

SPEECHES AND ORAL REPORTS

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At University you will almost certainly be called on to give speeches or other oral presentations from time to time. And if the prospect doesn't exactly kindle you with joyful anticipation, you are not alone. Most students are likely to approach a formal speaking situation with some degree of nervous dread, even when the audience is made up of classmates whom they see every day. Yet the ability to speak effectively before a group is not a difficult skill to develop, and it is one that will serve you well, whatever your sphere of activity, all your life.

It should hearten you to realise that even the experienced and successful speaker may feel apprehensive before giving a speech. But he/she has learned to convert nervous tension into constructive energy that actually helps him to be alert, vigorous, and effective in speaking. To make tension work for you, rather than against you, you must be **(1)** fully prepared to do your job, and **(2)** motivated by a strong and sincere desire to communicate to your audience. This means knowing your subject well, taking ample time to think about and plan what you will say, evaluating your topic in terms of your intended listeners, concentrating on what you can give them of interest and value - in a word, being audience-minded instead of self-centred. This mental attitude will have a bearing on your speech at all stages, from planning through the moment of delivery.

The Plan for the Speech

The ideal finished plan for a speech or oral report is a very detailed outline, usually containing 30 to 50 percent as many words as the actual speech. It is thus much fuller than an outline for a written paper, but far from being your speech word for word. From it you can see the order and relationship of ideas, distinguish main ideas from supporting materials, and note where the major junctures or transitions come. It enables you to learn the speech as a complete, organised pattern of ideas, and thus to avoid the rote memorisation which often results in a parrot-like delivery.

Basic parts of the outline. The outline may conveniently be divided into four basic parts: introduction, purpose statement, body and conclusion.

- 1. Introduction:** In the introduction you seek to win *the good will, attention, and interest* of your listeners. Your means to this end are a pleasant, confident delivery, and such devices as a striking example, an interesting but relevant narrative, or relating the topic to something the audience is already interested in. The introduction should also provide any **background information** the audience is likely to need; definitions of important terms, or appropriate historical or social context.
- 2. Purpose statement:** Your statement of purpose, often no more than a single sentence, tells your audience just what ground you intend to cover. This statement should be clearly and precisely worded, because it provides a

focus for the entire speech. Usually it comes at or near the end of the introduction.

3. **Body:** The body or main part of the speech should comprise between 65 and 90 percent of the whole. Here you develop the topic presented in your purpose statement.
4. **Conclusion:** The conclusion is essentially a summary of the main points made in the body of the speech. It also gives you an opportunity to round off the speech smoothly by referring to something mentioned in the introduction, by suggesting broader implications, or by specifically relating speech to audience.

Components of the speech. A speech may be thought of as a fusion of main ideas, supporting materials, and transitions. A good speaker gives deliberate attention to each of these components separately and in combination.

1. **Main or key ideas:** A shrewd speaker will not expect his audience to remember a welter of details. Rather, he has a few key ideas he wants to convey (for example, the four main stages in building a house, or five characteristics of Hemingway's prose style), and he constructs his speech so as to help the audience grasp and remember them. He may hope some of the audience will note and remember subordinate points also, but he regards these primarily as means of making his key ideas clearer and more memorable.

You must first, then, have a precise idea of the main points you wish to put across and the best order in which to present them. On these points you build your outline, making sure that every item in the body of the speech contributes to developing a particular main idea. In this way you ensure against confusing your audience by digressing or backtracking.

2. **Supporting materials:** Supporting materials help your listeners to understand, accept, and remember your main ideas. They provide evidence for the main points, relate the subject to the knowledge and experience of the audience, and maintain interest. They are used in greater quantity and variety in speaking than in writing to give the audience a chance to absorb and accept the main points: for unlike the reader, the listener cannot stop and ponder or look back.

Whereas main ideas are likely to be general statements, supporting materials should be specific: **factual data**, such as names, dates, places, and events; **examples**, ranging from brief references to detailed anecdotes; **vivid descriptions** of how things look, feel, sound, smell, taste; **comparison and contrast** with things familiar to the audience; **expert testimony or opinion**, cited or quoted; **literary quotations**, when they are apt. **Statistics** can be useful, but must be handled with care since they are harder to take in by ear than by eye. If they can be translated into concrete or pictorial terms, so much the better; thus, in addition to stating the estimated gallons of water wasted by a community's leaky plumbing over a period of time, you might give

the time it would take the same volume of water to pour over Niagara Falls.

A special type of supporting material is the **visual aid**, which covers a wide range of materials, including blackboard or chartboard drawings, poster type materials displayed on an easel, three-dimensional models, specimens, and films. Visual aids are useful in holding the audience's attention and presenting statistical relationships (as in graphs) and complicated structures or processes which are hard to explain in words alone. Though experienced speakers sometimes draw or write as they talk, a beginner would be wise to prepare in advance any aids he intends to use and thus avoid having to do two things at once.

- 3. Transitions:** Transitions help emphasise your main ideas and enable your audience to move mentally with you from one point to the next. If your transitions are not unmistakably clear, your listeners will become confused. Inexperienced speakers often fail to realise that oral presentation requires far more transitional material than writing does, and that oral transitions must be more obvious and repetitive than those used in writing.

Oral transitions may take a number of forms. First, you may emphasise main ideas by **restatement**, saying them twice, in different words. This gives your hearers a better chance, a little more time, to grasp these ideas and to see that they are relatively important.

Another transitional device is **pre-outlining**. Near the beginning of your speech perhaps right after the purpose statement, you may tell your audience the main points you intend to take up. Similarly, at the beginning of each major section, after stating the main idea, you may outline the ground you intend to cover.

If you have several sections of parallel nature and importance, you may make use of **listing**: either enumeration ("First....", "Second...., etc.) or a key phrase repeated with the introduction of each main idea, or a combination of both ("The second type of jet engine is....").

Connective transitions tell your audience that you are moving onto a new section of your speech and indicate how it is related to the previous one. For example, "Now that we understand the problem that faced the engineer, let's see how he solved it". Or "Since we now know the history of this riot, let's attempt to identify its underlying causes".

Finally, in **internal summaries** you can condense and restate some or all of the points you have already presented.

Making Your Own Speech Plan

Choosing a topic. Many speakers get off to a bad start by selecting a topic that is too broad. Remember that in ten minutes of speaking you can cover the equivalent of only five to seven typewritten pages, and that supporting materials and

transitions should take up a proportionately larger part of an oral presentation than of a written one. Usually a speaker should not try to get more than three or four main points across in a short speech of ten or fifteen minutes. It is the depth of perceptive explanation, interpretation, and illustrative detail, rather than the amount of ground covered, that determines the value of speech.

Consider the interests of the audience and the demands of the occasion, but also pick a topic you are already interested in. Your interest, or lack of it, will be sensed by your listeners and will influence their reception of what you have to say.

Phrase your topic in one simple sentence, to serve as a tentative purpose statement, and analyse it to see if it is clearly focused.

Preliminary overview. Ransack your mind for information, ideas, and opinions on the topic and for ideas about further sources of information. List all these items, and use the list as a guide in gathering further information. If you start from what you know and think, your own personality will emerge in the speech and thereby provide some original flavour and perhaps even a fresh outlook on the topic.

Break your subject down into the main areas of ideas you want to cover. Your topic statements for each of these will become the main headings in your outline for the body of your speech.

Research. From the list of items you made in your preliminary overview, you can decide what material you must obtain from the library or other sources of information. But don't overlook your own experience and imagination as a resource, especially for such supporting materials as analogies, comparisons, and actual or hypothetical examples. Always keep the needs of your audience in mind.

Preparation of final outline. The purpose statement, as the focus, should be at least tentatively planned at an early stage of your preparation. The introduction and conclusion are usually planned after the body of the speech - unless you get an inspired idea while you are doing research on working on the main part.

The outline for the body of the speech should be taking shape around your main headings while you are doing your research. When you have all your material together, plan the **exact phrasing** of your statements of main ideas and transitions, just as you intend to say them in your speech. Write these in full in the appropriate places in the outline. Now insert your supporting materials as sub-entries under the appropriate main heading, but don't write them out in full as you did the main statements and transitions - a few words or reminder are enough. If you overlook any main ideas or transitions, your whole structure may come crashing down. But if you slip up on a supporting detail or two, the consequences are not serious; and your delivery will have a more spontaneous quality if you develop them from notes rather than from pre-planned sentences.

At least two days before you are to give your speech, go over your outline to put it in final form. Many speeches fail to achieve their full potential just because the speaker does not take the trouble to make a final check for subordination of supporting materials to main points, clarity of transitions, and deletion of irrelevant material.

Preparing to Deliver the Speech

First, read your outline through several times, both silently and aloud. Your aim is to learn the pattern or sequence of ideas, not to memorise words and sentences. To fix the pattern in your memory, test yourself with such questions as, "What are my main points?" "How do I explain my third main idea?" "What transition do I use after the section on...?"

Next, say your speech aloud a few times, referring to your outline when necessary (time yourself to be sure you meet the requirements). Keep thinking in terms of ideas, not of set phrases and sentences. Remember that oral speech patterns are more conversational and less formal than written ones.

Now prepare to "go it alone" without your outline, as you must do in the actual speech situation. You may, however, plan on using conventional speaking notes - a very much abbreviated outline, of words and phrases, typed or written on 4 x 6 inch cards. These notes will help you keep to your plan but will not tempt you into reading, as your full outline might.

The practice delivery. With your outline well in mind and your note cards in hand, you are ready to practice delivering your speech. Try to duplicate the actual speaking situation as closely as possible. Ideally, you would practice your speech in the room or hall where you are to give it, with a few friends serving as audience. This is your chance to anticipate the physical "feel" of speech-making. Pay conscious attention to your gestures and voice; think about what you are going to do with your hands; use your speaking notes so you will be accustomed to them; speak aloud enough to be heard at the back of the room; assume an alert and confident bearing.

Go through the speech from beginning to end. If you make mistakes, keep right on going - you can give special attention to troublesome parts later. Some students can get by with one or two trial runs; others need ten or a dozen. Practice is more valuable if spread over two or three days. Even for a simple class report, avoid the temptation to practice only at the last minute or not at all. The more attention you give to techniques of delivery in practice sessions, the less they will throw you off your stride in your actual presentation.

Facing the Audience

No matter how much you practice, there are some things that can be worked out only in the actual speaking situation. An effective speaker is sensitive to the response of his listeners and responds in turn to them. He is both stimulated and cued by his audience, alert to the need to make minor adjustments in his presentation: For example, to slow down and insert internal summaries, if his hearers seem confused; or to omit some supporting material and get on to the next point, if they seem restless.

An important element in this establishment of *rappport* is good eye contact with the audience. You should appear to be in a genuine two-way relationship with your

listeners, and this is impossible if you are examining the ceiling or the floor, or staring fixedly at your notes or your hands. When you talk with an individual, you look directly at him; and you should do the same with your audience. You can start by establishing eye contact with a single person. Look directly and pleasantly at him, and address yourself to him until you feel that you have his full attention and have established a relationship. Repeat with one or more other individual members of the audience; then, when you have gained confidence, pick out a **group** of persons, and look and speak directly to them, as a unit. Do the same with other groups in different parts of the room. In this way you can learn to establish eye contact with the audience as a whole.

Many of the mannerisms that inhibit full communication with an audience are the result of undirected nervous tension. A few deep breaths can do wonders to steady pulse and voice and put you in physical control of the situation. Your physical bearing has a direct effect on your audience's response. If you sag or lean against a desk or speaking stand, you will suggest apathy and dullness to your listeners. If you fiddle with a pencil or a ring or your note cards, their attention will be diverted from what you are saying. Stand erect, and make a conscious effort to control any overflow motion generated by nervousness, or else convert it into expressive gestures.

In the same way, your voice cues the audience. First of all, you must speak loudly and clearly enough to be heard and understood. Vary your rate and pitch to hold the attention and interest of your listeners. If you clip rapidly along in an even, monotonous tone of voice, you will suggest that your main aim is to get the whole thing over as fast as possible and that what you have to say is of no particular interest anyway. As a rule, you should speak more slowly and formally when you are giving main ideas or difficult material, and more rapidly and conversationally when you are citing examples or narrating anecdotes.

Don't be afraid of a pause. If you forget what comes next, take time for an unhurried look at your notes. If the right word won't come, don't panic and try to fill up the silence with "uh, uh, uh," but pause without embarrassment until you are able to resume. Good speakers, in fact, make deliberate use of pauses to emphasise important points or to recapture an audience's wandering attention.

An Oral Presentation of a Written Report

In some classes you may be asked to make an oral presentation of a paper which you are also to hand in as a written report. This can present a problem for two reasons: (1) oral discourse, as we have seen, differs from written discourse in several significant ways; (2) the required length of the written report may be incompatible with the amount of class time available for giving it orally. There are three ways of solving the problem:

1. You can write your paper and then use it as source material to prepare an oral report. The disadvantage of this solution is that it requires you to prepare two distinct reports, one written and one oral.

2. You can write the paper with the idea of oral presentation primarily in mind.

But this has disadvantages too. For one thing, **writing** oral discourse is a rather specialised skill. Moreover, the very things that help make the oral presentation a success - the restatement and repetition, the numerous and obvious transitions, the relative amount of space given to the supporting materials, the personal quality and conversational tone - may be criticised as flaws in the formal written report.

3. Probably the best plan is to write the report as you normally would, and then **adapt** it to oral presentation. On a clean carbon copy, note down the supplementary supporting materials, internal summaries, and emphatic transitions you intend to add when you give the report orally. By merely noting these items, rather than writing them out in full, you have a chance to work in some conversational spontaneity. Practice reading the paper aloud until you know it well and will be able to look up from it frequently to establish eye contact with your audience. The more familiar you are with the sentence rhythms, the better you will be able to adapt them to a spoken delivery. Know exactly where the supplementary oral materials come, and practice moving smoothly from reading to speaking and back to reading again.

