Topic Selection

The first and perhaps most important task in the speech-making process is to select your topic. In some situations, this can be difficult, and in others it is easy because the topic has already been provided. Determining what to speak about is also called the process of invention because it involves the creation of not only your topic, but also what you plan to say about it. The creative enterprise of topic selection allows you to identify what you want your audience to understand by sharing with them how you understand the topic.

In this chapter, we will provide guidelines to help you develop your speech topics. This process begins broadly, with establishing the general purpose of your speech. Once this is clearly laid out, you will begin to narrow that purpose to a specific topic. Once you have a more concrete topic, you will then narrow your purpose even further by stating what it is you want to specifically say about that topic. Let's begin with discussing how we figure out the general purpose of a speech.

General Purpose Statements

Every speech begins with a general idea. This general idea covers what you want to do with your presentation. Do you want to inform an audience? Persuade them? Perhaps celebrate some accomplishment? Each of these is a very broad and general purpose, but it helps you begin to identify what you might say in your speech. For that reason, it is important to start by clearly writing your general purpose statement.

A general purpose statement is brief, usually only a few short words. It describes the type or category of speech you will prepare and deliver. There are three types of general purpose statements: informative speeches, persuasive speeches, and commemorative speeches. As you develop your speech, this general purpose can help guide what you choose to say and how you deliver it to the audience.

An informative speech gives the audience information, but does not try to convince an audience to do or believe something. Think about instructors' lectures as speeches with the general purpose "to inform." In fact, the general purpose statement for any informative speech is "to inform," "to describe," or "to demonstrate." Notice how these general purposes would be helpful if you found yourself veering off and making a case for the audience to agree with, rather than staying true to informing, describing, or demonstrating something.

A persuasive speech has a much different general purpose than an informative speech. Persuasive speeches are intended to change or to reinforce the audience's attitudes, actions, beliefs, or values. These speeches might try to convince the audience to take a particular position on an issue or might try to induce the audience to take a course of action. Clearly, the general purpose moves beyond informing, describing, and demonstrating. A persuasive speech's general purpose statement is "to persuade" or "to convince." Again, just as with informative speech's general purpose statements, these can help you stay on track when writing the body of your speech.

A commemorative speech is generally a speech of celebration, honoring someone, or presenting or accepting an award, such as a wedding toast or a funeral eulogy. Here the purpose is not to simply describe something, as in an informative speech, nor is it to try to convince someone of something, as in a persuasive speech. The general purpose of a commemorative speech is "to honor," "to commemorate," or "to celebrate." Each of these gives a different tone to the speech than a persuasive or informative speech.

After you decide on the general purpose statement, you should begin to narrow your topic. This next step is crucial because topics that are too broad will lack substance. For example, an informative speech on the Olympics is extremely broad, and could include any number of items. There have been books and documentaries about one specific Olympic event, just one sport, or even just one athlete. A speech that encapsulates all aspects of the Olympics would take weeks to deliver, and then it is unlikely that all of it would be covered. So, with that in mind, and your general purpose clear, it is time to begin focusing your topic.

Choosing Your Topic

Once you know what your general purpose is, the next step is to choose something more concrete upon which to speak. Topics can be chosen in a variety of different ways, depending upon your situation. In many cases, the occasion will determine your topic, or you might be asked to speak about something on which you have knowledge or experience. In other cases, you might decide you want to speak about something that piques your curiosity, and so you want to learn about it and share it with your audience. This last situation may be the case in most classrooms, but when you are speaking as part of your career, you often do not get this opportunity.

In many professional situations in business, the occasion will dictate your topic. For instance, salesmen try to sell particular products, thus limiting their ability to create a topic from their own interests. CEOs will provide input on the company to stockholders and employees, again dictated by the situation in which they find themselves. Accountants need to prepare updates on financial information for presentations to colleagues. In each instance, the meeting situation dictates the topic to the speaker.
Despite the overwhelming influence of meeting types on selecting a topic, there are times when you might be called upon to speak based on your knowledge or expertise. This situation is most common in the fields of science and engineering, in which people who possess expert knowledge often are asked to explain those concepts to an audience with general knowledge. Think about doctors and medical researchers who try to explain cancer, heart disease, and other health risks to patients and advocacy groups, or engineers who need to describe structural changes to bridges and buildings. Experts from medical fields are sometimes called upon as expert witnesses in court cases. In each of these scenarios, people from STEM and healthcare professions give presentations in which their topics flow from their area of expertise.

There are also times when your topic is something that interests you, but it is not very familiar to you. When this happens, you teach yourself about your topic through your research, and then you teach it to the audience. This opportunity is rare in the professional world, but very common in the classroom where you are encouraged to explore ideas and topics that you are curious about. In education, instructors sometimes develop seminars and courses designed around ideas they want to study. These chances, though rare, are something you should take advantage of because they give you the opportunity to expand your knowledge.

Whichever of these approaches you choose for selecting a topic, it is imperative for you to narrow that topic into something that can be reasonably explored and covered in the amount of time you have for the presentation. In the next section of this chapter, we will discuss how to narrow a topic to a focus that fits your time.

Narrowing the Topic

The amount of time you may have to narrow your topic will vary, but in most instances, classes allow more time than the professional world for generating presentations, and so give you more time to narrow your topic. Classroom settings mirror professional situations when it comes to time for speeches; there are time constraints and your professor will likely give you minimum and maximum time limits for your speech. Many professors will penalize your grade for violating the time target, much like going over the time limit will result in a negative experience in the professional world as well. This is why it is important to develop skills for quickly narrowing the topic of your speech, and one of the most common methods for doing so is to brainstorm.

Brainstorming involves the generation of ideas and listing them as they come to mind. The process of narrowing your topic begins with writing down as many ideas as you can come up with regarding a specific topic. In true brainstorming, the strength is through the spontaneous generation of ideas; initially, every idea is accepted. These ideas can be broad, narrow, specific, or general because at this point it doesn’t matter what they are. The list is then organized from general or broad, to narrow and specific categories under the broader labels. This helps organize your ideas into a more coherent model for coverage of topics.

In addition to, or perhaps even in conjunction with, brainstorming there is another tool you can use to help narrow and focus your topic: a concept map. A concept map, also known as a mind map, is a visual representation of the potential areas you could cover in your speech. This more visual model illustrates relationships between the ideas you generated as part of brainstorming. In a concept map, you circle topics that have certain things in common and draw a line connecting them to another group of ideas to which they relate. This visual representation makes it easier for you to understand your topic, and eventually helps you organize your ideas into an outline for your speech. Another strategy you can use is to analyze your ideas and choose those that are most important or interesting.

Once you develop your concept map and have a better idea of what you plan to talk about, you need to begin considering what aspects of the topic fit in the time you have to deliver the speech. There are three ways to go about making choices about what to cut and what to leave in the speech. You can choose to cover the most important elements of the topic, you can choose the most interesting or fascinating aspects of the topic, or you can combine the important with the interesting.

A topic will likely have several elements, but it is unlikely they will be equally necessary for the audience to know. For example, suppose you chose to deliver a speech on the AIDS virus to your class. You brainstormed the topic and generated the following potential topics: history of the virus, biology of the virus, affected populations, government treatment programs, famous people with AIDS, and medical treatments for the disease. Any one of these is too large for you to speak on to your class, so you then decide to brainstorm more and come up with: Magic Johnson, Arthur Ashe, Mary Fisher, AZT, blood transfusions, homosexual community, and dirty needles. Now you are starting to see some links between broader and more specific ideas for your presentation.

Now, this particular speech cannot cover all of these points, so you need to choose what to cover. You can elect to cover what you deem the most important elements of the topic, you can include the most interesting points about it in your presentation, or you can combine both. Looking at our example, the most important elements might be how the disease is transmitted and what segments of the population are at most risk. On the other hand, it might be more interesting to the audience to hear about famous individuals who contracted the disease, such as Mary Fisher, Magic Johnson, and Arthur Ashe. Finally, you could decide the best way to go would be
to combine parts of both and talk about at-risk populations and then choose one figure to talk about as a cautionary tale in your speech. Whatever route you choose, you have successfully employed brainstorming and concept mapping as a way of appropriately narrowing your speech’s topic.

Knowing the elements of your speech topic is half the battle, and it was only made possible through a clear general purpose statement and time spent generating ideas for what to cover in the speech. Now that you have a narrow enough topic, some subpoints related to the topic, and a rough idea of how these all fit together, it is time to clearly articulate a specific purpose statement. In the next section of this chapter, we will discuss what this is and how you can effectively create one for your presentations.

**Determining the Specific Purpose**

The **specific purpose statement** is derived from both the general purpose and the topic of your speech. It is a far more concise statement than the general purpose and serves as a guide as you go forward developing your speech. Specific purpose statements are composed of one declarative sentence that notes what you will talk about, how you will talk about it, and what you want the audience to walk away with at the end of the speech. Look at your specific purpose as an umbrella and everything you do in your speech should fit under this umbrella. You might discover some interesting information, but if it doesn't fall under the specific purpose, then it probably should not be included in your speech. To include this information might be interesting to the audience, but it will also confuse them and detract from the central idea you wish to communicate. The specific purpose should have a sharp focus.

Let’s look at an example of a specific purpose:

“My speech will inform my audience that the process of hosting a dinner party requires a focus on detail that begins with determining when the party will occur, who will be invited, and what will be served.”

As you can see, this specific purpose statement provides a sharp and clear focus for the speech. It indicates the general purpose of the speech (to inform), the topic of the speech (hosting dinner parties), and the main points you will cover (timing, invitations, and menu). This is clearly an informative presentation, but it also has a very sharp focus, making it easy for the audience to follow what you plan to say.

**Persuasive speech specific purpose statements are equally clear.** Look at the following example:

“My speech will convince my audience that Tiger Woods is the greatest PGA golfer of all time due to his short, middle, and long game, plus his ability to handle pressure, and the sheer number of tournaments he has won.”

Again, all three of the purposes mentioned above are accomplished. The central argument is clear (Tiger Woods is the greatest golfer ever), and the main points that support that claim also are indicated. This allows the audience to prepare to hear this information and think about how it connects to the central argument you make.

In commemorative speeches, the specific purpose statement is different from the two previous examples we have discussed. Here is a commemorative speech specific purpose statement:

“My speech will commemorate the occasion of Independence Day, a day when we celebrate the founding of our country, the principles that gave this country birth, and our development as a nation.”

Here we notice the general purpose of celebration, the topic (Independence Day), and the main ideas that are to be celebrated in the speech. In each of these three examples, you see how specific purpose statements help ground speeches in a central idea, prevent you as the speaker from going off on tangents, and also provide the audience with a sense of how the speech will unfold.

The specific purpose guides you in developing your speech and also serves as the foundation for creating your thesis statement. The thesis statement, which is the core idea you wish to communicate to your audience, comes from rewording the specific purpose statement so it makes sense to an audience. Let's examine how we would retool the specific purpose statements from above so they work as thesis statements.

**Informative speech specific purpose statement:** My speech will inform my audience that the process of hosting a dinner party requires a focus on detail that begins with determining when the party will occur, who will be invited, and what will be served.

**Informative speech thesis statement:** Hosting a dinner party requires a focus on detail that begins with determining when the party will occur, who will be invited, and what will be served.
As you can see, all three of the elements of the specific purpose statement are there, but it is constructed to make sense to your audience. The topic and structure of the statement changed very little in this example, except the first few words of the specific purpose statement were eliminated. Let's see what happens when we use the persuasive speech specific purpose statement.

**Persuasive speech specific purpose statement:** My speech will convince my audience that Tiger Woods is the greatest PGA golfer of all time due to his short, middle, and long game, plus his ability to handle pressure, and the sheer number of tournaments he has won.

**Persuasive speech thesis statement:** Tiger Woods is the greatest PGA golfer of all time due to his short, middle, and long game, plus his ability to handle pressure, and the sheer number of tournaments he has won.

The same minor changes result in creating a clear thesis statement. Dropping a few words is all it takes to change one to the other. Let's see if the same holds true for commemorative speech specific purpose statements.

**Commemorative speech specific purpose statement:** My speech will commemorate the occasion of Independence Day, a day when we celebrate the founding of our country, the principles that gave this country birth, and our development as a nation.

**Commemorative speech thesis statement:** Today we celebrate Independence Day, a day that marks the founding of our country, celebrates the principles that gave this country birth, and marvels at our development as a nation.

Here, the specific purpose statement and the thesis statement have more differences than a few simple words, but the essence of the idea is still the same. The changes only helped make the statement more appealing to the ear, rather than the eye; after all, the audience is hearing the statement, not reading it.

**General Guidelines for Specific Purpose Statements**

There are several things to keep in mind when creating the specific purpose statement. First, ensure that it is one statement. A specific purpose is just that: a statement, not a paragraph or an essay. The one statement summary approach helps you stay focused and not put too much information in the speech. That said, just because it is a single statement does not mean it cannot have clauses embedded within it; in fact, if you look at the prior examples, there are several clauses in each specific purpose statement. These clauses also help keep you focused. Ultimately, if you have more than one sentence you are trying to do too much in that speech, and it will confuse not only the audience, but also you.

It is also important that this single statement be declarative in nature. This means that the sentence makes a statement and clearly says something. Go back and review the statements we used as examples and you will find that all of them are direct, easy to understand, and declare something that will be done. This declaration weds you to the topic, and the supporting structure you state will support your comments about that topic. Your specific purpose statement is essentially a declaration of intent to the audience regarding what you will say.

Finally, understand that the specific purpose statement is not a rigid law by which you must abide, but an evolutionary element of your speech. It can change based upon how you find the rest of your speech is coming together. In the end, the specific purpose statement must reflect how all the ideas fit together in your speech, but it can be adjusted as you craft the body of your speech.