

# Context and the Speech Situation

You may ask yourself when you will ever need to give a speech. Maybe you might have to at a wedding, or as part of a class project, but those might be all the situations you could envision. The fact of the matter is that in many different professions you will be called upon to deliver a speech, and all of those instances will present different environments in which you must effectively deliver your message. Most, if not all, professions have national associations, or business meetings, or require presentations to be made for clients, and each of these different scenarios requires public speaking skills. In fact, today, media has expanded the potential venues through which you might deliver a speech or presentation.

In this chapter, we will first explain some of the basic elements found in any speaking situation. We call these the components of the speaking environment. We will then discuss how media has changed and expanded the idea of a speaking environment in many ways—ways very relevant to you, regardless of what career path you choose. Third, we will cover the different types of live audiences and rooms that you may encounter when speaking. Finally, we will provide some basic tips for using the speaking environment to your advantage when addressing an audience.

## Basic Components of the Speaking Environment

Every speaking situation can be described in three different dimensions. The first is the physical location in which the speech is being delivered. The second dimension details the speaking tools available in that location, and the final dimension of any speaking situation is the speakers themselves. Each of these dimensions is always relevant to understanding any speaking environment, and in this section, we will explain how these dimensions can manifest differently in various speaking situations.

### Physical Location

The **physical location** of a speech refers to the immediate environment in which the speaker will be speaking. Locations vary from large rooms to small rooms, from outdoors to the comfort of your office or home. It is important, however, to stress that the location refers to a physical environment, and not the medium through which a speech is delivered. In that respect, the Internet is not a location, but rather a medium through which a message is transmitted. The location would be the actual location in which the video or audio file was recorded. Now that we have made that distinction clear, let's explore a variety of physical locations in which you might deliver a speech and the challenges and advantages inherent in each.

One of the most common venues for a speech of any kind is indoors. The majority of sales presentations, company updates, conference panels, wedding toasts, and eulogies occur inside. "Indoors," however is a broad description with a lot of variance. Indoors can refer to a small intimate setting in a conference room; it can mean a classroom; auditoriums and churches are also both indoors, as are large arenas or even a living room in someone's home. Indoor speaking in any of these environments provides some very basic, but important, advantages for a speaker. First, the lighting and air temperature usually can be adjusted for your comfort. Being indoors also minimizes certain types of distractions by blocking out the outside world and its associated sounds such as airplanes, cars, wind, weather, and even people talking. The contained nature of an indoor room, regardless of how big or small, is generally the most comfortable situation in which speakers may find themselves.

Indoor speaking does not encompass all possible speaking environments, as occasions do arise when you might be called upon to speak outdoors. These situations could include company picnics, family reunions, golf tournaments, building dedications, political pep rallies, or facility tours for prospective clients. Compared to indoor presentations, outdoor speaking is more challenging because there are significant distractions for the audience and you, but there are also some unique advantages as well.

One prime example of a possible advantage to outdoor speaking situations is the opportunity to adjust the setting in advance of the presentation. In many cases, outdoor speech locations are set up before the speech, and so the actual seating style, arrangement, and design of the environment can be influenced in advance with a site trip. When a speech is indoors you have no chance to knock down a wall or create more space, but outdoors you have space to play with, thus allowing you to somewhat customize your speaking situation.

Even so, many of the advantages to speaking indoors are challenges when presenting outdoors. For instance, you cannot control the weather outdoors, and thus must have backup plans to compensate for rain, wind, or other unforeseen nature-related obstacles that might present themselves. You also might not have some of the comforts available in a conference room, such as electricity, thus inhibiting your ability to project your voice to a large crowd or show slides or videos to your audience. If the weather is nice or the setting is scenic, your audience may easily lose focus on you and your message. For these reasons, outdoor speaking can be more challenging than presenting indoors.

Whether you find yourself indoors or outdoors when delivering your speech, location is just one of the primary components of the speaking environment. Next, we will discuss a second aspect of the speaking environment relevant to both indoor and outdoor speech delivery: speaking tools.

## Speaking Tools

There will usually be some type of **speaking tool** to assist you when delivering your speech. These tools include a microphone, a podium, a lectern, and lighting. Each of these tools can help improve the delivery of a speech in a variety of ways, but you must become familiar with the nuances of the available tools before trying to incorporate them into your presentation.

The most common speaking tool is a microphone. Some voices project well, carrying throughout even large rooms, but many people do not have that powerful a voice and need to amplify it. Even those with a booming voice will sometimes need a microphone in large areas or where there may be background noise that interferes with the audience's ability to hear the speaker. Microphones can allow for this to happen, but not all microphones are created equal.

Microphones primarily come in three types. The first is a fixed microphone, which may be on or attached to a podium. These microphones are often placed at the top of a stand and can be adjusted to the height of the speaker. This is convenient for speakers, but it is important to adjust the height before the presentation if possible, so as not to take up time determining how to adjust the stand when you should be speaking to the audience.

The second type of microphone is portable and wireless, enabling it to be carried around the room by the speaker. These are especially advantageous if a speaker or moderator wants to interact with the audience because it allows the presenter to hand the microphone to individuals and allow them to speak. When you choose to do this, though, be aware that when you pass the microphone to someone you have lost some control over the situation. Most often this is not a problem, but sometimes individuals who are given a microphone go on rants, or do not relinquish the microphone when you want them to. Overall, though, wireless microphones give you more freedom to move about a large room when addressing an audience.

The third type of microphone is also portable but is not handheld; rather it takes the form of a small receiver on your lapel that picks up and amplifies your voice. This device is usually called a lapel microphone. These are very useful when the speaker wants to present visual aids or to make demonstrations with products. Sometimes you see people in grocery stores or at conferences who wear these types of microphones to demonstrate how to use a product while also speaking to an audience.

The next tool is a **podium**, which is a raised platform that can vary in size, that the speaker stands on. As mentioned earlier, it is advantageous to both the speaker and the audience if both are not on the same level, and podiums create this type of atmosphere. Sometimes a podium is in the center of a room, like in an arena, while other times it is at the front of the room. In smaller rooms, podiums are not used, but instead are replaced with a **dais**, which is a table at which people sit in the front of the room. This is not a raised platform on which people stand, although a dais can be placed on a podium.

People commonly confuse a podium with a lectern. A **lectern** is the stand behind which people speak, and on which they place their notes. Lecterns are usually placed on a podium or at the end of a dais, so that there is a designated place from which a person will speak.

The final tool available in speaking situations is the lighting of the area. Obviously, in most cases, indoor lighting is more easily controlled than outdoor lighting. The lighting can help create a certain mood, can spotlight the speaker or someone in the audience, or can even be dimmed so that visual aids are more visible to the entire audience. In most cases if the lighting is not uniform the speaker is more brightly illuminated than the audience members.

Outdoor speeches are trickier to manage with regard to lighting, as there is often natural light with which a speaker must compete. Natural light, though, is unpredictable and when the sun goes behind clouds it can significantly alter visibility for a crowd. Despite that, many outdoor venues will supply additional lighting if the weather indicates it might be needed. Always pay attention to weather forecasts and stay in touch with the site coordinator to determine what, if any, adjustments are needed for lighting.

## The Speaker

The last aspect of the speaking environment we will discuss is you, the actual speaker. How you carry yourself, from your posture to how you dress, communicates a message to the audience. How you appear and carry yourself adds importance and influences the mood of the situation, so your choices in clothing and demeanor must convey the same emotional attachment and feeling you want to create for that moment.

You can communicate that you respect the situation and context, and also the audience, through your choice in clothing. Both women and men should be well dressed, and if you are unsure of how to dress, remember the old axiom that it is better to overdress than to underdress. Often the situation itself will dictate the type of clothing to wear, but when in doubt it is always helpful to ask.

Dress is the only element of the speaking situation that you will always have total control over, so it is important to take advantage of this. As the speaker the focus is on you, and you always want the audience to see that you respect them and the situation, and the first thing they will notice about you is the way you are dressed. If you dress inappropriately, or in a distracting fashion, then the focus shifts from your presentation to your attire and the audience will not receive the message you want them to walk away with.

When you are the speaker, you should dress at least as formally as your audience. Make sure your clothes fit well and are comfortable; if you are constantly tugging at a garment that doesn't quite fit, both you and your audience will be distracted throughout your presentation. Likewise, avoid wearing accessories or clothing with busy patterns that will distract attention from what you are saying, unless you have a specific reason for that particular accessory or garment.

So far we have covered the three basic elements of any situation, but as we mentioned earlier, technology has drastically altered our understanding of speaking situations. In the next section, we will discuss mediated speaking situations and how they might arise in your chosen career.

## Media

The last several decades have seen a great change in technology, and thus a corresponding change in our ability to communicate. In particular, we can now hold conference calls with people across the globe, upload presentations to YouTube to watch at a convenient time, and use video conferencing software such as Skype. In this section, we will discuss using media to enable presentations through these various programs.

Perhaps one of the most common media through which businesses present materials is conference calling. Conference calling allows multiple parties to communicate on one telephone line, thus allowing for a larger audience and increased audience interaction. To be successful, however, conference calls must be carefully arranged and monitored.

Over the last several years, conference call software has developed to the point where we can now see the people with whom we are talking, thus creating the possibility for videoconferencing. Even classes on college campuses utilize this software for distance education courses in which students watch lectures or presentations live from places other than the classroom and can be seen by and interact with the instructor and other students. Two common programs that facilitate this are Illuminate™ and AdobeConnect™. This software also adds the ability to post comments and pose questions online to those presenting in the room and allows many people to interact from different locations at once.

Another popular means of videoconferencing is a webinar. These are valuable in situations when someone wants to demonstrate a product or provide an interactive online educational seminar. For example, suppose a software designer in Chicago wanted to demonstrate how to navigate a Web site to several people located in different cities. Each person would log in to the chosen Web site and dial in to the conference call, and the designer would walk them through the Web site or portal; they would all watch the same Web site on their respective monitors at work or at home. Webinars are convenient ways to present ideas and demonstrate products to clients when the distance is too far to travel.

Another recent and popular technological tool for sending messages to people through the Web is Skype. Skype is a **Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)**, which allows voice and images to be sent live over the Web to another person. It uses the Internet, much as we use it for e-mail or Web surfing, to carry our voices and images live. The quality is very good, and the technology is quite inexpensive. In fact, Skype is free software that enables us to maintain connections and deliver demonstrations with people miles away—all it takes is a webcam.

Webcams also can be used to tape presentations and demonstrations for upload to the Web. One popular site where weblogs or video blogs are posted is YouTube, a repository for hundreds of thousands of video compilations. These video diaries, journals, or presentations are there in perpetuity, so be careful what you choose to upload. Uploading videos to YouTube is easier than actually giving a speech because you do not see your audience. That said, you never know if what you post will go viral!

These technologies are becoming more and more popular. They save companies and individuals a great deal of money and time by not having to travel. These technologies can enhance productivity and accomplish much the same thing as face-to-face meetings and although these technologies are popular, speaking to groups of people in live settings is still used.

## Room Ratios

Since outdoor venues can vary a great deal, depending on geographic location, we will provide some suggestions for indoor locations for speeches that have a bit more stability. There are several indoor scenarios in which you may find yourself, and each has its challenges and opportunities.

Small rooms, the most common speaking environment indoors, include conference rooms and classrooms, and they allow more intimacy with audience members. It is unlikely that you will need a microphone in these situations as everyone should be able to hear you easily; however, some moderate sized rooms might be packed with people and require a microphone for those in the back to adequately hear you. Generally, these settings allow you to move around or sit to deliver your remarks.

Small rooms can sometimes contain a small audience. If you are expecting a much larger audience this can be a letdown, but as the speaker you have the obligation to put as much energy into the speech as you would if the group were large. If the audience is small consider being more informal and presenting your ideas in a conversational manner. This also may allow you to ask the audience for their feedback during your presentation. Small settings with small audiences can create an opportunity for more interaction with your audience, but also remember the smaller the audience, the larger the focus on you as the speaker.

Small rooms are not the only indoor locations for presentations, as you may deliver remarks in a big room with a large audience. In this setting a formal delivery is required, and you are restricted in your ability to interact with the audience. This setting requires a strong delivery and a very clear organization of your ideas. Since this setting is less intimate than a smaller setting, it is easier for the audience to drift away and become disengaged. Such an obstacle requires you to be well prepared and to deliver your remarks with enthusiasm to minimize the risk of losing the audience.

Large rooms, however, do not always guarantee large audiences. In fact, it is possible that you may find yourself speaking to a small audience in a very large room. This is a challenging environment, even for experienced speakers, as the size of the room can be intimidating and the number of attendees can be disappointing. There are some ways you can turn the situation to your advantage. First, you may want to acknowledge the discrepancy between attendance and room size to the audience that is present. Usually in these circumstances, audience members are scattered throughout the room or auditorium, and this increases the challenge. If this occurs ask the audience members to move down front and sit as a group. This allows you to focus on them and creates an intimate environment, thus mitigating the distraction of a large room. You also can engage them in much the same way you might in the smaller room scenarios we discussed earlier.

The ratio of room size to audience size can create challenges and opportunities for you as a speaker, but remember all the tools available to you and use those that will enhance your presentation and allow you to adapt to the situation. Regardless of the room in which you find yourself, remember that different environments create both opportunities and challenges, and as a good speaker you must not only adapt to the situation, but know how to use it to your advantage.