Selecting Your Speech Topic

- As a public speaker you are both author and director
- Speechmaking is an artistic process that needs the spark of creativity to live
- You will select a topic with your audience, your own interests and your speaking occasion in mind.

Choosing an excellent speech topic involves several steps:

- Generate a list of ideas for possible topics
- Select a topic
- Focus the topic
- Determine your general purpose
- Formulate your specific purpose
- Word your thesis statement

Generate Ideas

**Brainstorming**
You list all the ideas that come to mind without evaluating or censoring them
The larger the list of possible topics, the better the topic you will finally select

What may seem silly at first can turn out to be an unusual speech subject with a lot of potential to interest your audience

After brainstorming, ask the following questions:

What topics interest you?
What topics interest your audience?
What topics develop from the occasion?
What topics develop from research?

Your answers will help you select the most appropriate topic from your list
Self-generated topics

Come from your memory, your notes, your interests, your experiences, and your ‘personal’ files.

Jot down your hobbies, favorite courses, books you have read, pet peeves, names of people who intrigue you, issues and events that excite you.

What are your likes and dislikes?

On what topics do you consider yourself knowledgeable?

Review your list, writing beside each item possible speech topics.

May also include topics you need to know

   For example, if you expect to travel soon and you’re making your own arrangements for the first time, you may draw on how you addressed making arrangements as an interesting topic for a speech. You might do something about searching the web for the best ticket prices.
   Remember, though, it must be interesting to your audience—if the audience already knows how to search the web for the best prices, your speech might not be worth listening to (more of this below).

Possible problems with self-generated topic

   You may know too much:
   Don’t forget to adapt to the audience
   e.g. You trade stocks on the internet
       May be jargon associated with this
       Define your terms for your audience

   You may be lacking in objectivity
   If you’re too involved with a topic, you may have trouble giving a balanced speech
       You may leave out important information that does not match your preconceived ideas.

Audience generated topics

What topics are important and of interest to your audience?

   If you are asked to speak to a group, you are often asked because of your expertise in a particular area—topic selection is probably predetermined.
For classroom speeches:

Ask your classmates what they’re interested in
  Casual conversation
  Questionnaires

Listen and read—what do your classmates discuss before and after class—articles in campus and local paper and letters to the editor might suggest topics

Consider your listener’s needs
  (See notes on Chapter 5—Audience Analysis)

Occasion generated topics

When and where a speech is given may guide you in selecting a topic
  e.g., a speech on setting goals may work better at the start of the semester than toward the end

If you’re scheduled to speak on or near a holiday as speech about the holiday may be in order
  Specialty calendars or almanacs list unusual but interesting holidays, birthdates of notable and notorious people, or anniversaries of important historical events

Check out:
  www.scopesys.com/anyday
  www.festivals.com

On a larger scale, there are occasions that may culturally require certain lines of talk
  Weddings
  Funerals
  Birthdays
  Anniversaries (of those present)
  Commencement
  Awards ceremonies
  Etc.

Research generated topics

Explore a variety of sources
  Browse (can be a sort brainstorming)
Visual brainstorming (this is a great tactic)
Write your topic in the center of a piece of paper

Think how you might divide it and narrow it by generic categories—link them like spokes on a wheel to your topic-in-the-center:
- Causes
- Types
- Parts
- Aims
- History
- Etc.

Or by categories specifically related to the topic

  e.g. Music
  Instruments
  Performers
  Composers

Focus your topic

Use visual brainstorming to locate divisions or subtopics (see above)

Use research
The more you read about a topic, the more likely you will be to discover its many aspects

Determine your general purpose
Broadly there are three general purposes for speaking—they may overlap—in the end you’re looking for an emphasis

Speeches to inform:

  **Objective is to impart knowledge to an audience**
  Process
  Concept
  Etc.

You convey information in an objective and unbiased manner

To facilitate understanding of the subject and retention of the ‘new’ information
(Chap. 15 notes for greater detail)
Speeches to persuade:

**Objective is to influence beliefs or actions**

**Beliefs:** speech to convince
   Focuses on changing (intensifying/altering) beliefs and attitudes
   Stops short of advocating a specific action

**Actions:** speech to actuate
   Focuses on changing (intensifying/altering) beliefs and attitudes & audience behavior
   (See Chaps. 16 & 17 notes for more detail)

Speech to Entertain (epideictic):

**Speaking to entertain:**
   A general phrase covering several types of speaking
   Humorous monologues
   Stand-up comedy routines
   Storytelling
   Etc.

**A speech to entertain:**
   More formal, highly organized, developed in more detail
   Awards ceremony
   Eulogy (notice in this context ‘entertain’ is not solely about levity)

   Can combine persuading and informing

   (See Chap. 18 notes, Speaking on Special Occasions for more detail)

*Formulate your specific purpose*

**General Purpose:** inform, persuade, entertain

**Specific purpose:**

- Begin with general purpose
  e.g. “To convince”

- Name the individual to whom the speech is addressed:
  e.g. “The audience”

- State what you want the speech to accomplish:
What you want the audience to know, believe or do as a result of listening to your speech

e.g. Establish the belief that alcoholism is hereditary

Complete statement: To convince the audience that alcoholism is hereditary

Other examples:

To inform the audience on how to communicate constructive criticism

To inform the audience on celebrity worship syndrome

To convince the audience that publicly funded professional sports stadiums are a misuse of taxpayers’ money

To move the audience to draft and sign a living will

To move the audience to spend their spring break building a house for Habitat for Humanity

*Word your thesis statement*

*Presents/asserts the central idea of the speech*
A one-sentence synopsis of your speech
e.g. Compulsory national service would benefit the nation by promoting the national spirit, the national defense, and the national welfare

*Working thesis:*
A statement that, based on your current research and thinking, summarizes what you will say in your speech

Again—your thesis may develop as you move toward speech-time

*Examples:*

*Topic area:* Sculpture

*Topic:* Works by Andy Goldsworthy

*General purpose:* To inform
Specific purpose: To inform the audience about Andy Goldsworthy’s sculptures

Thesis statement: Andy Goldsworthy sculpts wood, ice and leaves into intricate works in their natural settings

Topic area: Police oversight

Topic: Mandatory videotaping of police

General purpose: to persuade

Specific purpose: To persuade the audience that all police actions in police stations should be videotaped

Thesis statement: Videotaping all police actions in police stations will deter police misconduct, deter false charges of police misconduct, and restore public confidence in police work.

Develop your speech title

Whenever you have the opportunity, you should title your speeches

If you don’t somebody else will (possibly to your detriment)

A title:

Generates audience interest
By appealing to the needs and interests of your audience, a title can encourage active listening

Interesting titles may enhance your image as a communicator

With an unfamiliar audience, your title may generate their first impression of you

Makes your message more memorable
When you encapsulate the point of your speech in its title, you prepare the audience to listen for its development.

Your title may provide a reference point when listeners explain it to others

A headline!
When you give your speech a title, you are forced to state your point clearly and concisely (we hope!)

Options for generating titles:

If your speech contains a key phrase or sentence that is used repeatedly, that statement may be your title

MLK: I have a dream

Promise your audience something beneficial in your title
“Living longer, feeling better”

“How to . . .”

Use a question:
Asking a question signals to the audience what they will know/believe/do at the end of the speech
In any event make sure you can answer the question (and that it is appropriate to frontload your speech’s intended outcome)!

Can you make a quick million betting on the lottery?

So: chaotic beginnings invite chaotic endings

Select your topic and develop it with care!!