

Develop Your Public Speaking Skills: Tips for Beginning Speakers, Speech Coaches, and Judges¹

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Developing effective public speaking skills is one of the most valuable benefits young people can derive from participation in 4-H, FFA, and other youth groups. The adult volunteers who serve as coaches and judges for local, regional, state, and national competitive public speaking programs can have a lasting impact on the participants. Young people setting out to improve their public speaking skills and leaders, teachers, and parents helping in this important work can benefit from this publication.

In working with young, relatively inexperienced speakers, there is an understandable tendency to focus primarily on the development of dramatic presentation delivery skills. It is apparent in some contests that competitors put less effort into preparation of significant presentation content. The challenge for coaches, teachers, and judges is to find the correct balance between communication and performance. Because these young people are forming public speaking habits that can last them a lifetime, it is important for them to have competitive speaking experiences that help them become effective communicators.

In general, students with a background in speech competition do very well in oral communication classes. A few, however, still focus too much on what they think contest judges look for in speech delivery and not enough on presenting a substantive message for noncompetitive communication settings. For these speakers, competitive experience becomes a disadvantage. It leaves them with poor communication habits, which they must work hard to recognize and overcome. Thus, the quality of coaching and judging by adult volunteers and youth organization staff makes a big difference in the educational value of public speaking competition programs.

The ideas offered here have three purposes. First, they can help public speaking contestants successfully prepare and deliver effective presentations. Second, they guide parents, teachers, and other volunteers in helping novice speakers prepare competitive presentations. Third, the information provides an objective basis for judging or assessing the effectiveness of a presentation when delivered before an audience.

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The material is drawn from two principal sources: 1) several well-respected public speaking textbooks used as primary or secondary references for courses in oral communication or public speaking, and 2) comments from follow-up critiques at public speaking competitions. This information is consistent with accepted practice for public speakers and specifically relevant to the problems young speakers commonly have in competition.

Speech competition requires two main actions: preparation and delivery, each with several responsibilities.

Preparation

- Audience Analysis
- Topic and Purpose
- Content
- Structure
- Developing the Body
- Developing the Introduction
- Developing a Strong Conclusion

Delivery

- Notes vs. Memorization
- Wording
- Movement
- Gesture
- Vocal Delivery
- Audience Interaction

Speakers shouldn't feel that they have to score at the top on each item discussed here to be competitive; judges shouldn't expect each speaker to excel in every aspect. Every speaker and presentation has different strengths. The idea is to help each participant develop and deliver the best possible presentation, given his or her individual skills, abilities, and style.

Preparation

This phase of the work involves clear thinking and decision making about

- the "real world" audience for the presentation,
- the topic of the presentation,
- the "real world" purpose of the presentation, and
- the information needed to get the job done.

Audience Analysis – Before choosing a speech topic, speakers should perform an audience analysis to determine what topics might be appropriate and of interest to this specific group. Sometimes this involves gathering new information about an audience; sometimes it simply requires taking into account information they already have as they plan and develop a presentation. Common aspects of audience analysis include typical age, gender, group affiliations, education, type of employment, knowledge of the topic, attitudes about the speaker and the topic, and personal or professional interests that might be relevant to the topic.

Occasionally, a competitor will give a presentation intended for a general audience. This is usually a problem. A general audience is an anonymous audience; it is not known who the audience members are, what they care about, or how they relate to the topic. The speaker has little information to decide what to cover and how to approach the audience; the competition judge has little information to assess the likely effectiveness of the effort. Speakers with specific audiences in mind generally present a clearer message.

Topic and Purpose – The most immediate purpose for the competitive speaker is to have a winning presentation. But the purpose of a public speaking competition is to help participants develop skills for communicating about real issues to real audiences, as they may do in the future. Contest judges should look for evidence that the competition speech would actually be effective in persuading or informing an audience.

In searching for good topics, students should look for the overlap of their knowledge and interests with the interests and information needs of the audience. For example, a speaker could plan to inform an audience of citrus growers about the advantages of low-volume irrigation systems, or the speaker could plan to persuade an audience of community leaders about the importance of agriculture to the local economy.

Competition judges have indicated that speakers with "big concept" topics, such as family, environment, or the American way, do not have an advantage over speakers with technical topics, such as low-volume irrigation, aquaculture, wildlife habitats, and so on. Also, presentations on general topics are more difficult to prepare and present than presentations on narrower topics. Instead of "Leadership" as a topic, try "Developing Leadership Skills Through Volunteering." Instead of "Youth Employment," try "Five Key Employment Skills and How to Get Them."

Content – Content should receive significant time and attention during preparation. After all, it's the content that contains the message! Once the topic is selected, the speaker identifies the main points to be covered, then assembles facts and statistics, expert opinions, accepted theories and concepts, and any other available evidence to support the main points and convey the central message to the audience. Speech coaches might help students choose what information to include in a speech by likening the speech to a hamburger: The actual burger patty represents information that cannot be left out. What does the speech need to be a complete speech on that topic? The lettuce and tomatoes represent ideas that are not necessary for the speech to be complete but that would enhance the speech if time allows. The onions represent ethical issues. Some people don't like onions, so what thoughts might turn people off from listening? These should be avoided in creating a speech. Lastly, the bun represents the introduction and conclusion. How should the speaker wrap his or her speech so the audience can follow it? Using this hamburger analogy may help students decide what content to include in their speeches.

Good public speaking presentations also include examples, illustrations, and supporting stories that show how the information presented applies to the lives of the audience members. However, a common error in competition is overuse of this kind of material. When this happens, the speaker becomes a storyteller, spinning an entertaining tale of humorous anecdotes and familiar quotations, but not presenting a substantial message.

Entertaining presentations certainly have their place. Good speakers can tell a few jokes or give an enjoyable after-dinner speech, but the purpose of public speaking is to inform or persuade. The reason speech coaches invest so much effort in helping young people develop public speaking skills is to prepare young people to participate effectively in public discussion and debate on issues relating to agriculture, natural resource use, food safety, international trade and competition, and the like. To do this, coaches, teachers, and judges should challenge competitive speakers to present factual and accurate information to their audiences, provide new insights for the audience to consider, and convince the audience that the message rests on solid evidence. Simply testifying to the strength and sincerity of one's own beliefs does not guarantee that anyone else will accept the same beliefs.

Structure – After the content of the speech is chosen, the speaker should consider both the overall speech structure as well as the structure of the information to be delivered. Perhaps the world's oldest maxim guiding public speakers is to "tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you've told them." This is sometimes called the "Tell them x 3" approach: introduction, body, and conclusion.

Specific suggestions regarding introductions and conclusions are offered below. It is recommended that speakers begin by first developing the body of the speech.

Developing the Body – The message lies in the body, which usually includes three to five main points. In the example topic "Developing Leadership Skills Through Volunteering," the main points might be

- importance of volunteers in community services,
- basic principles of leadership in a volunteer setting, and
- finding youth volunteer opportunities in specific communities.

These main points would support or explain the main theme of a presentation about how young people can develop leadership skills through volunteer service. Usually, the speaker spends about the same amount of time on each main point.

Presentations organized around fewer than three main points may offer so little information that they leave the audience feeling shortchanged, or there may be a jumble of information that would be easier to understand if the speaker did a better job of organizing the material.

In organizing the information in the body, speakers should choose and use a specific, consistent structure. The speaker must decide whether he or she is talking about steps in a process, problems and solutions, general categories of a broader topic, a historical sequence, case examples, and so on. Strong presentations are built around a logical structure that works for the topic and helps the audience follow the speech. The structure helps the speaker decide which main point to address first and the order of the points that follow. The audience can become quickly confused if a presentation is simply a laundry list of everything known about a topic. If audience members become confused, they assume it's the speaker's fault and tend to stop listening.

Developing the Introduction – Once the body of the speech has been developed, the speaker should focus next on the introduction. The introduction sets the tone for what is to follow. Audience members use the introduction like a road map in order to understand where the speech is going. After a solid introduction, the speaker and the audience are on the same page regarding what will happen next and why. A good introduction does the following:

- Gets attention: Speakers should start with an interesting quote, a surprising statistic, a rhetorical question, or a brief story with which the audience can identify. This helps involve

audience members in the presentation at the outset. If a speaker starts right in with content before the audience is ready to listen, audience members might miss an important point or not be engaged in the speech from its outset.

- Discloses the purpose: Speakers should let audience members know the purpose of the presentation by explicitly stating what it means to them and how it will impact their lives and interests. What problem will the presentation help them solve? What question will the presentation answer? What issue will the presentation help them deal with more effectively? Why does the presentation matter to them? Audiences can become turned off when the speaker seems to be talking only about his or her own interests. Choosing a topic that matters to the audience is essential. Telling how and why the topic matters lets each audience member know that the speaker has prepared something useful.
- Establishes the credibility of the speaker: Early in a presentation, audience members make important judgments about the speaker based on these and similar questions: Is the speaker really prepared to speak on this topic? What is the speaker's underlying motive for giving the presentation? Do I trust the speaker? Not only should the speaker give his or her name during the presentation's introduction, but the speaker also should let the audience know what interest or organization the speaker represents, what qualifies the speaker to speak about the topic at hand, and why the speaker is giving the presentation.
- Establishes rapport: Rapport refers to mutual good feelings between the speaker and the audience. To establish rapport, speakers touch briefly on areas of shared experience or shared values they have with the audience. A speaker whose family grew up on a farm would likely state this fact when speaking to an audience of farmers. An agricultural speaker dealing with an audience of environmentalists might begin by emphasizing that farmers also rely on a healthy environment. When trying to persuade an audience, it's particularly important to begin

with areas of agreement before dealing with areas of contention.

- Provides the speech's road map: It is important for the speaker to develop the presentation around a logical structure. The speaker should let the audience know the structure of the speech and the main points in the introduction. A speaker might say, "To understand the current problems in the Everglades, we have to review four key historical events: 'A,' 'B,' 'C,' and 'D.'" This prepares the audience to follow the body of the speech.

In a competitive setting, speakers should include some introductory information that establishes the communication setting for the judges. The speaker might say, "My message today is for our friends in the environmental community who have questions about agriculture's role in creating environmental problems." Or the speaker could say, "Today's citrus growers face conflicting pressures to keep costs down and invest in new technology to reduce water use. The research results I'll share with you show how low-volume irrigation can help deal with this challenge." This orientation material gives the judges a better basis for assessing the likely effectiveness of the presentation.

Beginning speakers may be tempted to rush into the content portion of their presentations, but a successful introduction can build confidence that carries the speaker through the presentation. A solid introduction pays off for the speaker and provides for better audience engagement and understanding.

Developing a Strong Conclusion – The conclusion should bring the presentation to a close. It should close the loop opened by the introduction. Where the introduction gives an advance notification of what will follow, the conclusion should review and reiterate the main points that have been covered. Where the introduction tells the audience how the presentation will benefit them, the conclusion should specifically tell the audience how and under what circumstances to apply the information provided. The conclusion should also touch again on the audience interests served by the material presented. This motivates the audience to remember and use the information.

Delivery

Most competitors work diligently on speech mechanics, so delivery is generally strong. Thorough preparation and rehearsal, focused on good standards of performance, are key to successful delivery. Delivery is important because it reflects as much variation in how competitors have been coached as it does in competitor effectiveness. Most young public speakers try to do whatever their parents, club advisors, or teachers tell them to do. Those helping competitors prepare and those judging competitions should have similar standards.

Notes vs. Memorization – Speakers must choose to use notecards or recite a speech from memory. Each speaker should do what he or she can do best. Speech competition judges report that many competitors have trouble remembering the material, while other speakers clumsily use notes. Winning speakers, however, have successfully used either method.

It's certainly reasonable to memorize presentations when preparing for competition. Speakers want to be prepared so they don't forget anything important. Speeches are most often written before being memorized. However, most speakers do not write in the same manner as they speak. Written pieces usually incorporate longer words, more formal phrasing, and more complex sentences. When speakers recite written material from memory, the speech can sound a little stiff, as though they are reading from a book instead of speaking to an audience. Phrases should be shortened for a more conversational tone.

Many good speakers use a keyword outline of their main points and any essential information, like statistics and direct quotations. Using a keyword outline is different from following a script, as it allows speakers to use personal pronouns, shorter words, shorter sentences, and even sentence fragments. This kind of speech is easier to remember and deliver. Judges report that they have not deducted points because speakers were too conversational.

Wording – Good public speaking is only slightly more formal than ordinary conversational speech. Long words may sound important, but they

don't necessarily communicate better. Speakers should not

- use any words their audience might not understand,
- use any words they are uncertain how to pronounce correctly,
- use any words they wouldn't care to define in response to a judge's question,
- use any long words if they know short words that will do just as well, or
- use two or more words when one word will do the job.

When using technical terms or complicated numbers, speakers must define and interpret the term or numbers for the audience. More advanced speakers use numerous speaking devices and figures of speech to add to the power and vividness of their language. Beginning speakers should concentrate on the basic vocabulary needed to make their points.

Movement – Many effective speakers stay at the podium, while others prefer to move around. Judges suggest that neither approach is automatically superior. Winning speakers have done both. The key is to choose what works for the speaker. If the movement seems spontaneous and it emphasizes and supports the presentation, then it can be very effective. For example, a speaker might move from one side of the stage to the other while discussing opposing points of view on a particular issue. A speaker might also move toward the audience while asking a key question intended to engage audience members' thinking. In these situations, movement can make a speech more dramatic and memorable. On the other hand, movement can also appear mechanical and detract from the immediacy of a presentation. If the movement seems random or nervous, it detracts from the speech.

Gesture – As speakers prepare for competition, there is a tendency to prepare and memorize every gesture. Sometimes, though, memorized gestures can come across as canned or artificial. The audience has the feeling that the speech will be identical every time it is delivered, regardless of who is listening.

This can lead the audience to tune out, and the essential interaction between speaker and audience is lost.

Vocal Delivery – Public speakers have a wide variety of vocal ability. However, speech coaches can effectively teach vocal delivery. The keys to vocal delivery are comfort and variety. As speakers gain experience, they will discover the vocal pitch and volume that are most comfortable for them. Pitch refers to the high or low tones of a voice. Volume refers to how loud or quiet a speaker is. Speakers should find the levels of pitch and volume where they sound genuine and can speak without exaggerated effort. A speaker should never try to sound like an orator because it decreases the personal aspect of the speech.

To add emphasis and help the audience interpret the meaning of the presentation, competitors should punctuate with changes in pitch, rate, and/or volume. As with gesture and movement, these changes should support the speech. At times, a speaker might want to stop speaking altogether to add emphasis. If the speaker reaches a key point in the presentation or asks an important question that is intended for audience members to answer in their own minds, it can be very effective to take a long pause to let the audience think about what the speaker is saying.

Some beginning speakers think delivering speeches requires full volume and emphasis on every syllable. This leads to yelling rather than speaking. Other speakers, particularly those struggling with memorized speeches, may fall into a singsong delivery with repeating patterns of volume and emphasis that have nothing to do with the content of the speech. Experienced speakers, in contrast, use a conversational delivery for most of the presentation and save the extra volume and emphasis for when they are most needed and most effective.

Finally, effective delivery requires correct pronunciation. If a word is too hard to pronounce, the speaker should choose a simpler word. If a term is unfamiliar, the speaker should check pronunciation with a teacher, industry professional, or other authority who knows the word or regularly uses it.

Audience Interaction – The best presentations seem more like conversations than lectures or sermons. The best speakers know that audiences like to participate and feel involved in the speech. This may seem like a contradiction in terms: How can there be a conversation when the speaker is doing all the talking? Actually, audience interaction is key to effective public speaking. First, as stated earlier, have a topic the audience cares about. Then build audience responses into the speech itself.

One way to do this is with the rhetorical question. ("What would life be like without agriculture?" or "Who wants their children to live in a world without clean water?") Speakers don't ask these questions because they want the audience to answer out loud. Instead, the speaker wants them to answer in their own minds. When the audience members answer these questions in their own minds, they are participating in the presentation, even though they aren't saying anything.

Another way to involve the audience is to acknowledge their reactions and opinions. ("When I say agriculture, I know that most of you are thinking cows and tractors," or "If you're like most people our age, you've never even thought about problems with the local landfill.") These techniques allow a speaker to talk with an audience as he or she would in a conversation, as opposed to merely talking in front of them.

Finally, smiling, making eye contact, and using personal pronouns, such as "you," "we," "us," and "our," help increase interaction and a sense of identification between the speaker and audience.

Final Thoughts

This publication on public speaking techniques and behaviors had three main goals:

- Provide aspiring speakers with tips to prepare and present good speeches.
- Assist coaches and teachers with guiding young people who are preparing for a public speaking competition.

- Provide guidelines to help competition judges recognize good public speaking as well as energetic performance.

It is important to recognize that each speaker is an individual with a unique set of strengths. Speakers are not required to meet all of the expectations set forth here to be successful. Beginning speakers should identify their strengths and weaknesses and use this information to improve their ability to communicate through oral presentations.

Public speaking is an art form that is developed through practice and feedback. For the beginning speaker, the following instructions are essential to developing an effective speech:

- Speakers should start with a message that interests them and their audience.
- Speakers should organize the message so the audience can follow their thinking.
- Speakers should put enough good information in the message to make the presentation believable.
- Speakers should deliver their presentations using voice, gestures, movement, and eye contact to emphasize their words.
- Speakers should include plenty of audience interaction to keep people involved.

Using these five key concepts to develop and deliver presentations will help speakers succeed in competitions, build strong oral communication skills, and ensure that the presentation has the meaningful impact desired by participants.