

## 3

# Giving Your First Speech

Preparing Your Speech

Delivering Your Speech

Sample Speeches with Commentary

**Y**ou may be surprised to learn that one of your first assignments is to give a speech. You say to yourself, “What am I going to do? I have barely started this course, yet I’m supposed to stand up in front of the whole class and give a speech! I’ve only read a few pages in the textbook, and I don’t know much about public speaking. Where do I begin?”

If these are your thoughts, you aren’t alone. Most beginning speech students have a similar reaction. Fortunately, giving your first speech sounds a lot harder than it is. The purpose of this chapter is to help you get started on preparing and delivering your speech.

## Preparing Your Speech

Usually a brief introductory presentation, the first assignment is often called an ice breaker speech because it is designed to “break the ice” by getting students up in front of the class as soon as possible. This is an important step because much of the anxiety associated with public speaking comes from lack of experience giving speeches. Once you have broken the ice by giving a speech, you will feel less anxious and will have taken the first step on the road to confidence.

### DEVELOPING THE SPEECH

There are a number of possible assignments for the first speech. One is a speech of self-introduction that provides insight into the speaker’s background, personality, beliefs, or goals. In other cases, students are asked to introduce a classmate, rather than themselves.

No matter which you are assigned, be sure to focus your presentation sharply so it



conforms to the assigned time limit. One of the most common mistakes students make on their first speech is trying to cover too much material. You should select a limited number of points and illustrate them clearly.

It would be impossible, for example, to tell your audience everything about your life in a 2-minute speech. A better approach would be to focus on one or two events that have helped define who you are—an incident from your childhood, the story behind a personal photograph, a few of your typical behaviors, or an important lesson you learned from someone you admire. This allows you to make a few well-developed points about a clearly defined subject.

Once you have a topic for your speech, be creative in developing it. Think of ways to make your presentation mysterious or suspenseful. Suppose you are telling the audience about meeting a celebrity. Rather than identifying the celebrity at the outset, you might save his or her name for the end of your speech. As your story unfolds, provide clues about your celebrity's gender, physical characteristics, special talents, and the like, but keep the name secret until the last moment.

In addition to mystery and suspense, audiences are naturally interested in drama, adventure, and danger. Suppose you are introducing a fellow student and you learn that he or she was caught in a flood or spent a summer working with the stage crew for a pop star. The details would provide excellent material for a speech.

You can also make your speech interesting by using colorful, descriptive language. One speaker used this technique when introducing a fellow student, named Alexa, to the class. The speaker began by saying:



#### Video 3.1

View the introduction from "Gotta Dance."

The spotlight shines. The music blares. The crowd cheers. The colors, bright and vibrant, bleed together as Alexa and her partner sail around the dance floor. Her partner touches her hand and her waist, but only briefly. He then spins her away, and she glides across the floor in what seems like a single motion. Alexa has worked many weeks for this moment. Alexa, you see, is a championship ballroom dancer.

Word pictures like this are always more interesting than dull language and abstract generalizations.

You might wonder whether you should use humor to make your first speech entertaining. Audiences love witty remarks, jokes, and funny situations, but like anything else, humor is effective only when done well. It should flow naturally out of the speech content rather than being contrived. If you are not normally a funny person, you are better off giving a sincere, enthusiastic speech and leaving out the jokes.

## ORGANIZING THE SPEECH

Regardless of your topic, your speech will have three main parts—an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Your first job in the introduction is to get the attention and interest of the audience. You can do this by posing a question, telling a story, making a startling statement, or opening with a quotation. The purpose of all these methods is to create a dramatic, colorful opening that will make your audience want to hear more.

Here, for example, is how one student began a speech about her cultural heritage:



When working on your first speech, ask friends or family members for feedback and suggestions. In addition to helping you improve the speech, they can provide valuable personal support.

When I look at this photo, I think of lemons, peaches, and guava. I think of lush green trees and bright red roses. I think of good food and joyous celebrations—birthdays, weddings, holidays. This courtyard is where my grandmother lived and taught me about my Mexican heritage.

Even though I was born in the U.S. and have lived here all my life, the courtyard is very meaningful to me. It has helped me understand the importance of family and appreciate the cultures that have shaped my life.

After this introduction, the audience was eager to hear more about the courtyard and its role in the speaker's life.

In addition to gaining attention and interest, the introduction should orient your listeners toward the subject matter of your speech. In the longer speeches you will give later in the term, you will usually need to provide an explicit preview statement that identifies the main points to be discussed in the body of your speech. (For example, "Today I will inform you about the symptoms, causes, and treatment of high blood pressure.")

Because your introductory speech is so short, you may not need a detailed preview statement. But you still need to give your audience a clear sense of your topic and purpose. Look back for a moment at the introduction about the courtyard quoted earlier. Notice how it moves from arousing curiosity to letting the audience know what the rest of the speech will focus on. By the end of the introduction, there is no doubt about the topic of the speech.

After getting the audience's attention and revealing your topic, you are ready to move into the body of your speech. In some speeches, the body seems to organize itself. If you are telling a story about a significant experience in your life, you will relate the events chronologically, in the order they occurred.

But not all speeches follow such a format. Suppose you are giving a presentation



Video 3.2

View the beginning of "The Courtyard."

### preview statement

A statement in the introduction of a speech that identifies the main points to be discussed in the body.

### chronological order

A method of speech organization in which the main points follow a time pattern.

### topical order

A method of speech organization in which the main points divide the topic into logical and consistent subtopics.

### transition

A word or phrase that indicates when the speaker has finished one thought and is moving on to another.



Video 3.3

View the ending of “The Courtyard.”

introducing a classmate. You could organize the most important biographical facts about your subject in chronological order, but this might result in a dull, superficial speech: “Jinjin was born in Beijing in 2002, attended Beijing No. 2 Experimental Primary School from 2008 to 2014, and graduated from Beijing No. 4 High School in 2020.”

A better way of structuring your remarks might be to discuss three of the most important aspects of Jinjin’s life, such as hobbies, career goals, and family. This is called the topical method of organization, which subdivides the speech topic into its natural, logical, or conventional parts. Although there are many other ways to organize a speech, your first presentation will probably use either chronological or topical order.

Regardless of the method of organization you use, remember to limit the number of main points in the body of your speech. In a 2-minute presentation, you won’t have time to develop more than two or three main points.

Once you have selected those points, make sure each one focuses on a single aspect of the topic. For example, if your first point concerns your classmate’s hometown, don’t introduce irrelevant information about her job or favorite music. Save this material for a separate point, or cut it.

Try to make your main points stand out by introducing each with a transition statement. In a speech introducing a classmate, you might begin the first main point by saying:

Rico’s family moved a great deal throughout his childhood.

When you reach the second point, you might introduce it like this:

Moving a lot led to Rico’s outgoing nature and confidence in making friends. In fact, he has friends all around the world with whom he corresponds regularly by WeChat.

You have now let your audience know that the first main point is over and that you are starting the second one. The third main point might begin as follows:

Corresponding with people all over the world is more than just a hobby for Rico, since he is majoring in international relations.

Transition statements such as these will help your audience keep track of your main ideas.

When you finish discussing your final point, you will be ready to move into your conclusion. You need to accomplish two tasks in this part of the speech: Let the audience know you are about to finish and reinforce your major theme.

If possible, end on a dramatic, clever, or thought-provoking note. For example, in the presentation discussed earlier, the student devoted the body of her speech to explaining how the courtyard symbolized the importance of family and the different cultures that shaped her life. Then, in her conclusion, she wrapped up by saying:

Even though I’m now a student here at the University of Wisconsin, when I look at this photo, I can practically smell the roses and hear the joy of family celebrations. And I miss my grandmother. She died two years ago, but I can still see her face and hear her voice—and I remember all the things she taught me on the tiled floor by the fountain.



Although it can be challenging, work on presenting your first speech extemporaneously. This will provide a strong foundation upon which you can build in later speeches.

I proudly call the United States home, but when I look at this photo, I will always think of my grandmother and my home away from home.

The final lines bring the speech to an emotional close and underscore why her grandmother's courtyard was so important to the speaker.

## Delivering Your Speech

Once you have selected a subject and organized the content into a clear structure, it is time to work on the delivery of your speech. Because this is your first speech of the term, no one expects you to give a perfectly polished presentation. Your aim is to do as well as possible while also laying a foundation you can build upon in later speeches. With this in mind, we'll look briefly at the extemporaneous method of speech delivery, the importance of rehearsing your speech, and some of the major factors to consider when speech day arrives.

### **SPEAKING EXTEMPORANEOUSLY**

You might be inclined, as are many beginning speakers, to write out your speech like an essay and read it word for word to your listeners. The other extreme is to prepare very little for the speech—to wing it by trusting to your wits and the inspiration of the moment. Neither approach is appropriate. Reading from a manuscript runs the risk of poor eye contact with the audience and a stiff, unenthusiastic delivery. On the other

hand, ad-libbing is a recipe for disaster. The outcome is usually an aimless talk that is either embarrassingly short or rambles on far too long.

Most experts recommend speaking extemporaneously, which combines the careful preparation and structure of a manuscript presentation with the spontaneity and enthusiasm of an unrehearsed talk. Your aim in an extemporaneous speech is to plan your major points and supporting material without trying to memorize the exact language you will use on the day of the speech.

### extemporaneous delivery

A method of delivery in which the speech is carefully prepared and rehearsed but is presented from a brief set of notes.

The extemporaneous method requires you to know the content of your speech quite well. In fact, when you use this method properly, you become so familiar with the substance of your talk that you need only a few brief notes to remind you of the points you intend to cover. The notes should consist of key words or phrases, rather than complete sentences and paragraphs. This way, when you are in front of the audience, you will tell them what you know about the topic in your own words.

Prepare your notes by writing or printing key terms and phrases on note cards or sheets of paper. In either case, your notes should be large enough to read clearly at arm's length. Many experienced speakers double- or triple-space their notes because this makes them easier to see at a glance. Write or print on only one side of the note card or paper, and use the fewest notes you can manage and still present the speech fluently and confidently.

At first, it may seem very demanding to deliver a speech extemporaneously. In fact, though, you use the extemporaneous method in everyday conversation. Do you read from a manuscript when you tell your friends an amusing story? Of course not. You feel relaxed and confident with your friends, so you just tell them what is on your mind in a conversational tone. Try to do the same thing in your speech.

## REHEARSING THE SPEECH

When you watch a truly effective extemporaneous speaker, the speech comes out so smoothly that it seems almost effortless. In fact, that smooth delivery is the result of a great deal of practice. As your speech course progresses, you will gain more experience and will become more comfortable delivering your speeches extemporaneously.

The first time you rehearse your introductory speech, however, you will probably struggle. Words may not come easily, and you may forget some things you planned to say. Don't become discouraged. Keep going and complete the speech as well as you can. Concentrate on gaining control of the ideas rather than on trying to learn the speech word for word. You will improve every time you practice.

For this approach to work, you must rehearse the speech out loud. Looking silently over your notes is not enough. Speaking the words aloud will help you master the content and length of your talk. Once you have a fairly good grasp of the speech, ask friends or family members to listen and to give constructive feedback. Don't be shy about asking. Most people love to give their opinion about something, and it's crucial that you rehearse with a live audience before presenting the speech in class.

## PRESENTING THE SPEECH

When it is your turn to speak, move to the front of the room and face the audience. Assume a relaxed but upright posture. Plant your feet a bit less than shoulder-width apart

and allow your arms to hang loosely by your side. Arrange your notes before you start to speak. Then take a moment to look over your audience and to smile. This will help you establish rapport with your listeners from the start.

Once you are into the speech, feel free to use your hands to gesture, but don't try to plan all your gestures ahead of time. If you don't normally use your hands expressively during informal conversation, then you shouldn't feel compelled to gesture a lot during your speech. Whatever gestures you do use should flow naturally from your feelings.

Above all, don't let your gestures or bodily actions distract listeners from your message. Do your best to avoid nervous mannerisms such as twisting your hair, wringing your hands, shifting your weight from one foot to the other, rocking back and forth, or tapping your fingers on the lectern. No matter how nervous you feel, try to appear calm and relaxed.

During your talk, look at your audience as often as you can. One of the major reasons for speaking extemporaneously is to maintain eye contact with listeners. Be sure to look to the left and right of the room, as well as the center, and avoid the temptation to speak exclusively to one or two sympathetic individuals. When you are finished speaking, your listeners should have the impression that you established a personal connection with each of them.

Try to use your voice as expressively as you would in normal conversation. Concentrate on projecting to the back of the room and, despite your nerves, fight the temptation to race through your speech. If you make a conscious effort to speak up, slow down, and project clearly, you will be on the right track to an effective presentation.

## Sample Speeches with Commentary

---

The following four speeches provide excellent models of introductory speeches. The first three are speeches of self-introduction. "Tap, Tap, Tap" was presented by a U.S. college student. "My Life with Sign Language" was delivered at the FLTRP Cup by Chen Qiyu, a student at Tsinghua University. "Pot, Soil, Water" is from a student at the University of Wisconsin. The final speech, "Fork in the Road," also by a student at Wisconsin, is a speech introducing a classmate.

As you can see from the videos, all the speeches are creatively written and skillfully delivered. They provide excellent models of how you might develop an introductory speech for your own class.



## Tap, Tap, Tap

### COMMENTARY

As you can see from the video, the speaker uses a combination of words and brief tap-dance moves to gain attention and interest. She then explains how long she has been tap dancing and previews the main points to be discussed in the body.

The speaker's first main point deals with the hard work of learning to tap dance. Her image of hiding under a table at her first dance lesson is memorable and dramatizes how much she has progressed since then.

In her second main point, the speaker performs the pull-back move to help explain how tap dancing has taught her patience. Here, as elsewhere, the performance of tap moves is used to provide insight about the speaker herself, rather than to demonstrate how to tap dance.

In her third main point, the speaker relates tap dancing to her speech assignment. She communicates engagingly, with natural gestures and strong eye contact.

The conclusion summarizes the speaker's main points. It then ties the entire speech together by returning to the brief tap moves of the introduction.

### SPEECH

When I first started, it sounded like this. But I kept working until it sounded like this. Now it sounds like this [*speaker demonstrates*]. For the past 15 years, I've been tap dancing. Some may think it's strange to spend 10 or 15 hours a week making shoes click across the floor. But to me, tap dancing represents hard work, patience, and courage—and it has helped shape my life in ways that go far beyond the dance floor.

I started taking tap lessons when I was three years old. Actually, when I started, I just hid under a table, too scared to join the other kids. But my mom kept driving me to class because she knew it was a good outlet for my energy. Slowly, I learned to come out from under that table. It was hard work, but it was definitely worth it in the end.

Tap dancing has also taught me patience. One of the toughest moves in tap dancing is called the pull back. It involves brushing your toes backwards to create a satisfying click-click-click sound—like this [*speaker demonstrates*]. For months I worked on the pull back, scuffing up the pale wood floors as I tried to move my feet in just the right way. At first I looked at those scuff marks with frustration, but eventually I was at peace with them. Today the pull back is as natural to me as walking down the street.

Tap dancing has also given me courage, including the courage I needed to give this speech. Earlier this week, I felt the same ice in the pit of my stomach that I do in the days leading up to a dance recital. So I approached this speech just like I approach a dance recital: I worked hard, I practiced a lot, and I concentrated on being positive.

Today, I know I'm not the best tap dancer—or speaker—in the world. But I'm grateful for the hard work, patience, and courage that I've learned over the past 15 years. It's because of those qualities that I've been able to turn this into this [*speaker demonstrates*]. Thank you.



Video 3.4

View "Tap, Tap, Tap."

## My Life with Sign Language

### COMMENTARY

The speaker's opening statement arouses curiosity. She then explains her early knowledge of sign language by stating that she learned it from her grandparents, both of whom were deaf.

Here, as in later parts of the speech, the speaker combines small bits of sign language with her spoken words. As you can see from the video, this works very well.

Now the narrative shifts direction. At age 12, the speaker moves away from her grandparents and her sign language falls out of use.

This paragraph conveys the speaker's disappointment at no longer using sign language. She has lost one of the joys and charms of her childhood.

The narrative shifts direction again as the speaker rediscovers a need for sign language when visiting a special education school. Her dramatic details, dialogue, and signing help bring her ideas to life.

The speaker's joy at rediscovering sign language is conveyed by her words and her delivery. She has excellent vocal variety and comes across as sincere, credible, and confident.

The speech concludes on an uplifting note. Alluding to the famous dialogue between Huizi and Zhuangzi, the speaker ends with poetic words that express her happiness at rediscovering the usefulness of sign language.

### SPEECH

The first language I learned was not Chinese but sign language. This was because of my grandparents. Illness had deprived them of their hearing ability when they were kids. They taught me sign language when I was a baby.

This is "Grandpa." [*Signing the word*] He held my little hands and taught me the first word I learned. This is "computer" [*Signing the word*]*—*I taught my grandpa 10 years later. With the help of sign language, I had a happy childhood—even happier than those of my friends.

When I was 12 years old, I moved away from my grandparents, and sign language was then out of use, as if it were the useless stuff locked in a top drawer and could never be taken out again.

During the holidays, when my grandparents came to visit me, I attempted to pick it up from them. But they just laughed. "You will have no use for it. Just go and focus on your homework." [*Signing the words*] I felt very disappointed at that time, for I thought I may never have a chance to use this magical language full of charm anymore.

Last year, our school went to a special education school for disabled kids. We went to the kitchen to help before supper. However, the kitchen staff were all deaf and mute, and we could not communicate. It was at that moment a voice rang in my mind. "Hey, Kate. Don't you remember you can use sign language?" "Oh, yes!" I turned to the cook. "Could you please help us clean and cut the fish?" [*Signing the words*]

That day my sign language was revived. The language that was out of use for years popped back to my life. I used it to perform the theme song for the promotion of the Youth Olympic Games. I used it to recharge the flagging spirit of my deaf friend. I use it for every new possible meaning I can conceive of for it.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are times in our lives, when we were Huizi, desperate for the single and ultimate definition of usefulness, and disappointed at the useless gourd in our hands. However, once on board the gourd float of Zhuangzi, "we will free our stuffy mind and float about over the rivers and lakes." [*Signing the words*] Thank you.



### Video 3.5

View "My Life with Sign Language."

## Pot, Soil, Water

### COMMENTARY

The introduction captures attention and reveals the topic. By comparing herself to a houseplant and the elements it needs to grow, the speaker provides a creative touch that runs through the entire speech.

Each main point in the body is clearly stated and discussed. As you can see from the video, the speaker has excellent eye contact and a pleasing manner.

The assignment for this speech required students to use an object to introduce themselves to the class. As the speech proceeds, notice how the speaker does not focus on describing the object—in this case, her houseplant—but on how the plant provides insight into the speaker herself.

The speaker completes the body by mentioning some of her personal interests and weaving them into the overall theme of the speech.

The speaker provides a harmonious conclusion that ends on a positive note and completes the comparison with her houseplant.

### SPEECH

Those of you with a green thumb know that a healthy houseplant like this one needs a number of things to grow, including a good pot, rich soil, and adequate water. The pot is the plant's home, the comforting place where it grows up. The soil gives the plant nutrients and helps its roots expand. Water is the basis of all life and allows the plant to thrive. Like this plant and the pot, soil, and water it requires to grow, you can get a sense of my growth by looking at my family, my friends, and my interests.

The pot represents my family. A pot holds the plant together just like my family holds me together. My mom and dad not only gave me life but a loving home to grow up in. If I ever had a bad day, they kept me from falling apart. As the pot protects the roots and the soil, my family protected me as I grew through my childhood.

The soil represents my friends, who have supported me as I branched out into new experiences. Here on campus, my three best friends have helped me adjust to college by showing me around, by introducing me to new people, and by helping me with my assignments. They encourage me to follow my dreams and are always willing to offer advice. As the nutrients from the soil feed the plant, my friends have helped me grow and develop.

The water represents my interests. Without water, this plant would turn brown and dull, but with water, the plant is bright and full of life. Like water for this plant, my interests help me flourish rather than wilt. I have a broad range of interests, including music, art, swimming, and watching movies. My interests make my personal colors more vibrant and allow me to bloom.

I wouldn't be who I am today without my family, my friends, and my interests. But like this plant, I still have some growing to do—more things to learn and more things to experience. Luckily, because of my own pot, soil, and water, I'm confident I will blossom into the person I want to be.



Video 3.6

View "Pot, Soil, Water."

## Fork in the Road

### COMMENTARY

The speaker starts with a quotation that gains attention and introduces the central theme of her speech. She then reveals that her classmate Bethany is facing a fork in the road as she decides whether to focus her studies on art or medicine.

The first main point in the body deals with Bethany's lifelong passion for art. Here the speaker notes that Bethany has won numerous awards for her drawings.

The speaker completes main point one by stating that Bethany is thinking of pursuing a career in art.

A clear transition leads into the second main point, which deals with Bethany's passion for medicine.

The story of J.C. provides drama and interest. Here, as elsewhere, the speaker is clear, direct, and easy to understand.

The conclusion reinforces the central theme of reaching a fork in the road. The speaker summarizes Bethany's options and ends by stating that she will be successful whichever path she decides to follow.

### SPEECH

Inspirational speaker Liz Murray once said, a "fork in the road happens over a hundred times a day, and the choices you make will determine the shape of your life." At one point or another, we all come to that fork in the road, when we are forced to choose between two paths, not sure where either will lead. Our classmate Bethany is now at that point, forced to decide between her two passions: art and medicine.

From an early age, Bethany has been passionate about art. She has been drawing since the age of three and has continued to improve her skills ever since. Over the years, she has won many awards for her drawings, including the Wisconsin Scholastic Art Award.

Bethany draws people, places, and things that she sees on a daily basis in the world around her. Drawing allows her to relax and to escape from the stress of life. And now, because of her passion, she is considering making art her career.

In addition to art, however, Bethany is also passionate about medicine. She dreams about one day doing medical mission work in Africa. She is motivated in part by her friend J.C., a Rwanda refugee whose leg was severely injured in an explosion about 10 years ago.

For eight years, J.C. lived with bomb-shell fragments in his lower leg. It was only two years ago, when he and his mother moved to the United States, that he was finally able to have surgery. Bethany's friendship with J.C. has inspired her to help those who lack sufficient medical care and to make her think that a career in medicine is right for her.

It can be said that Bethany has reached her fork in the road. She has a passion for drawing and a passion for medicine. Will she choose to follow her love for art and pursue a career as an artist? Or will she choose to follow her love for medical mission work and pursue a career as a doctor? It's hard to know right now, but either path Bethany chooses will surely be a road to success.



Video 3.7

View "Fork in the Road."

## Summary



One of your first assignments will be to present an introductory speech, either a speech of self-introduction or a speech introducing a classmate. Focus the speech on a limited number of ideas and be creative in developing them. Use interesting supporting materials and present them in colorful, descriptive language.



Video 3.8

When organizing the speech, make sure you have a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. Most introductory speeches fall naturally into chronological or topical order. Using clear transitions will help your audience follow you from point to point.



Video 3.9

Although you will write a complete manuscript or outline of your speech when preparing it, you should deliver it extemporaneously. This means you have rehearsed fully and can present your talk from a brief set of speaking notes. Concentrate on establishing eye contact with the audience and on speaking in a dynamic, engaged tone of voice.

View more sample introductory speeches.

## Key Terms

preview statement (35)

transition (36)

chronological order (36)

extemporaneous delivery (38)

topical order (36)

## Exercises for Thinking and Speaking

- Carefully examine the sample speeches with commentary on pages 40–43. Answer the following questions about them.
  - How does the opening paragraph in each speech gain the attention of the audience?
  - How clearly is each speech organized? What does the speaker do to help listeners follow the progression of ideas?
  - What are the similarities and differences among the conclusions in the speeches?
  - Which speech do you find most effective? Least effective? Why?
- Are there occasions outside the classroom on which you might give a speech of self-introduction? Identify two such occasions and explain how you might apply the principles of self-introductory speeches discussed in this chapter.
- Prepare a 2-minute speech of self-introduction that you will present in class. Follow the principles of speech preparation and delivery discussed in this chapter. Deliver the speech extemporaneously from a brief set of speaking notes.

4. As an alternative to the preceding exercise, prepare a 2-minute speech introducing one of your classmates. Arrange a time outside class when you and your classmate can interview each other to gain information for your speeches. Plan your questions in advance. In addition to asking about basic biographical information, try to develop creative questions that will give your speech color, detail, and interest.

Prepare the speech by following the principles of speech development and delivery discussed in this chapter. Deliver the speech extemporaneously from a brief set of speaking notes.

## *Public Speaking* in **Your Career**

---

As a college senior, you are preparing for your job interviews. In your interviews, you will be asked to present a 1–2 minute speech of self-introduction that provides information about your background and explains why you will be an excellent person for the company to hire. Prepare a draft of your speech.