The Speech

Topic

There are no limits to selecting a topic. A speaker can prepare a successful presentation on absolutely anything if – and it's a big IF – audience needs have been fully analyzed and the speaker's ethos will be enhanced. In other words, if the speech makes sense to the audience and the speaker exhibits good will and concern for the audience, then the topic is appropriate.

Topic Selection

The first step in topic selection is to find a subject of interest to the speaker. Everyone has hobbies and interests and connections to off-campus activities. If you enjoy hunting or shopping, driving or running then these may be excellent topics for your audience. A speaker must be passionate about the topic because that passion will be translated to the audience in an energetic delivery. If a speaker isn't particularly interested in the topic, the audience will know; the audience will see that disinterest in any off-hand, bored presentation.

The second step is to find out some background information that will increase your expertise. You already know something about the topic. However, you are not a recognized expert and your opinion is no more credible than any other college student. It's time to do some general reading to find out what sorts of general information is available to flesh out your basic knowledge. The best way to do this initial search is to state your topic as a question. By looking for answers to the question, you'll focus the topic and spend a lot less time researching. For example, if you wish to speak about a gasoline crisis, then the research topic could be stated as: How are college students affected by the rising cost of gasoline? This limits your topic nicely. You know that gasoline prices are going up because you both pay more at the pump and you've been watching the news. But why are the prices going up? How high might they go this semester? This year? Are they going up so high that it will cut into the ability of college students to buy books? Pay tuition?

Without stating the topic as a question, it may lack focus. For example: My topic is about gas prices going up. What's the focus? Who's your audience? Why is this an issue? As a statement, there's nothing to work with and you'll spend far too much time doing unfocused, and

eventually unusable, research. Spend your time wisely and think through exactly what you want to discuss before you begin doing research. In fact, make notes to yourself by writing down your research question, think through how your audience will be affected, and where you might want to look for information.

In order to demonstrate good will toward the audience, part of the topic selection process is to determine what the audience needs to know. Audience analysis kicks in from the very earliest stages of the selection process.

- Is it likely that my audience members are going to be aware of my topic?
- Will they care?
- How are they going to be affected?

Writing out the answers to these questions also helps focus the research question and takes most of the work out of searching for background materials. Once the speaker has a good idea of how the audience should react to the topic and how the topic can meet audience needs, it’s time to do the background research.

Some specific guidelines to assist in selecting a good topic might include a topic that is:

- Meaningful and important to your audience
- Important and interesting to you personally
- Tailored to your particular audience so that it is relevant to their interests

- Something about which you already have some knowledge
- Researchable
- Limited so that you can learn enough to make a responsible presentation
- Appropriate for the time, place and occasion of the speech

Research

Finding information on your topic using sources other than your own opinion and experience is called research. Research involves time and energy spent reading, listening, thinking, and writing. IT CANNOT BE DONE AT THE LAST MINUTE AND THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS. Speakers should look for information from credible media sources, online databases, reputable journals and magazines, and interviews with experts. On campus, the university library provides books, periodicals (serials), newspapers, electronic databases, and reference professionals to help you find just the information you need.

A good speech uses a mix of reference materials from a variety of media, and the speaker includes information about the author or the publication so that the presentation has a balanced approach. The audience must be aware of any bias or credibility issue with the editorial view. For example,

a pro-hunting speech using online resources only from the N.R.A. (National Rifle Association) will be unbalanced and promote only the views of a biased organization. This does not mean that the organization's views are wrong. It does mean that the views represent only one side of an argument and must be balanced with references from other sources reflecting other views.

The speaker should gather far more information that will be used in the speech so that they are truly expert in the topic area. This technique is called the iceberg theory of research and it serves two purposes: one, you have plenty of information available to add to the speech if it comes up somewhat short, and two, you can "pull" information out of your head that you remember from your research if you "blank out" during the presentation. A speaker who gathers only enough information to create a minimum expectation speech will be in real trouble if the speech doesn't quite stretch to the time limit, or they forget what they meant to say and their only option is to repeat what they've already shared.

When doing research, refer to your research question frequently, asking yourself, "Is this information relevant to answering the question?" You will run across quite a bit of interesting material, but not everything will meet the needs of your speech. Try not to be distracted by gripping narratives,

stunning examples, and fascinating data that simply do not fit your topic. You will have to look at five or six or twelve or thirty sources to get the answers to your research question because there will be no one source that has the magic answer. If, for some reason, you do run across a single source that has all the answers, you will need to find additional, corroborating sources. A single source speech is simply a report about that source. Your task is to synthesize material from a variety of sources to prove your contentions and create a unique perspective in your presentation.

Source Credibility

Not all research sources are created equal. Anyone can write a book, so it's important to know something about the author. Any organization with some money can publish a magazine, so it's important to know something about the publisher. Anyone, including your twelve-year-old neighbor, can mount a website that looks professional and be easily navigated, so it's important to find out who owns and/or sponsors the website.

The best course of action is to stick with journals published by professional organizations, material from databases owned by the university library, and established media outlets such as credible news magazines, and online

news outlets such as the *New York Times* or *CNN.COM.* Oddly enough, the *National Enquirer* tabloid is about 60% credible news from wire service sources, but the publication itself is not held in high esteem within the news gathering profession.

When using web-based sources, always go to the home page and find out everything possible about the author and the sponsoring organization. Go back out to the web and do a search on both the author and the sponsoring organization. The more you know about your sources, the greater your credibility as a speaker because you will be able to inform the audience about the quality of your information. And remember that a significant part of your speech is building in references to your research sources, so it's time well spent.

Support

Using research effectively in your speech is called support. Information from magazines, books, newspapers, interviews, and online searches all contribute to helping you prove the truth of your conclusions. There are all types of support materials including facts, statistics, narratives, examples, and testimony. You will want to choose the best

type of support for your topic and the type of speech you are giving.

For example, if you want us to feel some emotion, then a narrative would be a good choice. Narratives are stories. They are true stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end that illustrate the importance of the point you wish to make or include a human dimension that otherwise would be missing. Human beings love stories. We tell stories all day, every day. We interpret what happened to us at work when we are asked how the day went. These are not factual recitals but edited versions of what is important to us. The speaker will find a story while doing research that moves forward the topic while engaging emotion. The story is never quoted which would force the speaker to break eye contact or recite from memory but is re-interpreted so that the speaker is telling his or her version of the narrative with all due reference to the original source.

Examples illustrate concepts or conclusions or behaviors that might not be envisioned in exactly the same way by all members of the audience. Well-written research materials are often full of examples, so all the speaker has to do is find one that meets his or her needs, reference the source in the speech, and share the example. Try to avoid hypothetical examples simply because examples from

research enhance speaker credibility. Real experiences and real examples involving real people create a link (or common ground) with the audience. So, rather than introducing a fictional Jane Doe who is going to be badly injured at the beginning of your speech about the dangers of improper seat belt use, spend some time researching recent newspaper accounts of traffic accidents until you find a real person whose problems are chronicled in a published source so that your credibility with the audience goes way up.

Testimony is using the words of another as a means of explaining a human reaction to some event. Following the 2005 hurricane devastation along the Gulf Coast, news outlets had testimony from a variety of sources, both lay and expert. Lay testimony involves essentially a *man-on-the-street* description of what happened to that one individual. Lay testimony may be biased, incomplete, and based on incorrect information but it always reflects the emotion and conclusions reached by the individual. Residents of New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward who angrily insisted that the government was doing nothing to help them are correct. Someone in need of help who is getting no help is correctly describing their opinions and conclusions. In fact, lay testimony is simply another word for sharing opinion. Opinion is not factual and must be contextualized within the

speech. In other words, if a speaker is using lay testimony to illustrate what life is like in the Lower Ninth Ward, the audience must be made aware that this is the opinion of a lay person; opinion should never be confused with expert testimony. Opinions are conclusions drawn by individuals without benefit of reasoned discussion, research, or any analysis. Opinions are closely related to attitudes.

Expert testimony involves official spokespersons sharing information that is based on verifiable research, group consensus, scientific experimentation, and other quantifiable data. An engineering expert might testify that government resources are focused on shoring up the levees and cleaning up the streets; that work is being done in the Lower Ninth Ward but it is not directly related to helping an individual homeowner get back into their home. Notice that the expert testimony is less likely to evoke an emotional connection with the audience even though it may have more reasoning and evidence behind it. When using expert testimony as source material in a speech, it is VERY important to include the titles and job descriptions of those you are citing as expert. The audience must be able to decide whether the testimony is truly expert by hearing whether it came from the Governor or the police chief or the head of public works.

Facts and statistics describe a class of research information that uses concrete information and numbers to describe actions and thoughts. This information, expressed descriptively or in numerical form, means absolutely nothing until it is interpreted by the researcher and compared to other, related information and numbers. It is important to have this sort of definitive factual research in the speech but beware of just listing facts or numbers without providing interpretation. A speaker who provides one large number after another without any context is assuming that the audience is remembering the numbers and figuring out what they mean just as quickly as the speech is delivered. That just doesn't happen with the average audience. Additionally, a speaker who simply lists historic events without describing their relationship to the audience and each other is not really giving a speech; they are just sharing a list. Facts and statistics are best used to illustrate larger issues; best used as examples or as a means to illustrate a trend, not as stand-alone proof.

Over 2,500 years ago, Aristotle decided that there are three main forms of proof in deliberative speaking: ethos (speaker credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (reasoning). He wrote at length about the importance of reasoning but concluded that most listeners are persuaded by

rhetoric using pathos; that we rely on our emotions to make decisions and judge credibility. A wise speaker will use testimony sparingly and carefully to arouse emotion. Without some narrative and testimony, a good presentation may not as be effective if the audience cannot see the human face within the topic.