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## History of Public Speaking

About 2,500 years ago in ancient Athens, young men were required to give effective speeches as part of their duties as citizens. During the time that Socrates (c.469-399

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BCE), Plato (427-347 BCE), and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) taught their pupils both philosophy and rhetoric, democracy was on the rise in Athens and all citizens of the *polis* had to be able to speak in the legislative assembly and testify in court. Citizens met in large Assemblies in the marketplace (*agora*) to debate issues of war and economics and politics. Plus, with the institution of the People's Court by the *Sage*, Solon, in 594-593 BCE, citizens could take their grievances before a magistrate and argue their cases. There were no lawyers, and since people sued each other frequently, it was important that each citizen be able to represent himself and his family.

*Rhetoric is "the art of winning  
the soul by discourse."*  
**Plato**

Aristotle identified the basic elements of good speech and persuasion as *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. The *ethos* (credibility, believability) of the speaker was important; the *logos* (logic) behind any conclusions drawn by the speaker during the course of the speech needed to be valid and clear; and the *pathos* (emotional appeals) were important in making human connections between the speaker and the listener.

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*Rhetoric is "the faculty of discovering  
in any particular case all of the  
available means of persuasion."  
Aristotle*

Rome succeeded Athens as the political, military, and philosophical center of the ancient world. During the first century BCE, Marcus Tullius Cicero (c. 106-43 BCE) rose to power as an orator, lawyer, politician, and philosopher. He developed what we call the five *canons* (canon=rule) of rhetoric still used today: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. He urged his students to seek all possible means of argument (invention), put those arguments in the order best suited for the situation (arrangement), use the best and most expressive language (style), memorize the presentation (memory), and present the speech with the best gestures, expressions, and volume (delivery). Some speeches given in ancient Greece and Rome were so famous that speech students then – and now – read them as literature.

*"Rhetoric is one great art comprised  
of five lesser arts: inventio, dispositio,  
elocutio, memoria, and pronunciatio."  
Rhetoric is "speech designed to persuade."  
Cicero*

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In the United States, the right to our freedom of speech is more than words on a piece of yellowed parchment on display in Washington, D.C. Prior to the adoption of the Bill of Rights, a citizen could be arrested, tried, and hung by the neck until dead for speaking out against government policies. When Patrick Henry famously declaimed, “Give me liberty or give me death!” on March 23, 1775, he wasn’t overstating the case. He was uttering words that were treason in England. And the colonies were still English. Could he have been executed for speaking his mind? Yes.

Henry Clay earned a reputation for pacifism and oratory as the “Great Compromiser,” engineering the Great Compromise of 1850 (which we know as the Missouri Compromise today) through his impassioned speaking in the U.S. Senate. Although few of you might remember hearing him speak during the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy’s ringing words, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” stirred hearts and minds at his 1961 inaugural, ultimately leading hundreds of young Americans to enlist in the new Peace Corps after its establishment just a few months later.

Public speech is still the cornerstone of both our governmental system and our judicial system. Congressmen speak aloud on the floors of the Senate and the House – you

can tune into C-SPAN and watch them around the clock. The Constitution, Article II, Section 3, demands that the President share the state of the union with the Congress. George Washington delivered the first address in January of 1790 and George W. Bush continued the tradition on February 2, 2005. Our courts of law demand that those accused step before the bar and explain themselves. Our preachers stand before our congregations and speak aloud their interpretations of scripture. So Americans have both a national tradition and an historical culture of public speech that cannot be ignored.