**Topic 4. Public Speaking**

Of all the skills employers desire in employees, oral communication skills rank highest. Survey after survey reports that oral communication skills are considered even more important than writing and math skills, as well as a number of other job-related qualities, such as initiative, technical competence, and organizataional abilities.

Oral communication encompasses a variety of genres: conversations, interviews, discussions, debates, and negotiations, to name just a few. Many of these speech events take place in fairly nonthreatening settings, with interactions occurring either between two people or within small groups. While feelings of communication anxiety do occur in these settings, they are usually infrequent and of minor proportions. Public speaking is a different matter: Here the speaker shares his or her views with a larger audience and often experiences apprehension and nervousness before and during the presentation.

However, there are times in almost everybody’s life when public speaking is required. Occasions can be as informal and brief as offering a toast at a party or as formal and involved as delivering a speech at a graduation ceremony. Many careers are based on a certain amount of public speaking. Take teachers, trial lawyers, politicians, broadcast journalists, or preachers, for example. For all of them, public speaking is an integral part of daily life. Likewise, people in leadership positions are routinely asked to share their views or provide guidance in larger settings. But even for those whose careers don’t call for public speaking, opportunities for speaking in front of audiences abound. There are individual or group presentations in a classroom setting, for example, contributions during a town meeting, or reports as members of a committee in school, at work, or in the community.

In short, almost everybody sooner or later has to speak in public. Try not to see the task as unpleasant. Instead, try to see it as a chance to have an impact or to improve yourself. The earlier you start gaining experience and honing your skills, the better. There are many techniques and “tricks of the trade” that can help you become an effective and confident speaker.

Preparing Your Presentation

Considering Your Audience The most important aspect of public speaking is the audience. At all times during the process of preparing and delivering a speech, we need to keep in mind that we are speaking to an audience and not just to ourselves. Whether the goal is to entertain, to inform, or to persuade, we should try to reach our listeners and tailor the speech to them. To do this effectively, engage the audience in a dialogue in which the audience members interact mentally with your ideas. For this purpose, choose a topic, examples, and language appropriate to your listeners.

Key Points

Getting to Know Your Audience

• What are the age range and educational background of your audience? Marital

status? Children? Gender and sexual orientation? Occupations?

• What do you know about their ethnic diversity? Languages represented?

Group affiliations? Regional characteristics?

• Do you know something about their interests? Values? Political views?

Religious beliefs?

• What do the audience members know? What do they want to know? What are

their reasons for listening?

• What is the relationship between time of delivery and expected states of mind (e.g., hunger before lunch, tiredness in the evening), between the physical environment and its effect on the audience (e.g., lighting, temperature, seating arrangements, outside noise), between occasion and emotional climate? Are there reactions to previous speakers? If you don’t know who will be in your audience, the answers to these questions will have to be educated guesses. If your audience is predetermined, however, you may want to gather information through surveys or other research and tailor your speech to the exact needs and interests of your listeners. Your efforts will be rewarded by the feedback you receive for a presentation that is interesting and sensitive to your audience.

Choosing a Topic

When speeches are given in political or professional contexts, speakers focus on their areas of expertise. They may have some freedom in choosing a topic, but the broader theme is predefined. An environmental activist at a political rally, for example, is expected to talk about environmental issues, and a sales representative of a computer software company will probably discuss software. Students in public speaking classes generally have more freedom in selecting their speech topics. In most cases, limits are set only by sensitivity considerations or taboos, usually eliminating such themes as sex, religious proselytizing, and extremist political persuasions. Sometimes, this freedom of choice makes it difficult to select a topic. If you are undecided, consider the following techniques.

Key Points

How to Search for a Speech Topic

• Skim headlines in newspapers for current events.

• Check television schedules for interesting news programs or documentaries.

• Surf the internet.

• Think about people (individuals or groups), places (local, national, or international), objects (natural or human-made), events (personal or public), processes (how something is done or made), concepts (theories, complex ideas), and controversial issues.

• Make an inventory of your own interests, experiences, and classes you have

taken.

• List things you are curious about and skills you have always wanted to learn. Write down everything of interest to you. Here is an example of what a list of search results might look like. Do you find any of the topics interesting? Do they make you think of other possibilities?

• The Geological Features of Yellowstone National Park

• The Safety of Internet Sales

• Extreme Skiing

• Chocolate and Fair Trade

• A Day in the Life of a Homeless Person

• The Future of the Automobile

• Your Children’s World: Will Polar Bears Survive?

• Table Manners in Chinese Culture

• “Once in a Blue Moon:” The Origin of Idioms

• The Music of Australian Aborigines

• Children and TV Advertisement

When you have brainstormed possible topics, go through the list and evaluate them.

Key Points

How to Select the Most Suitable Topic

1. Which topics stimulate your imagination the most? (In order to excite your

audience, it is important that you be enthusiastic yourself.)

2. Which topics will be of greatest interest to the audience?

After you make your final selection, you need to assess whether you can cover the topic in the time allotted for your speech. If you have too much material, you need to narrow your topic down in some way. For example, if you want to talk about the islands of Indonesia (there are more than 13,000!) and have only five minutes, you will not be able to include enough details to make your speech interesting. To make the topic more manageable, you could focus on the Spice Islands and their role in international trade, for example, or on the living conditions of orangutans in Borneo and Sumatra. In any case, it is much better to speak at a comfortable rate and flavor one’s speech with examples and stories rather than hurry and attempt to cover too much material in too little time.

Warning

Be careful with topics that have been covered extensively in the community or in the media (e.g., the death penalty, abortion, smoking). Even if you feel strongly about these topics, your audience will most likely be familiar with them. To be truly stimulating, your speech should explore unusual material and contribute significant knowledge. It is difficult to present unusual and significant information on widely covered topics.

Determining Your Purpose

To fine-tune your focus before you start researching your topic, determine the general and specific purpose as well as the central idea of your speech. The general purpose of a speech usually is to entertain, to inform, or to persuade; the specific purpose describes exactly what a speaker wants to accomplish; and the central idea is the core of your message. Here is an example.

Topic: Video Editing on Home Computer

General Purpose: To inform

Specific Purpose: To inform my audience about the processes involved in editing videos on one’s home computer and to introduce commonly used software

Central Idea: Video editing skills are easy to acquire.

Researching Your Topic

After you have selected a topic and determined your specific purpose, you should research it thoroughly. Your audience will expect comprehensive and up-to-date coverage. There are many sources for information.

Key Points

Sources for Conducting Research

• Books

• Encyclopedias

• Almanacs

• Atlases

• Magazines

• Newspapers

• Professional Journals

• Audiorecordings

• Videos and Films

• Internet

• Electronic Databases

• Lectures

• Interviews

• Surveys

To ensure the validity of your material, look for authoritative sources that will be credible to your listeners. When in doubt, try to find several sources that agree on the point under contention.

There are many ways to record the information you find: You can copy exact quotes, you can paraphrase passages, or you can summarize the contents. Notes can be kept on index cards, on regular paper, or in computer files. Select whichever method suits you best. No matter what you do, however, make sure you note exact references for your material. Here is an example of a source card for a speech on word and phrase origins.

The card contains bibliographic information and a quote from the source.

Sample Source Card

Source: Morris, W., & Morris, M. (1977). Morris dictionary of word and

phrase origins. New York: Harper & Row.

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Quote: “Blue-chip stock comes from the chips used in gambling games like poker. These chips or counters range in value from red (cheapest) through white to blue (most valuable—usually worth ten times the red). So a blue-chip stock is one likely to give the greatest return on an investment.”

Selecting Support Material

Research furnishes you with information about your topic and can lead you to suitable support materials. These materials are essential for effective speech-making because they arouse interest, provide substance, and emphasize important ideas. Here is a list of typical kinds of support material.



Support materials not only make your speech colorful, they also give your listeners

reason to accept your conclusions. Every major point in your speech should therefore be accompanied by one or more supporting materials. While supporting materials are at the core of an interesting speech, they can be used ineffectively and unwisely.

Warning

• Be selective. Don’t overwhelm your audience.

• Use only reliable facts and statistics.

• Don’t confuse your audience with too many numbers. Round off numbers when possible.

• Use visuals to make statistics more understandable.

• Humor should be relevant to the speech topic and sensitive to the audience.

Don’t poke fun at people; humor can easily give offense. Humor is most suitable for entertaining speeches. The speaker needs to be comfortable with the audience to inject humor into a speech.

Tips for Nonnative Speakers

When choosing support materials, consider the background of the audience. Some concepts and examples are more common in some cultures than in others. Make sure to choose support materials with which the audience is familiar.

Organizing Your Speech

Once you have researched your topic and collected support materials, the first part of your speech preparation is completed. Now, it is time to organize your ideas. The most common and versatile pattern is the division into introduction, body, and conclusion.

Body. You may be tempted to plan the introduction first. The easiest way to organize a speech, however, is to start with the body. Look at your material and divide it into major points. In general, the fewer main points you have, the better. A relatively small number of main points makes your speech more translucent and memorable for the audience. A short speech of five minutes, for example, should not have more than three or four main points.

The next step is to arrange your main points within the body. For this purpose, you need to consider the general content of your main points. Depending on this content, your speech will probably lend itself to one of the following traditional organization patterns.



After you have determined the general organizational pattern of your speech, you can create a more detailed outline. In most cases, you will have to select subpoints to elaborate on each major point. You will also have to decide in which order the main points and subpoints should appear (e.g., from least important to most important, from simplest to most complex, etc.). A detailed body outline with main points and subpoints for the Spatial Organization speech above might look like this.



Determining the content of the body will help you plan an effective introduction and conclusion for your speech. The body is best done first so that it can provide an anchor for the beginning and ending of your presentation.

Introduction. One of the most important parts of a speech is the introduction. The

introduction should function as an attention-getter, create interest, motivate the audience to listen, establish your credibility, and give a preview of your main points. While there are different ways to accomplish these goals, the following pattern has been proven effective and may serve as a guideline.