material.

The rule is to have from two to five divisions. Experienced speakers can handle five divisions and still keep everything clear for the audience. Still it is

unusual to hear as many as four from these speakers. When there are four or five areas, the speech is likely to be a major address of at least 30 minutes. These speakers realize the difficulty involved in managing that many divisions. They also know that they can never tell everything about anything anyway. So, they are likely to elect to narrow the focus to three areas and hope for an opportunity to discuss the other areas at another time.

For beginning speakers, it's best to plan on covering only two or three sections. For example, if you wanted to give a speech on building a deck, it would require many steps from conception to completion. It would be better to select one area such as factors in designing a deck, which is usually the most exciting stage. Another option for the professional, or soon to be professional, audience would be considerations in hiring a contractor. For the do-it-yourself audience, you might select an important or difficult part of the construction as the substance of your speech. Any of these options would be superior to one that attempted to touch on all the bases. Of course, building a deck is a mere example; whatever your topic, the same principle is apt to apply.

However, if for some good reason you need to give a panorama involving many areas, you can consider refocusing your speech at a higher level of abstraction. Take the common subject of astrology with its twelve signs. Twelve divisions are too many! However, you might manage the four areas: earth, wind, water and sky. If this approach is taken, you would consider each area as a unit, perhaps giving an example using one of the signs to represent the group. Again, this adjustment can work for other topics where the goal is simply to give an overview.

Obviously, both approaches discussed here require elimination of some supporting material. Each could require more research. If you focus on one segment of the total picture, you will need to find or develop ways to zoom in on that area. Similarly, but in contrast, if a broader perspective is taken, the supporting material might need to more clearly represent that perspective.

3. Label each section

You will want to name each section so that you can refer to it as a unit in talking with your audience. This will help the audience to place your information in a context. It will also help you to manage material during your speech. For that purpose, you should keep the label simple. For example, if you were giving a chronologically ordered speech on the battle of Gettysburg, the labels could be Day One, Day Two and Day Three. If the speech were ordered spatially, the label could be Northern Camp and Southern Camp.

If you are a student in a class, you will probably be required to express your labels in complete declarative sentences. This requirement is essential for the instructor to understand and help you in preparation for the speech. Summarizing the material as a statement will have a benefit of ensuring you have an idea of the totality of the section. This idea which will be an abstraction of material will then be the point of the section. Writing these points will have the additional benefit of reinforcing some language-art lessons and our earlier discussion of abstraction.

Inset 7-3

SELF-INSTRUCTION BLOCK ON FORMULATING POINTS

For each of the following, select the item which is the best point for the material described. Remember that a point is a declarative statement in that it expresses a complete thought. It does not ask a question, give an order or make an outcry. Then, the best answer will be an abstract statement, covering most closely the specifics of the supporting material.

1: Supporting material:

Quote from mayor commending the fire fighters' courage during the fire.

Statistics of the percentage of patients saved from the hospital.

Examples of some individuals rescued

Q: Options:

- a. The good job the fire fighters did.
- b. Do you know about the effort of the fire fighters during the recent fire?
- c. Fire fighters saved many lives.
- d. The mayor cast the best possible light on the hospital fire.

A: Note that a. isn't a complete thought; it only sets up a category of the job. Had it said, "Fire fighters did a good job," it would have been a correct choice. Of course, b. is a question. So, there are only two declarative sentences. Option d. may be true and could include the statistics, especially if a large percentage of people died. However, it would not include the examples. So, c. is correct.

2: Supporting material:

Bar graph showing PBS viewership for last five years
Nielsen researcher statement about decline of PBS viewership

Example of decline in PBS station's ratings

Q: Options:

- a. PBS viewership has declined in recent years.
- b. PBS's programming isn't as good as it once was.
- c. Decline in PBS's rating over the last five years.
- d. Did you know that PBS's ratings have declined?

A: Hopefully you eliminated the last two options automatically as not being declarative sentences. Option a. then becomes the most correct answer since none of the descriptions include a consideration of programming.

3. Supporting material:

Analogy to selling one's personal car

Story of company who tried to save money by not advertising

Charts showing sales increases as ad dollars increase

Q: Options:

a. Selling your car is just like running a business.

b. Advertising is essential to a successful business.

c. How does advertising work?

d. Advertising works because of creative image management.

A: Item b.

4. Subdivide if needed

Where the nature of the material or your purpose demands, you may subdivide each section. With any subdivision, you will start with step one above. The subdivision may have its own pattern. So, the speech on the Gettysburg battle could be ordered chronological but for each day, the pattern could be spatial. The result then would be that each subsection would have its own label or point. Each of these sub-points would then need a variety of supporting material. The sub-points would serve to develop the main point.

In preparation for your first speech, you should work so as to keep your divisions unified in focus so as not to need any subdivisions. The purpose underlying this advice is to keep the speech as easy for you to manage as possible. It is the same thinking that supports the rule to have a limited number of divisions overall. If you create a speech with only three main points and yet have one of them divided into three sub-points, you will have made your task too difficult. Of course, a speech divided into two main sections could support a subdivision of two parts. The spirit of rule is to maintain an organization that is balanced and manageable.

In keeping with this spirit, you will not subdivide your speech more than once. The desire is to make the speech manageable for yourself and understandable for your audience. As discussed in Chapter six, you want to provide the audience with a variety of supporting material within the each abstract domain; so, the number of domains needs to remain limited.

Of course, keeping any section unified, be it a main point or a division, calls for the abstraction skills discussed in Chapter two. If, for example, your point is "The Body X Exercise Machine has advantages and disadvantages, the point isn't unified; it has two ideas. "The Body X is worth considering," is one idea that is sufficiently abstract to include consideration of both advantages and disadvantages. The section could then be divided into two unified section: one dealing with the advantages and the other with disadvantages. However, one

could develop the broader idea without subdividing. Without subdividing, it would be possible to illustrate some of the advantages and disadvantages in one example or quote an expert who mentioned one or the other or both. By focusing the attention at the higher level of abstraction, the organization is simpler, unified, and yet contrasting details of the subject can be examined.

5. Develop transitions

At this point, you will have a well structured speech. It will be easy to look at your notes and see that it is organized. We just need to remember that the audience hasn't seen your notes. You need to communicate this structure to your listeners during the speech. Obviously, you could list the names of each section on a visual and show it to the audience. This visual aid is certainly an effective way to communicate your structure to the audience. It is recommended for many informative situations. You do need to remember the rules for visual aids from Chapter 6: Read the labels to them when you show them the visual and then remove it from sight.

If you do show your audience the organization of your speech as you begin to talk about the topic, the visual will serve as a transition. A transition is any message about your speech that helps the listeners to follow your thought pattern. In speeches, unlike news programs, we generally want our transitions to be obvious so that the audience is sure that the speech is progressing. Transitions become very important for that very reason. Transitions should constitute at least 15% of your speech; so, you should not be concerned that you are using them too much. Transitions are inexpensive and yet valuable to your listeners' understanding and, also, to your ability to manage your ideas.

We include in transitions all the things you say about the speech, the meta-communication. There are three types of transitions:

a. *Key words*: Conjunctions and prepositional phrases are commonly recognized transitions. We use them naturally. The problem is we tend naturally to favor one word or phrase too much. For one person, the word may be "next;" for another person it may be the phrase, "in addition." To help you avoid the overuse of a connector, you should make a long list of words and phrases that work for the purpose of moving quickly from one item to another. By varying the key words you use will help to keep the audience's attention on your ideas and prevent their counting the number of times you use a particular term.

b. *Previews*: If you elect to show the audience your speech's categories in advance of discussing any of the sections, that visual will constitute a preview. A preview that states all the major areas of a speech is often called a *partition*. Whether you show them the items or simply tell them the areas to be covered in your speech, **partitions are essential for beginning speakers**. As we will cover in the next chapter, you should have a preview as a transition from your introduction to the body of your speech. Then, when you are ready to begin a new part of your speech, you can provide a partial preview, i.e., you can tell the listeners, by giving them the abstract label or point, what will be covered next.

c. *Summaries*: Once you have discussed the specifics in each area, you will let the audience know that you are finished with that part by giving them an

internal summary, such as, “Now we have covered the events of day one.” You will then be ready for a key word and a preview of the next section: “Next, we’ll look at what happened on day two.”

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented five steps in organizing a speech. First, I encouraged you to select a pattern for arranging your material. Second, I suggested you divide the material into two to four approximately equal sections according to that pattern. Third, I encouraged you to label the sections simply and in a complete declarative sentence. Fourth, I discussed conditions for subdividing each section. Finally, I outlined three types of transitions that you should use in keeping the audience with you in presenting the speech. Remember: speech (indeed communication) is structured redundancy. Tell 'um what you're going to tell them (the preview), tell 'um (give the content via two or more types of supporting material, and tell 'um what you told them (the summary).

Key Sources

- Luria, A. R. (1982). *Language and cognition*. James Wertsch, Editor. NYC: John Wiley & Sons.
- George A. Miller (1956). The magical number seven, plus or minus two; Some limit on our capacity for processing information. *The Psychological Review*. 63, 81-97.