

Public Speaking¹

Ricky Telg²

This publication about public speaking is the first of a three-part series about developing effective public speaking skills. This series also covers speech writing and public speaking tools.

Introduction

Public speaking is a valuable tool in the agricultural community because people still like the “human touch” of interpersonal communication. Many farmers, for example, still rely on face-to-face discussions with other farmers, university researchers, or county Extension agents for the latest agricultural production processes to help them grow their crops or raise their livestock.

An effective communicator may be called upon to serve as a spokesperson for a cause related to the agricultural industry or for a company. Knowing what to say and how to say it are foundational skills for all leaders; therefore, people promoting the agricultural industry need to know how to speak in face-to-face situations. This publication shares the basics about gathering information and organizing, writing, and delivering speeches.

What Is Public Speaking?

Public speaking usually refers to a person speaking to a live audience of more than 20 people, usually without interruption and often in a formal setting. Examples of public speeches include religious sermons, speeches given during political rallies, and classroom lectures.



Figure 1. 4-H Congress gives the youth of Florida the chance to practice their public speaking skills.

Credits: UF/IFAS

Public speaking is one form of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is the process of sending and receiving information between two or more people. Interpersonal communication is usually divided into dyadic communication (communication between two people), small-group communication (communication with 3 to 20 people), public speaking (communication with more than 20 people), and mass communication (communication with a large audience of unknown people, usually not in the same location as the speaker). Each of these communication forms involves five basic elements: a *sender*, the person who sends information; a *receiver*, the person or people who receive(s) the information sent; a *message*, the information that is sent; a *communication channel*, the medium used to communicate the message; and *feedback*, the response from the receiver(s).

1. This document is WC115, one of a series of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date August 2011. Revised June 2021. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

2. Ricky Telg, professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Preparing the Speech

Delivering a good speech takes more than just getting up in front of a group. It takes developing an understanding of your audience's characteristics, selecting a good topic, composing a thesis statement, gathering supporting materials to help make your ideas clearer to the listener, and determining the physical environment where the speech will be delivered.

Developing an Audience Analysis

Your speech should be targeted to the needs of your audience. The speech should be of interest not only to you but also to the audience. If time and resources permit, it would be best to conduct an audience analysis to find out the audience's characteristics and knowledge of the topic. However, if a formal audience analysis is not possible, consider the following points:

- If the audience is unfamiliar with the topic, show how the topic is relevant to the audience.
- If the audience knows relatively little about the topic, do not use jargon that might be unfamiliar.
- If you think the audience is negative about the topic, start by appealing to areas of agreement and offer evidence from sources the audience is likely to accept.
- If you believe the audience holds a positive attitude toward the topic, provide supporting information that reinforces the audience's feelings (O'Hair, Rubenstein, & Stewart, 2007).

Selecting a Topic

Unless the topic is assigned, choose a topic that interests you. You will be spending considerable time researching the materials for the speech and practicing the speech's delivery, so find something that engages your interest. However, also keep in mind that the topic must be of interest to the audience.

The topic must be suited to the particular purpose of the speech. If it is a persuasive speech, the topic must call the audience to action. For example, a topic that is purely informational and does not ask the audience to make a change would not be appropriate for a persuasive speech.

The topic should be something that you know something about. Just because you are interested in the topic does not mean that you are qualified to speak on the topic. If you do not possess adequate knowledge of the topic at the outset, you should do enough research on the subject so

that you become an expert on the topic before the speech is delivered.

Composing a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is the main idea of the speech. A thesis statement should be composed as a single, brief sentence that illustrates what you will attempt to demonstrate in your speech (O'Hair et al., 2007). Everything in the speech—the supporting materials, the introduction, the main points, and the conclusion—hinges on the thesis statement.

Gathering Supporting Materials

Good speeches contain interesting supporting materials, such as examples, stories, testimonies, facts, and statistics.

Examples may be the most effective and versatile supporting material. Examples illustrate or describe things. Professional public speakers routinely use at least one example to support every main point of their speeches (Koch, 2007). Examples can be real or hypothetical. Hypothetical examples are those that have not happened but are used to illustrate what the outcome could be. While hypothetical examples can be useful, some of the most powerful examples are those taken from the speaker's own life.

Stories or narratives tell tales, both real and imaginary. Stories commonly have a plot, characters, and a setting, and they can be brief or lengthy. Using stories well, though, takes practice so that the speaker does not tell the elements of the story in the wrong order.

Testimonies are eyewitness accounts and people's opinions. Presenters frequently use direct quotations or paraphrases from people who have knowledge of the speech topic. It is better to use a direct quotation if the person's wording makes a powerful statement or if the testimony is controversial and you want the audience to hear the source's exact words (Koch, 2007). During the presentation, it is common practice to include the name and qualifications of the person whose testimony you use (O'Hair et al., 2007).

Statistics provide quantifiable evidence for your topic. Statistics should be rounded off so that the audience can hear specific numbers. For example, it would be better to round off "\$3,493,126" to "almost \$3.5 million." Statistics can be displayed on posters or on computer-generated slides to accompany the speech. Numbers carry weight with audiences; however, statistics must be used appropriately so that they do not misrepresent information.

Determining the Physical Environment of the Speech

Not only should you learn as much as you can about your audience, you should also try to find out the physical environment where the speech will be delivered. For example, if the room is large and has no audio and video equipment, you will know two things: you will have to speak loudly because of the lack of a microphone, and you cannot have computer-generated slides to help illustrate your speech. Ask about the physical environment if you are not familiar with the setting.

Overcoming Public Speaking Anxiety

Few people enjoy giving speeches. By using the information presented in these publications about public speaking, you should feel more at ease as you prepare and deliver your speech. However, if the thought of giving a speech still makes you feel anxious even after reading these publications, following are some tips to lessen the stress:

- *Prepare in advance.* Gather as much information as you can and organize it in such a way that the speech achieves your purpose.
- *Use notes.* If you do not feel you can give an impromptu or “off-the-cuff” speech, use notes—just do not read the notes.
- *Practice.* There probably is no better way to relieve public speaking anxiety than to practice the speech multiple times. Practice in front of a mirror or in front of family or friends. If you have a video camera, record yourself. Critique what you see or solicit feedback from a person who watches you practice so that you can improve your speech delivery prior to when the real speech is presented.
- *Take a deep breath, laugh, or yawn.* You cannot take a deep breath or yawn and be tense at the same time. Even a nervous laugh to yourself before the speech can help relieve tension.
- *Remind yourself that you are the expert.* People want to hear what you have to say.
- *Do not eat certain foods or drink certain beverages before the speech.* Certain foods and beverages coat your throat, causing difficulty in swallowing and speaking. Stay away from such items as cola drinks, chocolates, and dairy products. It takes several hours to clear your throat from these foods and beverages.

Additional Information

DiSanza, J. R., & Legge, N. J. (2005). *Business and professional communication: Plans, processes, and performance* (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Hamilton, C. (2012). *Essentials of public speaking* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Koch, A. (2007). *Speaking with a purpose*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

O’Hair, D., Rubenstein, H., & Stewart, R. (2007). *A pocket guide to public speaking* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s.