Designing Speech Assignments

In FS courses, it is helpful (for you and for the students) for speech assignments to include an emphasis on audience—without attention to audience, speeches are more like “notes to self” than effective public presentations. Unlike the specifics of structure or even extemporaneous delivery skills, an ability to consider the impact of audience on any presentation is a universal skill that students can take with them into any future presentation context.

Broadly, a focus on audience can include:

- Careful attention to choices of evidence and examples to be appropriate and interesting for the intended audience
- Ways the intended audience should influence the speaker’s selection of the best research and information to include in the speech
- The influence of audience knowledge & attitudes on the speaker’s choice of thesis, structure, vocabulary
- The adaptation of the speaker’s style and level of formality to fit the intended audience

No single speech assignment in an introductory level course can (or should) emphasize all aspects of speaking at once. I recommend highlighting one other aspect of successful speaking (in addition to audience) in a formal FS speech assignment. You can then also focus your informal assignments to help students develop their skills in your chosen area of emphasis.

- Speech structure (intro/body/conclusion)
- Presentation skills
- Argument/content

**SPEECH STRUCTURE**

**The Introduction:**

- **Focuses the attention of your audience.** Use to command the attention of the audience and get them interested in the speech. Avoid gimmicks and stay consistent with your speech topic and style of speaking. Can include humor, startling ideas, drama, suspenseful story, quotations, etc.

- **Orients your audience to the topic.** Give your audience a sense of why the subject matter of your speech is relevant or important, set the stage and prepare them for the main ideas of the speech to come.

- **Presents the thesis.** State a single, clear, identifiable thesis in a way that is as concrete, specific, and precise as possible.
• **Previews the content of the speech.** Give the audience a preview of the ideas to come and their organization. This makes your speech much easier to follow and aids in audience knowledge retention.

**The Conclusion:**

• **Summarizes your main points.** Remind the audience of the main ideas explored in your speech. Paraphrase and combine in logical ways—do not just mechanically recount the previous ideas.

• **Leave your audience with something to think about.** Speeches should end with a bang, not a whimper. Try to finish with a sentence or two that leaves your audience with a sense of the significance of what they just heard. This may be accomplished by returning to the focus of the introduction, ending with a powerful and appropriate quotation, or concluding with your own assessment of the importance of the topic.

**The Body:**

• **Organized around a limited number of main ideas.** Audiences have to remember all of your ideas and their connections. Most speakers should work to limit themselves to 3-5 main ideas which are organized in a clear pattern that is highlighted for the audience.

• **Transitioning and signposting:** Like in papers they help the speech hang together, defining the connections and relationships between the major elements of the speech. Overt and deliberate transitions are even more critical for speeches than essays because audience cannot go back to catch a link they may have missed the first time.

  o **Transitions** link points together by expressing relationships between ideas.

  o **Signposts** mark the “direction” of the speech, linking structural segments, orienting the audience, and reminding them of where they are in the speech (what has come and what is next).

**PRESENTATION SKILLS**

FS instructors are asked to help students develop an ability to speak *extemporaneously.* Extemporaneous speaking is the most common form of delivery associated with professional presentations. Most televised speeches we see are scripted speeches read from a teleprompter – not extemporaneous. In business and professional settings, however, the most frequent form of presentation remains the extemporaneous speech
from notes. The key to extemporaneous speaking is extensive preparation in constructing the speech and practicing until you can deliver the speech conversationally and are comfortable expressing your ideas clearly without worrying about memorizing the words.

- Build an outline—do NOT write a script.
- Practice, practice, practice to achieve comfort with your ideas and speech organization.
- Get feedback by presenting the speech to others, and/or videotaping yourself presenting the speech. This feedback will allow you to make needed adjustments/improvements.
- Maintain a poised, conversational persona in front of your audience.

**Vocal aspects of presentation:**

- **Projection:** Your audience should be able to hear you easily without feeling that you are shouting or straining to speak loudly. Projection is a physical skill that can be enhanced by proper breathing and use of the body/voice.

- **Rate:** Your speech should be conversational—not rushed nor artificially slow. Most speakers tend to increase their rate of speaking due to nervousness. Concentrate on inserting needed pauses, give yourself cues in your notes to remind yourself to breathe, slow down, pause, etc. to help prevent this increase.

- **Vocal variety:** The pitch, volume, and tone of your voice should vary during the speech. Use these variations to emphasize important ideas, and communicate your enthusiasm to your audience.

**Physical aspects of presentation:**

- **Body and movement control:**
  - Avoid distracting actions such as playing with your hair, a pen, jewelry, etc.
  - Stand comfortably balanced—do not sway, twist, lean.
  - Do not lock hands and arms—allow for natural gesturing.
  - Practice with notes to allow ease of use. Your notes should not attract your audience’s attention (avoid brightly colored note cards, avoid sheets of paper—they rattle, avoid writing on the back of your notes)
• **Eye contact:** A speech is an interaction between audience and speaker. Looking down or away breaks that interaction and is often read as a sign of insecurity and uncertainty. Lack of strong eye contact makes the speaker seem unprepared or unprofessional and can distract your audience (they may shift their attention to see where you are looking).

• **Professional appearance:** Audiences have already made evaluations of a speaker’s credibility before the first word is uttered. Be sure your appearance reflects a sense of care and is appropriate for your audience, venue, and occasion. Avoid hats, avoid having anything in your mouth, make sure your face is visible, and that there is nothing distracting for your audience on your clothing or accessories.

**ARGUMENT/CONTENT**

Rather than go through the parts of an argument (something that is already likely part of all of your FS courses) I just want to emphasize here that students rarely have a good sense of how to adapt arguments for a particular medium (e.g. a speech) or for a particular audience.

Stressing for the students the need to build an argument that fits into the constraints of their assignment is one of the best things an FS speech assignment can do. You could address:

- The importance of simplifying your argument structure in an oral presentation
- The need to limit the amount of information (especially technical information) in a short speech to maintain effectiveness
- The use of visual aids as a way to enhance audience comprehension and emphasize particular forms of evidence
- The power of the narrative example in oral presentations as a way to move audiences to action
- The importance of citing information in an oral presentation (most students know they need to do this in papers, but are unaware or unsure of the need to cite information in speeches)
- The need to carefully and consciously repeat key aspects of your argument to help your audience follow the links you are making
- The importance of choosing clear and accurate terms that best express your ideas to your particular audience—they cannot look up an unfamiliar word
- The advantage of anticipating and answering likely questions/objections in the body of your speech—leaving your audience wondering about something means they are not listening to the next thing you say