



THE WRITING CENTER
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Writing Speeches

What This Handout is About

This handout will help you plan, draft, and revise writing for oral presentations.

Introduction

Basically, writing for public speaking isn't all that different from other types of writing. You want to engage your audience's attention, convey your ideas in a logical manner, and use reliable evidence to support your point. But the conditions for public speaking favor some writing qualities over others.

Most crucially, when you write a speech, you need to keep in mind that the people in your audience can't go back and hear that last sentence or paragraph again. Think about how many times you've been reading something for class and thought, "Huh? What does that mean? I'd better read that again-it sounds important." Since your listeners don't have that option, you must be extremely clear in writing your speech, even if that means writing in a less complex or more mechanical manner. For a listening audience, some of the rhetorical flourishes you proudly display in other forms of academic writing (such as complicated sentence structures or fancy vocabulary) will actually present problems, while some aspects of writing you usually try to avoid (such as repetition and the use of second-person "you") can work quite well.

Rather than rush ahead to stylistic concerns, though, we'd like to consider the process of writing a speech--from deciding on a topic to actually delivering the speech. Consequently, we've divided this handout into the following sections: prewriting, drafting, practicing, revising/editing, and delivery. We'll get to matters of style in the section on revising.

Pre-writing

Think about your purpose in delivering the speech.

What do you want the audience to learn or do? How can your audience benefit from what you have to say? Also: what's in it for you? Are you hoping the audience will provide feedback on your ideas? If so, what will you do with this feedback? Do you want them to join you in some way?

Most speeches invite audiences to react in one of three ways: feeling, thinking, or acting. For example, eulogies encourage an emotional response from the audience; college lectures often try to stimulate their listeners to think about a topic in a different way; student activists speaking in the Pit or on the steps of South Building generally recommend some specific action for their audience to take.

Of course, these categories do overlap. A commencement address, for example, will often seek to evoke some combination of these reactions—the speaker might simultaneously try to persuade graduating seniors (the main audience) to feel pride in their accomplishments, reflect on what they've learned, and take certain actions to make the world a better place. For the most effective speech, though, you should try to figure out the principal type of response you want from your audience.

Analyze your audience.

Why are these people listening to you? What are they looking for? What do they have in common? If you're delivering the speech because it's a required assignment, you may be tempted to answer these questions "because they have to," "a fire alarm," and "they're all thinking about something else," respectively. But if you don't dwell upon the compulsory aspect of your speech, you can start to identify ways to connect to your listeners, and these connections can help your speech become more interesting and more useful.

Once you've established this type of basic information in your mind, you can begin thinking about more specific issues: Do they know as much about your topic as you do, or will you be introducing them to new ideas? What level of detail will be effective for them? What tone should you adopt? What might offend or alienate this audience? For more questions along these lines, check out our handout on [audience analysis], which has a worksheet you can complete to help you figure out your audience.

Decide on your topic.

Focus on a key theme to explore. If your speech will be argumentative rather than descriptive-and most academic occasions for speeches do require an argument-construct a thesis statement that presents the main claim you'll be defending.

In their book *The Craft of Research*, Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams encourage writers to start with a general subject, then try to ask a specific question within that subject, then try to understand why that question is significant to the subject (and the audience). They assemble these steps into one three-part statement: "1) I am studying _____ 2) because I want to find out who/how/why _____ 3) in order to understand how/why/what _____." When completed, your statement might look something like this: "I am studying the proposed expansion of the University because I want to find out how new buildings might affect the larger community in order to understand why the county commission opposes the plans."

This three-part statement itself won't make a good thesis-it isn't argumentative enough. For the moment, while you're still in the prewriting phase, it's enough to develop an idea of a significant question that you want to address. Eventually, what you find out regarding the second part might lead you to a thesis statement. Using the information from the example above, you could generate a thesis such as: "Residents of Orange County should fight the proposed University expansion, which could increase automobile traffic, overwhelm local schools and other resources, and result in yet more pizza places on Franklin Street." For more on how to develop a suitable thesis, consult our handout on constructing thesis statements.

Do some preliminary research.

This way, you'll begin to understand how people have been talking about this issue. Learning key terms and existing perspectives will give you credibility with the people in your audience, whether they're knowledgeable or not.

As you research, be sure to consider what kinds of sources your audience will find most valuable and most convincing. If you're talking about the university expansion and its impact on Chapel Hill, you could begin by looking at local newspapers such as The Chapel Hill News or The Daily Tar Heel. These sources won't be as strong if you're

talking about genetic modification, for example. For this subject, your audience may give more credence to scientific studies published in scholarly journals, mostly because those studies will have been written by experts, reviewed by experts, and read by experts.

To some degree, which sources are authoritative depends on the makeup of your audience: some groups are profoundly distrustful of government statistics or conventional scholarship. But for most academic audiences, students and teachers alike, you'll gain more trust if you draw more heavily from academic journals and books than from popular magazines and TV shows.

Take special care with Internet sources. Treat personal websites with healthy skepticism, since you don't often know that person's credentials or agenda. In addition, websites for organizations can also present information in a partisan (or inaccurate) way, so try not to rely too much on these sites. For instance, if you're talking about abortion, you wouldn't want to use either National Right to Life or the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League as your only source because of the potential biases of each group. But that doesn't mean you should ignore such sources altogether. You could look at both views and use them together to construct both sides of the issue, or try to find a source that articulates both viewpoints objectively ("The NRL says this, whereas NARAL argues that").

Again, in most academic writing you want to take care in evaluating sources, but when you deliver a speech, you don't want your listeners to feel as though you're giving them only one side of the issue; you should instead show them that you have considered your topic from several angles to arrive at your perspective.

Talk out what you know after you've gathered some preliminary research.

You may find it useful to talk with a friend about your topic for five minutes or so, since you will (consciously or not) choose a way of speaking that will help your friend understand what you're saying. You can work from this kind of informal "speech" to plan your actual presentation.

Plan the parts of your speech-the different points you want or need to make and how they fit together.

Assuming that your speech will present an argument, think about what your listeners need to understand and accept before you can convince them your point is sound; you can use this information to organize your paper, whether by outlining or by less formal means, because you'll get some sense of what needs to come first and what has to wait until later.

You might also try to work out how someone who opposes your position might argue against you. Many assignments call for you to include counterarguments in your speech, to ensure both that you understand the issue fully and that you can tell a stronger argument from a weaker one. Your goal should be to find the strongest possible counterargument(s) so you can convince your listeners that these counterarguments either aren't valid or aren't relevant. If you can start this process during prewriting, you'll almost automatically strengthen your own position as you reflect and research more on your topic.

This stage might also be a good time to start thinking about the length of your speech. Most of the time, you'll know that your speech should fill a certain period of time—not much more, not much less. Consider that for most speakers, each double-spaced typewritten page takes about two minutes to deliver. Thus, if you are preparing a ten-minute talk, you should shoot for about five pages of text. Identifying the proper length of your speech at the planning stage will help you decide the scope and level of detail you can provide.

Do more research.

This will allow you both to become more of an expert on your topic and to search out compelling facts or quotations that can enliven your speech.

Drafting

Don't feel that you have to write the different parts of your speech in order. Many writers find it much easier and more productive to jump right into the body of the speech, making the argument first. Then they can decide the best way to set up the points they make in the introduction. The most important goal is to start drafting, so choose the best way for you to achieve that objective.

Introduction

A good opening accomplishes a number of goals. It can help you to establish a context and/or motive for your speech; provide you with credibility in the eyes of your audience; command the audience's attention; and preview your argument before you actually deliver it. In many ways, these same objectives apply to most forms of academic writing, so you should consider looking at our [handout on writing introductions](#) for useful tips.

As you try to accomplish these objectives, don't think of them as four different goals, each with its own part of the opening. Often, you will be able to combine them, so that you establish motive and credibility at once, or establish credibility and gain attention at once.

a) **To establish context and/or motive**, you want to explain to your audience how this material might fit in a larger picture and why you decided to speak on this topic. To do so, answer the following questions: why are you here? Were you asked to speak in this forum? Why? (Again, these answers might seem all too evident if your speech is a required assignment, but try to work out some connection not mandated by your instructor. After all, you don't want your listeners to be thinking only that you're standing up there talking because you have to.) Why did you choose this topic? If you didn't choose the topic, how did you decide to approach the topic you were given? Why is this topic important to discuss here and now?

b) **To gain credibility**, consider these questions: why should the audience listen to you? Are you an expert on this topic? Are you a relative expert compared to your audience? How did you acquire your expertise? Why is your perspective valuable, whether you're an expert or not?

If you're giving this speech for a class, you may be tempted to regard your instructor as your primary audience—after all, that's where your grade is coming from, right? And if you think you're basically addressing your instructor, you might hesitate to sound very authoritative, because undoubtedly you don't know as much as your audience. But it's likely that your instructor would prefer (even expect) that you assume a tone of authority for your speech, since you'll be speaking to all of the non-expert students in the classroom as well. In such an instance, you may benefit from pretending to yourself (though not to your audience!) that you are somewhat more of an expert than you really are. With this self-assurance, you will amply demonstrate your mastery of the material.

c) **To gain your audience's attention**, return to the audience analysis you did earlier. Think about how you can relate to these particular listeners—and

get them to relate to you. More than most academic papers, speeches give you an opportunity to connect with your audience on a personal level; in fact, such a connection is imperative in getting the audience to understand the full import of your discussion.

Remember, though, you want to get the good kind of attention, the kind that makes the audience warm to you and your topic. Hollering, cursing, using inappropriate humor, or brandishing a potentially offensive prop (say, autopsy photos) will gain you only the bad kind of attention, the kind that makes the audience tune you out-or pelt you with rotten fruit.

For specific attention-getting techniques, you might check out our handout on writing introductions.

d) **To preview your discussion**, you will want to tell your listeners your main point-i.e., your thesis-and explain how you will support it. Work to accomplish this objective early in the speech. You may be tempted to try to create suspense by keeping the people in your audience guessing until the very end, when you spring the implications of your discussion on them. But they will almost certainly become impatient and wonder why they're spending valuable time listening to you.

Body

Obviously, the content of the body of the speech will vary widely depending on the topic. Perhaps the only rule of thumb here is that the body should be considerably longer than the opening and closing put together; one speechwriting expert estimates that the body should make up about 80% of the total length of the speech. Some writers become used to lengthier introductions, especially in academic writing, and find it difficult to devote so much space to the body. But it's important to keep the audience feeling that you're giving them useful information, and the best way to do this is to move into the body quickly and end the speech efficiently after you've finished making all your points.

What you put in the speech will depend on whether you want to get the audience to feel, think, or act. "Feeling" speeches generally work harder to make a specific emotional connection to the audience, through personal address or evocative language; they may not heavily feature statistical or factual content, which are more important to "thinking" speeches (remember the college-lecture example?). "Acting" speeches most often offer a blend of

the other two, combining an emotional appeal (taking action is the right thing to do) with logical support (these are the reasons for taking action).

Nearly as important as content is the best structure for your speech. Your audience will have a hard time following the logic of your thought unless they perceive how the pieces of your speech fit together. Some structures tend to work better than others for speeches—you might try to conceive your speech along a linear, building-block structure (see our [handout on organization](#)). Even if you don't usually outline before you draft, it may be useful to do so here, just to stay aware of how your argument/explanation progresses. We'll talk more about structure in the section on revising, the step in the process when you can really sharpen your focus in the speech.

Here are a couple of other tips you might find handy:

a) **Try to keep relating to the audience on a personal level**, as you did in the introduction. This approach is quite uncommon in most academic writing, but again, in a speech you can't afford to lose the audience's attention even for a moment. Most people listen more closely when they sense something's at stake for them personally, so when you're talking about some fairly abstract concept, work to connect it back to the individual experiences of the members of your audience. Use the second person address ("you" and "your") fairly often to emphasize that you're speaking specifically to them, not just to hear yourself talk.

Again, audience analysis is the key to creating an effective personal connection between yourself and your listeners. Make sure that the "you" you're talking to is the "you" they are. The line "You know what it's like to stagger back to the frat house at four o'clock Friday morning" wouldn't go over very well if you're talking to a group of faculty members, right?

b) **Use statistics and quotations sparingly**. Whereas most academic writing welcomes, even requires, a wealth of factual material as logical evidence for claims, in a speech you run the risk of overwhelming listeners with information they can't readily assimilate. Include only the most striking factual material to support your perspective, things that would likely stick in the listeners' minds long after you've finished speaking.

Conclusion

You can use some of the same strategies as in the opening: to re-emphasize your motive and credibility, to pull your audience's attention back to the

current situation, and/or to review (not preview) your main points. One speechwriting expert argues that in a speech you need to "tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, and tell 'em what you told 'em." You can use the conclusion to tell briefly and emphatically the significance of what you have communicated. For effective techniques, consult our [handout on conclusions](#).

a) **Restate your main points-don't merely repeat them.** The distinction is important: if you say the same things you've said earlier, the people in the audience (if they're attentive at all) will have a "Didn't we already do this?" response. It may help you avoid blatant repetition if you return to an earlier point in light of what your listeners know now that they didn't know before. For instance:

"I asked earlier why we should care about the rain forest. Now I hope it's clear that . . ."

"Remember how Mrs. Smith couldn't afford her prescriptions? Under our plan, . . ."

b) **Be explicit about what the people in the audience should be taking away from your talk.** They've given you ten or twenty or sixty minutes of their time, so make sure they understand why.

c) **If appropriate, consider giving your listeners some form of action to take** based on their new knowledge or understanding. Be sure, though, that this action is possible for the folks in your audience; although they themselves may not be able to affect foreign policy directly, for example, they can vote or work for candidates whose foreign policy views they support.

On the other hand, the action doesn't have to be some grand gesture. Depending on whether you want your listeners primarily to feel or think or act, you can ask them to respond in a different way emotionally to distant events, or to reflect on your speech the next time they perform some everyday action. But some sort of recommended action will confirm your listeners' belief that they've benefited from listening to you, because they may choose to act differently based on what you've told them.

Practicing

It's hard to know whether your speech succeeds until you try to **read it aloud**. Once you've completed a draft, try reading your speech to a friend or in front of a mirror-

some setting that will make you self-conscious. When you've finished reading, ask yourself or your friend the following questions:

- Which pieces of information stand out the most, in a positive way?
- Which rhetorical strategies will connect with the audience, and why?
- Where might listeners lose the thread of your argument or description?
- Where might listeners become bored?

In particular, try to notice places where you had trouble speaking clearly and/or emphatically, since your audience will likely find those parts confusing or dull.

The next step is revising based on what you noticed during your practice speech. You can try to emphasize (through repetition, for example) the parts that worked especially well and change the parts that didn't. We encourage you to go through the practice-revision-practice steps more than once, if you can, since as we've noted, the speaking situation requires you to be especially clear and precise.

Revising / Editing

Below are some tips for achieving a writing style that's appropriate for a speech. Don't worry about making your writing look like this model as you're writing early drafts, since that's when you should be constructing and strengthening your argument. You'll probably be better off if you concentrate on these issues as you revise, which is why we're talking about them last.

Check organization by doing a reverse outline.

On a separate sheet of paper, write the numeral 1, and then write a short summary (no more than six words) of the main point of that paragraph. Underneath that, write "2" and summarize the next paragraph in six words or fewer. Do that for the entire draft, and then return to your list of paragraph summaries. When you read them in order, they should fit together to outline the overall argument or description you're making. If you notice that your list seems to jump around, or that the point in #4 doesn't seem to follow directly from #3, or that you seem to be repeating material unnecessarily, consider revising to clarify your organization.

Incorporate internal previews and summaries into the speech.

For example: "I'm here today to talk to you about three issues that threaten our educational system: First, ... Second, ... Third," or "I've talked to you

today about such-and-such." These kinds of verbal cues permit the people in the audience to put together the pieces of your speech without thinking too hard, leaving them more brain-space to pay attention to the content of your speech.

Use especially strong transitions

This will help your listeners see how each bit of new information relates to what they've heard so far. If you set up a counterargument to your own argument in one paragraph so you can demolish it in the next, begin the demolition by saying something like, "But this argument makes no sense when you consider that" If you're providing additional information to support your main point, you could say, "Another fact that supports my main point is" Most academic writing requires you to be a little smoother than these examples allow, and you may feel a bit robotic as you write. But your audience will appreciate having the logic of your organization spelled out clearly.

Repeat crucial points, using the same language where possible.

This tactic can be overdone (remember "fuzzy math" and "lockbox" from the 2000 presidential election campaign?), but you can try to keep your listeners attuned by reiterating what you want them to remember most. If you're discussing a legal issue, for example, you might keep returning to the question of constitutionality to make sure the audience understands the basis of your objection.

Simplify your vocabulary.

Like the bumper sticker says, "Eschew obfuscation." Use language familiar and commonplace to the people in your audience, so they won't have to consult their mental dictionaries while you're talking. Of course, what is familiar to some audiences is baffling to others. Use your audience analysis to decide your best approach.

Rely on shorter, simpler sentence structures

It's better in speeches to go for the basic subject-verb-object structure. Try to avoid using many subordinate clauses or interrupting your thought with asides and digressions. For the same reasons, you should revise to place your subject and verb close together. Listeners can follow your train of thought more easily if they don't have to wait too long for the noun to

perform an action. So instead of "The product, which was invented in 1908 by Orville Z. McGillicuddy in Des Moines, Iowa, and which was on store shelves approximately one year later, still sells well," you could try "Orville Z. McGillicuddy invented the product in 1908 and introduced it into stores shortly afterward. Almost a century later, the product still sells well." Notice that the second example is much more direct. In addition, dividing the draft sentence in two allows you to incorporate a much stronger transition to highlight your point.

Use strongly parallel constructions

(e.g. lists of actions, a subject with several parallel verbs, etc.) to emphasize the logic of your connections. For more on parallelism, visit the website for Strunk's "Elements of Style".

Try to limit pronoun use

Listeners may have a hard time remembering (or figuring out) what "it," "they," or "this" refers to. Repeat nouns with "this" or "these" as a way to tie everything together. For example:

"The U.S. government has failed to protect us from the scourge of so-called reality television, which exploits sex, violence, and petty conflict, and calls it human nature. This cannot continue."

What does "this" refer to? The government's failure? Reality TV? Human nature? People in the audience will have to take a few seconds to work out the reference-by which time they may miss the next point you make. Compare the passage above with the following revision:

"The U.S. government has failed to protect us from the scourge of so-called reality television, which exploits sex, violence, and petty conflict, and calls it human nature. This failure cannot continue."

Not only does the revision clarify the reference, it also repeats the idea that the government is failing to take necessary action, making the speaker's point even more emphatic.

Delivery

The Internet has a number of sites devoted to helping people become effective public speakers, but one of the most useful is available right here at UNC. The Oral Communication Program, affiliated with the Department of Communication Studies, has developed a guide to help you present material successfully. For more extensive help (and practice), enroll in one of the OCP's workshops for public speakers.

You can also consult Toastmasters International, a nonprofit group that devotes itself to helping people improve their communications skills, especially in public speaking.

Other Resources

Allyn and Bacon Publishing has published a valuable resource called the Essence of Public Speaking Series, which contains a number of volumes that examine writing for oral presentation from various angles. You can locate these books in Davis Library by doing a title search for the phrase "essence of public speaking."

Business-writing handbooks generally contain useful ideas for effective oral communication as well, so if you're speaking in a business setting, you may want to visit a library or bookstore and look through their offerings.

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