

Speaking and Ethics

Communication, and in particular speech, is a very powerful tool. It can be used to enhance the public good, or it can be wielded in a way that manipulates and harms people. Like any tool, the operators involved need to understand how to apply the device to achieve maximum benefit from it. Instruction manuals are easy to identify for things like drills, Blu-Ray disc players and even cars, but for good speech there is no such manual. Instead, good speakers follow good ethical principles, and those principles constitute the “instruction manual” for speechmaking.

In this chapter, we will broadly define ethics and discuss why speech must be governed by sound ethical principles. We will then lay out the basic ethical responsibilities of speakers and audiences, both of whom play a role in speechmaking and meaning construction. Before we explain why ethics are important to the practice of speech, however, we must provide you with a definition of ethics. **Ethics** is the study of the general nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by a person; moral philosophy. It is, for all intents and purposes, a way for people to make good sound choices for themselves and their community. Since we build communities through communication with others, ethical speech is at the core of a healthy community and we must be careful what we say and how we interact with others.

Public Messages Cannot Be Taken Back

Once we say something we cannot take it back. In that way, it is much like shooting a bullet from a gun, because you cannot “un-say” the words, just as you can’t “un-fire” a gun. Think of an interpersonal situation in which a couple is dating and one partner is angry at the other. In a moment of frustration one shouts out “I hate you!” to the other person. The sender of that message may begin to regret the words and apologize, noting that anger and emotional pain caused the outburst. The offended party can accept the apology and forgive the person, but the words were said and an apology in this situation can’t fully undo the damage. Words matter because they leave an indelible mark on a relationship.

We all know words can inflict significant damage in an interpersonal relationship, but they can do even more damage in a public speaking setting. Even though public speaking may seem like a less intimate setting, saying something unethical or offensive can be more damaging than in an interpersonal setting. Whereas much of interpersonal communication is spontaneous, public speaking is more planned and formal so the audience often attributes careful thought to the speaker in a public speaking setting. That is to say, they believe you say what you mean. Of course, in interpersonal settings, especially those with people who know you, such a slip can be explained away as just that, a “slip.” In speeches it is harder to say you “slipped” when you had time to prepare your comments.

The damage done when we say something unethical or offensive is not just to the listener. Yes, the audience may take offense, walk out, and suffer discomfort at hearing your comments, but you also are harmed when this happens. Your credibility as a speaker takes the brunt of this damage, and you may not be invited to speak again, depending upon what you said. Knowing that communication is irreversible, and thus permanent, as well as acknowledging the lasting impact our words have on ourselves and others is an important step toward becoming an ethical speaker.

Our words also let the audience into our minds, allowing them to see how we see the world. Our word choices reflect our impressions of our environment and carry with them significant meaning for ourselves and others. The words we use reveal what we feel about everything from the audience to our political views and reflect our personal values and beliefs. In this way, our messages to audiences in public speaking settings impact how the audience sees us and will have an impact on the effectiveness of our messages. If the audience does not understand or agree with our worldview, it can increase the challenges we face in a public speaking setting.

In today’s mediated environment this is especially crucial. Many people upload commentaries, speeches, presentations, and even casual web-logs to the Internet via YouTube and other online Web sites. We may not think that what we say will hurt anyone because there is no one in front of us when we videotape these comments and post them. The truth is that once we send our videos into the digital world they can reach many people, even those we don’t know. For that reason alone, it is especially crucial that we pay careful attention to our words and what we say because once we send them into cyberspace, they will never disappear and may go viral.

Ethical Responsibilities of Speakers

As the originator of a message in a public speaking situation, the speaker is bound by several ethical responsibilities. These obligations begin at the start of the speechmaking process, then progress through the research stage, and culminate with the delivery of the presentation itself. It is important to be attuned to the moral issues that arise throughout the development of your remarks because doing so will help you keep the best interests of your audience in mind. In this section, we briefly cover the ethical responsibilities of speakers from the planning of a presentation, to researching the topic, all the way through the delivery of the speech.

The Ethics of Choosing a Topic

In many instances, speakers know the broad topic on which they will present, but even in these instances it is important to maintain a focus on ethics when narrowing the topic. This means that speakers must choose topics and messages they firmly believe are in the best interests of their audience. Choosing self-serving messages or crafting topics in a way that is designed to manipulate an audience is a perversion of a speaker's responsibilities. As the creator of the message, you own what you say and so you should take care to keep others in mind when you decide what you will say. Remember, words cannot be taken back.

When choosing or narrowing the topic of a presentation, we often find ourselves balancing various ethical responsibilities that sometimes compete with one another. We have a duty to ourselves to do the best we possibly can, a duty to our families to provide for them by keeping our jobs, a duty to the audience and the greater public to seek the common good, and a duty to our employers to achieve results. It is not hard to envision a situation in which these duties conflict and present us with an ethical dilemma. When it comes to message construction and meaning-making through speeches and statements, how do we maintain our ethical principles when the situation is not so clear? This is the hard work we must do before we even decide what to say to someone, but once we know what we will say and how we will balance our ethical obligations, our requirement to do what is right does not stop.

The Ethics of Research

The ethical requirements of speechmaking are not restricted to keeping the audience in mind when we choose a topic; they also come into play in research and speech development. In almost every instance in which you will be called upon to deliver a speech, you will need to incorporate some degree of evidence that you researched. In a business meeting, it could entail explaining sales figures; in a design presentation it could be the history of the site upon which you plan to build; and in a class, it will most likely be scholarly research on a topic. In each instance, however, you must keep the interests of the audience in mind, properly evaluate the evidence you choose to cite, and properly attribute the source of that information.

Thanks to technology, we have vast amounts of information at our fingertips. This is both good and bad. Good because we can easily conduct research from our desks, but potentially hazardous because the Internet is rife with biased and fabricated information. For that reason, it is essential we know how to properly evaluate information we find before we decide to use it in a presentation or report. As researchers, we need to discern the true from the false and facts from opinions. Facts are information that can be verified and substantiated. They can be qualitative, as in historical events or testimony, or quantitative, as in polling results and the outcomes of scientific experiments. Opinions, on the other hand, vary from person to person and from group to group and are not as reliable as facts because they are often biased. Identifying the difference between opinions and facts will help you enhance your credibility. That credibility can be greatly diminished if the audience realizes you are citing a biased source.

When evaluating a source, there are several questions you should ask yourself to help determine whether the source can be trusted.

1. Will this person benefit from getting me to believe that this information is true? A source who is being paid as a spokesperson for a company trying to sell you something or trying to win your vote, is biased. Sometimes, biased sources are accurate, but they are often misleading, and as an ethical communicator, you have a responsibility to do additional research and find a more credible source.
2. Is this person an expert in this area or in a position to know this information? Individuals who have special training and experience related to the information they are sharing are more reliable sources than those who do not. For example, a cardiologist is a better source than an auto mechanic for information on how to keep your heart healthy, but an auto mechanic is a better source than your family doctor for learning how to change the oil in your car.
3. Are the claims made by this source substantiated by other credible sources? If you have a single source that makes a claim, but find ten other reliable sources that say the opposite is true, it is likely that the ten sources that agree are accurate. For example, if you find one source that says you can lose weight by eating three pizzas every day, but find many other sources that say you must limit your calories and exercise in order to lose weight, it is probably not true that eating large quantities of pizza will help you lose weight.
4. Is this source recent enough to be relevant? If you are speaking about a current topic, you should use the most recent sources you can find. For example, an article written twenty years ago is not a good source to learn about the most energy-efficient cars available today. However, if you are giving a speech about an important figure in the Civil War, a source that is twenty years old might be OK.

Biased sources and opinions are not the only pitfalls of which researchers must be aware, and they are not even the most grievous mistake a speaker can make. **Plagiarism** is perhaps the greatest offense a speaker can commit because it takes advantage of both the audience and the actual source of the information. When speakers plagiarize, they steal the intellectual achievements of another person and present them as their own, thus deceiving the audience into believing the speakers were responsible for more than they actually were. Like many crimes, plagiarism comes in many forms, so let's take a moment and describe what these various forms look like.

The first type of plagiarism is **global plagiarism**, which is taking an entire piece of work and saying it is your own. Suppose a roommate gave a speech in a class different from your class and you took that speech and put your name on it. That would be an example of global plagiarism and many consider it the worst kind of academic dishonesty. In these cases, speakers do no original work and act as if they did. They have robbed the source of the credit deserved for creating the speech, and tricked the audience into believing they themselves are a reliable source of information.

The second type of plagiarism is **incremental plagiarism**, which involves using part of someone else's work and not citing it as a source. An example of incremental plagiarism would be copying a few sentences from someone else's speech or paper and putting them directly into your speech without citing the source or using quotation marks. Despite the fact it does not steal something in its entirety, it is clearly still an incident of dishonesty. This type of plagiarism is a bit more common than global plagiarism, but it is just as unethical because of the way it treats the source and the audience.

The last type of plagiarism we will address is **patchwork plagiarism**. Patchwork plagiarism takes ideas from more than one piece of work and presents them as original work without giving due credit to the sources. This is perhaps the most common form of plagiarism, but just because more people do it does not make it right. It is deceitful and unethical in that it still robs others of the credit they deserve for work they conducted, and falsely inflates the credibility of the speaker.

Patchworking is a process that closely resembles patchwork plagiarism. When writers or researchers employ **patchworking** they are taking original sentences or work from another source, changing a few words in it and not citing the source. The changes are minimal and do not really change the idea presented in the original source, and without any attribution to the source material this remains plagiarism. On the one hand it is evidence of a poor attempt at paraphrasing, but on the other it is a deliberate attempt to deceive an audience. In both instances, however, it is an unethical practice and speakers and writers need to avoid it.

As we have mentioned when discussing each of these types of plagiarism, it is important to cite sources in your written work. It is also essential that when speaking we verbally attribute those sources as well, because failure to do so also constitutes plagiarism. Having the sources in your outline or manuscript is not enough; you must mention them to your audience as well.

When delivering a speech, you must note where the work came from by mentioning the author or publication in which you found the information. Ideally, your verbal citation should include as many of the following four pieces of information as possible for your source: (1) the name of the publication, (2) the date the source was published, (3) the author of the work and/or name of the person who is providing the information used in the source, and (4) the credentials of the source. It is best to cite your source first and then give the information, not the other way around. Citing the source after sharing the information is awkward and can hurt the flow of your speech, but citing the source before sharing the information can heighten audience attention and help the audience sense the importance of the information you are sharing. For example, in a speech you might cite your source by saying, "According to the February 10, 2012, issue of *Time*, Dr. Gary Landreth, a scientist at Case Western Reserve University, has discovered that a drug called bexarotene can reverse Alzheimer's disease in mice."

Thus far we have discussed the ethical requirements of a speaker when choosing and researching a speech topic. There is one more area in which speakers have an ethical requirement, and that is when they actually deliver the speech. In the next section, we will provide some general guidelines for ethical speech delivery.

The Ethics of Language and Delivery

Even if you prepare a topic with the best interests of the audience in mind and research the topic appropriately and thoroughly, there are still ethical pitfalls of which you must be aware when you actually deliver the speech. These ethical responsibilities primarily involve the language you choose to use when describing ideas, people, or things to an audience. Let's look at some general guidelines that will help you make good choices regarding the language and delivery of your presentations.

Maintain Composure. Every time we speak to someone, whether individually or in group settings, we must pay the person the same respect we hope he or she will give us. Sometimes our audience agrees with us, which makes conversation and discussion easier in many ways. Other times, some or even all of an audience will disagree with what we are saying, but that doesn't allow us to suspend civility and respect for them. In fact, it makes it even more important to be respectful and civil. There are also times when an audience will be neutral toward you and your topic, but respect is important in these instances as well.

Regardless of how the audience feels toward you or your topic, always show them respect. Knowingly insulting or offending an audience, even a single audience member, will get you nowhere. You may not like a particular person or his or her position, but purposely injecting unneeded negativity into the situation will damage your credibility and destroy any chance of conveying your message successfully. Sometimes it is hard to maintain your composure if someone is heckling or being rude when you are speaking, but even in these instances, you should keep a moderate tone of voice. People always respond to your tone before your message, so staying moderate and calm will help diffuse the situation and enhance your credibility because you will be seen as reasonable.

Beyond keeping a moderate tone, you also owe it to yourself and your audience to be polite and professional. Losing your patience or temper will eliminate any chance of reaching an audience, and you could lose the respect of even those people who support you. This does not mean you cannot call the hecklers out on their behavior, but you must do so in a civil way. This involves first describing their behavior and then asking them to hold their comments and concerns until after you have finished speaking. Unfortunately, there are occasions when this technique does not work, but you still cannot allow yourself to get agitated and focus on the heckler. This is not what the rest of the audience came for, and you should not give one person more attention than everyone else in the room. Explaining this may also help the situation. Additionally, members of the audience may come to your aid if you appear reasonable in dealing with the heckler (see Table 3.1).

TABLE 3.1¹

Some Rules for Civility ¹	
Pay attention	Respect others' opinions
Speak kindly	Listen
Don't speak ill	Mind your body
Assert yourself	Respect other people's time
Don't shift responsibility and blame	Acknowledge others

Describe People with Respect. As speakers, we often like to use colorful language to describe ideas, places, and even people. We must be careful, however, how we choose to describe others so we don't risk offending our audience by not treating others as people. When we use images of animals or objects to refer to people in a negative way, we are dehumanizing the people, or making them appear to be less than human. This insults and demeans people by depriving them of the very thing that they are: human beings.

Using dehumanizing language to describe people is very tempting when we do not agree with them, or if we are in conflict with them over something. In fact, such a technique is very common in presidential war rhetoric. It makes it more likely other people will see the person being dehumanized as an animal and not a person, thus making it less likely the target audience will respect the person. In war, such imagery actually makes it easier for people to engage in violent behaviors against an enemy they do not view as being human.

Furthermore, it is important to use gender-inclusive language when describing roles so you are not using language to inadvertently exclude a particular group. The titles of many professional roles have changed to reflect the inclusion of both men and women in those professions, and as a speaker, you should respect others by using inclusive language. Table 3.2 provides several examples of gender-inclusive language.

TABLE 3.2

Gender-Inclusive Language	
Inappropriate	Appropriate
Policeman	Police officer
Mailman	Mail carrier
Stewardess	Flight attendant
Mankind	Humankind

¹ These ten rules are taken from a larger list in the book. Forni, P.M. (2002). *Choosing Civility: The twenty-five rules of considerate conduct*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Language, as we will discuss later, is a very powerful tool. Being an ethical speaker requires you to respect your audience's humanity even when you do not agree with them. Such respect will help foster a more effective dialogue over differences, instead of a combat rooted in insults.

Avoid Profanity. Profanity is a common part of everyday language. We see it in movies, hear it on television, laugh at it when it is used by comedians, and even use it to describe everyday situations and frustrations. Despite its common usage, profanity has no place in a public presentation and should be avoided. Sure, a few audience members might be amused if you drop the occasional curse word, but it is likely most people will not be impressed. In fact, it damages your credibility when you choose to inject profanity into your speech because people see it as a linguistic tool of a weak mind. It simply does not make you seem intelligent.

Not only does profanity damage your credibility as a speaker, but it insults the intelligence of your audience. Even when you use a swear word to try and elicit a laugh from your audience, you are essentially saying two things:

1. You do not know how to tell a joke or make your audience laugh without swearing, and
2. You think the audience cannot understand humor that does not involve profanity, and by extension, your speech. Profanity insults the intelligence of the audience.

This is not to say there will never be a moment when profanity is acceptable. In fact, if you are quoting someone who used profanity you might need to repeat the terms. This is acceptable with the caveat that you make the audience aware that you are quoting someone. You should let them know before quoting the term that what you are about to say may offend some in the audience. Doing this should be rare and should only be done when not saying the word or words eliminates the effect or reason for including them.

Balance Simplicity and Complexity. Acting ethically when delivering a speech also requires that you make an honest attempt to speak to your audience on their level. What this means is that you take care not to oversimplify or overcomplicate things for your audience. To ensure you understand what your audience knows about a subject or concept you should review any audience analysis data available. This will enable you to approach topics with a clearer idea of what the audience knows and what they do not.

If you walk into a speech expecting that your audience knows nothing about the subject on which you are speaking, then you run a high risk of insulting their intelligence and losing their attention during the presentation. For example, if an engineer delivers remarks to a group of mechanics on the model for a new engine design and begins with a detailed description of why cars need engines, the speaker will have lost the audience and will likely be perceived as condescending. On the other hand, if you expect your audience to know things they do not know, it will result in negative audience perceptions as well. Take the case of the engineer and change the audience to a group of middle school students. If the engineer uses technical terms that middle schoolers do not know, then he will lose the audience, and they will also see the engineer as arrogant and ineffective. For this reason, knowing your audience and making an attempt to meet them on their intellectual level is essential for ethical speaking. No one likes to be made to feel unintelligent.

Balance Emotion and Logic. Oftentimes when we feel passionate about an issue or idea we inject that enthusiasm into our speech. Additionally, we try and "push" people to agree with us by using emotional stories. These elements of an appeal definitely have their place, but capitalizing on emotion to move an audience denies them the opportunity to sift and weigh the evidence for themselves and come to their own decision on the matter. As speakers, we need to respect the ability of our audience to make an informed decision for themselves and not fear that they might disagree with our position. To that end, we must balance emotion with logic, for emotional appeals can be very influential with an audience.

Emotions are a powerful force in our lives, and some of the strongest emotions are negative. Consider anger, rage, jealousy, hatred, and envy. These are powerful forces that have been manipulated by speakers time and again through history to get audiences to act in ways they normally would not if they were also provided accurate evidence. Look no further than the case of Adolph Hitler, whose words capitalized on a downtrodden German populace by igniting anger in them toward a specific group of people. This resulted in one of the most inhumane periods in human history: the Holocaust.

The power of emotions does not solely lie in negative feelings; positive emotions can also be powerful. Some of these are love, pride, joy, and gratitude. Think of commercials calling you to donate to Doctors Without Borders, a charity that finances medical assistance in impoverished countries. The appeal focuses on activating your love, or even sympathy, for the plight of other humans to get you to donate to their cause. This is a positive emotion you feel, and an equally positive cause, but creating an appeal based on emotion alone denies the audience the opportunity to properly evaluate the organization and its mission.

Although humans are emotional beings and emotions can be used successfully, especially in a persuasive speech, relying upon them alone constitutes unethical behavior. If people make decisions based primarily on emotion, then they might make decisions that lack logic and reasoning. Audiences make better decisions, and speakers make better cases for their argument, when emotions are tied to logic. So, when developing your speech, incorporate appeals to emotions in tandem with the logic and evidence you use.

Up until now, we have focused our attention on the ethical requirements of speakers, but they are not the only ones with such obligations. In the next section, we discuss the ethical dimensions of being a good audience member.

Ethics as an Audience Member

Even though the spotlight remains on a speaker during a presentation, there are still ethical responsibilities to which audience members are beholden. Too often in today's smartphone-dominated world, audience members do things like text message, check e-mails, or even do work during someone else's presentation. These types of behaviors are not innocuous and innocent, but rather are rude and unethical. Speakers put a lot of work into their presentations, and audience members have the responsibility to listen attentively and respectfully.

Be a Responsible Audience Member

Keep an Open Mind. Audience members should always approach a speech or presentation as an opportunity to learn something new. If you do this and keep an open mind to what the speaker is saying, you are giving the speaker the respect his or her work and effort deserve. There might be ideas in the speech about which you disagree, but there might also be ideas in the speech with which you agree. Being an ethical and responsible audience member means that we should give the speaker the benefit of the doubt and hold our own biases in check so we can concentrate on the message. It is entirely possible that the speaker might change our opinion on something, but even if we do not ultimately change our opinion, we have allowed the speaker the opportunity to present ideas to us. It is, after all, what we would want if the situation were reversed.

Do Not Heckle. Too often we see people attending political meetings who interrupt speakers and yell at them in the middle of their presentations. Just because we disagree with speakers does not give us the right to attack them and interrupt their remarks. Heckling is particularly nasty when the interrupter tries to demean the speaker. The end result of heckling is an uncomfortable environment for everyone else, and hecklers actually call negative attention to themselves. A heckler's disruptions can upset and throw off the speaker, and heckling can upset and interfere with the message reception of the other audience members. Just as you have ethical responsibilities to the speaker, you have ethical responsibilities to your fellow audience members. If the speaker or the message upsets you so much you feel warranted to engage in heckling, you should remove yourself from the environment and let the event continue instead of disturbing it for everyone else. Hecklers often wrongly assume everyone else in the audience agrees with them, and have thus prejudged not only the speaker, but also their fellow audience members.

Pay Attention. It is true that we will find some speakers and their topics boring, but our lack of interest doesn't mean we can do something else during the presentation. We might think speakers can't see us holding our cell phones, searching the Internet or sending a text, but they almost always notice, and it distracts the presenters. Such behavior tells speakers that you think they are boring and unimportant and can damage the speakers' confidence in an already challenging situation.

There are nonverbal behaviors that audience members engage in that distract the speaker and the audience. For example, putting your head down on the desk, slouching in your seat, and closing your eyes are all disrespectful to a speaker. A speaker could infer a lot of different things from these behaviors, such as laziness, indifference, and even contempt. That said, these nonverbal behaviors are not the worst things an audience member can do; the worst is when members of the audience start talking to each other during a presentation. It is a simple rule not to engage in side conversations when someone else is speaking.

In your public speaking class, you have the ethical obligation to pay attention to all speakers, just as you would want your classmates to do when you're speaking. Giving a speech is hard for many people, as we covered in the last chapter, and your attention can actually give them support and strength while they are speaking and can improve their performance. No one likes to be ignored or mocked when they are speaking, so we should all be respectful audience members when someone is delivering remarks.