

Turning a Paper into a Speech, or “How Double-Dipping can be a Good Thing”

Given the time crunch that is the FS 101/102 course sequence, a popular tool for maximizing student performance while minimizing the number of topics a student needs to research, is to design paired writing/speaking assignments. Most often, these assignments ask students to write an essay and then convert that essay into a public speech (though there are several interesting variations on this idea that are included at the end of this tip sheet). Though the idea of paired assignments is a strong one, many instructors have been frustrated, particularly by the speech section of the assignment, as students do not often succeed in converting an essay into an effective speech.

Some tips for avoiding this frustration:

1. Before either the paper or the speech is due, spend time in class working with students to identify the differences between well-crafted spoken and written messages. For example, you might discuss
 - a. Time/length: Students often want an easy conversion between spoken and written messages, however, it is important for them to realize that a well-written three page essay contains more information than can be fit into a strong three minute speech.
 - b. Organization: The organization of an academic speech is significantly different than that of an academic essay (usually involving a simpler structure, the need for more direct and specific transitions/signposts, a need for careful repetition of key points in ways that would not be suited to an essay, etc.). Looking at examples of speaking and writing well in advance (and discussing their differences can help students avoid common problems).
 - c. Embodiment: Unlike writing, oral messages are embodied by their authors which means that the author her/himself is part of the message and will be “read” or interpreted by members of the audience. Spend some time discussing how we listen to spoken messages and the inflections we give to the message based on characteristics of the speaker, such as our interpretations of a speaker’s nonverbal communication, her/his accent or speaking style, her/his appearance, etc.
2. Include comments on the final draft of the essay (if it is the first assignment) that relate to the idea of conversion. For example, you might ask questions about students’ choices of examples, their evidence, etc., in terms of how these might work with a live audience.
3. Have the students craft a **“reverse outline”** from their final essay draft and use the outline as the starting point for crafting the speech rather than having them begin from the text of the paper itself.

- a. A reverse outline allows the students to highlight the claims and evidence they included in the paper and moves them away from linguistic and organizational choices that might not be suited to a speech.
 - b. The reverse outline can help students prioritize what they want to include in the speech, where they might need more information, and what might need to be cut from the speech presentation.
 - c. *This step will also minimize the chance that a student presents a paper read aloud rather than a speech.*
4. Have the students identify any distinctions in the assignment in terms of audience, context, purpose, constraints, etc. from the essay to the speech and have them reflect on how those differences should impact their design/delivery of their speech.
5. Practice, practice, practice.
 - a. Just as a student's first draft of an essay is usually unsuited to hand in for a grade, the student's first performance of their speech is often tangled, confused, or generally less effective than it could be. Make sure the students understand that practicing the speech **aloud** is the equivalent step to revising/editing an essay. Encourage them to practice with a partner, at the Learning Commons, and/or videotape their performance in order to make this process most effective.
6. Be very clear about your expectations and requirements and stick to them—nervous students often try to “get around” a call for an extemporaneous speech by putting their entire essay on their note cards or memorizing their essay for presentation. Stress to the students *why* these strategies are detrimental to the goals of the assignment (if they are part of your requirements) and reflect on the problems of the student “cheating herself” of the experience of learning to speak extemporaneously.

Variations on a Theme

There are many ways to combine formal speaking/writing assignments beyond the simple conversion assignment. For example, students could:

1. Write position papers on a controversial class topic and then pair up and engage in a formal debate.
2. Write a paper researching a particular problem and then present a speech on a potential solution.
3. Write a paper that addresses a controversial issue for a supportive audience and then present the issue in a speech to a hostile audience.
4. Write a paper analyzing a topic outside of the shared class material and then design a presentation to teach the topic to the class.