

LESSON-5

Distinctive Features of Public Speaking

Conversations reflect a free-flowing, spontaneous, fluid process of communication. In this process the roles of speaker and listener are usually not well defined, because the conversationalist is *both* a speaker and a listener in an ongoing interaction. A conversation is a series of fragments that may or may not fit together into a meaningful whole. For example, conversationalists may talk at some length before realizing that they are talking about different things. When that happens, one is apt to hear, as T. S. Eliot's "That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all."¹³ In contrast, public speaking defines the roles of speaker and listener more clearly. Speeches may seem fresh and spontaneous, but good speeches represent carefully considered research, audience analysis, design, wording, and practice. In public speaking, the medium of communication can affect the message, as in the case of speeches presented on radio or television. Finally, the environment in which public speaking occurs changes dramatically from the typical setting for conversation.

Speaker and Listener Roles Are Clearly Defined. In conversation it is often hard to determine who is the speaker and who is the listener. In contrast, public speaking emphasizes the role of speaker, and there is no doubt who the speakers and listeners are. Whether speakers can take advantage of this prominent role depends on their ability to reward listeners with interesting and important messages. As Aristotle pointed out more than two thousand years ago, our impressions of speakers themselves affect how we respond to their messages. We are far more inclined, he observed, to react favorably when we think speakers are competent in their subject matter and when we trust them. These ancient qualities of competence and integrity form the basis of the modern term *credibility*. Aristotle also noted that audiences respond more favorably when speakers seem likable when they seem to be people of good will. Modern researchers have uncovered still another important speaker characteristic, forcefulness (or dynamism).¹⁴ Some speakers strike us as vital, action-oriented people. When important interests are at stake and action seems called for, we may turn to such people to lead the way. These qualities of likableness and forcefulness combine to form the basis for another modern term, *charisma*. Taken together, credibility and charisma provide an updated account of what Aristotle called the *ethos* of the speaker, a factor vital to our acceptance or rejection of a speech.¹⁵ We consider *ethos* at greater length in Chapter 2.

In public speaking, the role of the Listener is also quite important. As we will see in Chapter 3, ideal listeners are supportive, yet listen carefully and critically. Such listeners seek the value in all messages and listen actively and enthusiastically, rather than passively and apathetically. Finally, listeners help construct the meaning in messages. Because the fate of a message depends on how listeners respond to it, the audience must never be far from the speaker's mind. Indeed, Chapter 4 shows that intelligent speech preparation begins with audience analysis. What needs or problems are foremost in their minds? What subjects might interest them? What biases might distort their reception of certain messages? Such questions are crucial to the selection of your topic and to the way you frame your message.

Successful Public Speaking Offers Carefully Planned Messages. As we have indicated, conversations are fragmentary. They are often tentative explorations, taking many wrong turns - and sometimes even ending there. This d_ ifl; of meaning can be unpredictable, ,which makes conversa-tion q'llite exciting: "If that is true, then that must be true as well. Wow!" But the fragments of conversation don't always fit together into a mean-ingful pattern, and misunderstandings sometimes occur. In contrast, suc-cessful public speaking offers a message that is carefully designed to be internally consistent and complete. The message is based on responsible re-search and considered reflection. It is designed to guide the audience to give sympathetic attention to the speaker's ideas. It has been carefully worded and rehearsed so that it achieves maximum impact. The message is the product of the speaker's encoding processes, "the effort to find words, tones, and gestures that will convey how he or she thinks and feels about the subject. Encoding is the invitation to meaning that the speaker offers an audience. Audience members respond by decoding the message, decid-ing what the speaker intended, arid determining the value of the message for their lives.

Shaping a message is a basic public speaking skill. You begin by select-ing and refining a worthwhile topic. Next, you build a message structure in which each point seems to follow naturally and appropriately from the point before it until an idea is completed. We cover the art of speech or-ganization in Chapter 7, "Structuring Your Speech. Within this overall structure, supporting material facts, examples, testimony, and narratives - give your message substance. We address finding such Immaterial in Chapter 5, "Selecting and Researching Your Topic, and using such mate-rial in: Chapter 6, "The Use of Supporting Materials. To strengthen or clar-ify a message and add energy and variety to a speech, you may illustrate point_ with maps, models, or charts. We tell you how to develop such ma-terials in Chapter 9, "Presentation Aids_ "

The wording of a message is very important. The right words can make a message memorable. For example, in 1994 Republicans effectively used the phrase "Contract with America" as a label for the legislative program they presented to the public. It caught the electorate's imagination and for-warded their cause. On the other hand, the wrong words can destroy a speaker's ethos and impair the effectiveness of a message. For example, one sympathetic senator did not help the cause when, speaking in support of a balanced federal budget, he declared: "We're finally going to wrestle to the ground this gigantic orgasm that is 'just out of control."¹⁶ We discuss the effective use of language in Chapter 10, "The Speaker's Language."

Finally, you convey your message by the way you use your voice, facial expressions, and gestures. we cover' these topics in Chapter 11, "Presenting Your Speech. Becoming q master of the message is' a complicated process, but it is a goal *you* can achieve through practice and constructive advice from your teacher and classmates.

The Medium Can Affect the Message. Sound travels through air, and that air is the medium of the message. In conversation we can usually take the medium for granted, unless someone mumbles indistinctly. In that case, the sound impulses sent by the communicator do not possess suffi-cient strength and precision to travel successfully to

our ears and then to our brains for decoding. The remedy for the problem is very clear: “Speak up!” we are apt to say, “Speak more distinctly! That kind of blunt, honest feedback usually helps the problem.

As we move to public speaking, the medium can present complications. When speaking before an audience, we are not as close to our listeners. We may discover that we are in a place with poor acoustics or “dead spots” that block sound waves. When such problems arise, the speaker must make immediate adjustments, such as speaking more loudly, distinctly, or slowly.

When speaking on radio or television or when taping a presentation, speakers quickly realize that the change to an electronic medium has profound effects on communication. Radio emphasizes the attractiveness, clarity, and expressiveness of the speaker’s voice, but removes the speaker’s visual impact. Television brings a speaker into a close relationship with unseen viewers, so personality and physical appearance are magnified. Moreover, either medium precludes monitoring the immediate response of the audience, so direct feedback is not possible. When speakers want news coverage, they must often compress their ideas into twenty-second “sound bites” to fit the time constraints of newscasts. Their language must be immediately clear and colorful, so that casual listeners will be able to understand and remember the message. For speakers accustomed to eye contact, the impersonal microphone and the impassive eye of the camera may be unsettling. To be effective, speakers must be able to imagine the audience beyond the microphone and the camera, and speak to those listeners as individuals. -

Although a change in the medium of presentation can complicate the speaker’s job, effective speakers realize that the electronic media present a rare opportunity to extend their message to mass audiences. We cover media presentations in Chapter 11.

The Communication Environment Changes. Conversation can occur in a variety of settings, and the actual settings can influence the communication that takes place in them. One of the most profound discussions of the ethics of communication, Plato’s *Phaedrus*, written in ancient Greece some twenty-four hundred years ago, takes place in a woodland setting that frames and colors its message appropriately. This setting is described by Socrates as

... a fair resting-place, full of summer sounds and scents. Here is this lofty and spreading plane-tree and the [flowering vines] high and clustering, in the fullest blossom and the greatest fragrance; and the stream which flows beneath the plane-tree is deliciously cold to the feet. . . . But the greatest charm of all is the grass, like a pillow gently sloping to the head.¹⁷

In this setting of natural beauty Socrates envisions the loving nature of communication at its finest. Such communication, he argues, promotes spiritual growth for both listeners and speakers. Beyond the physical setting, the moods and immediate concerns of participants can also affect the fate of a message. Taken together, these physical and psychological factors make up the communication environment.

In public speaking the communication environment is both simple and more complex. In public speaking classes your speeches will most likely all be presented in one place - your classroom. This simplifies the problem of the physical setting: you can get used to

speaking in one place. On the other hand, the move from three people to twenty-four complicates the psychological aspects of the communication environment. Both the events and the expectations that are part of this environment can encourage or discourage speech effectiveness. For example, your carefully planned presentation attacking “impressive campus security” could be jeopardized if a major -crime occurs on campus shortly before your speech. But a cam-pus incident demonstrating the overreaction of security forces could be a real bonanza. You must be flexible enough to adapt to such events as you make your speech.

Audience expectations are another important part of the communication environment. If your listeners are anticipating an interesting self introductory speech and instead hear a tirade against tax reform, the communication environment may become a bit chilly. In another time, another place, perhaps, your speech might work - but not in that particular circumstance.

The negative or challenging factors in the communication environment that can disrupt effectiveness are called interference. Interference, which we discuss further in Chapter 3, can range from physical noise that impedes the hearing of a speech, such as a plane flying over the building, to psychological “noise” within speakers and listeners that prevents them from connecting.

While conversationalists are often close acquaintances who feel comfortable with each other, public speakers and their audiences can seem like strangers to each other, especially during first encounters. At such times, they may raise psychological barriers to protect themselves from the risks of genuine communication. Speakers troubled by communication anxiety may see listeners as distinct, unfriendly, or threatening. Even before beginning to speak, they have raised a barrier between themselves and their audience. Listeners may fear hidden agendas. They may be suspicious of a speaker’s motives, cautious about accepting messages, or concerned that what a speaker asks of them may be costly or risky. They may fear the change, even the growth, that can result from genuine communication. They may believe that even desirable change can have unpredictable consequences that will present them with problems. Or, they may have been wounded by a previous communication encounter. Such suspicions and fears may raise the barrier even higher.

Moreover, listeners may be indifferent to a message or distracted by other concerns. Worries over money or an upcoming test, or dreams about the weekend ahead, can further block communication. Stereotypes that clutter our heads with prejudice may multiply interference and dramatically raise the barriers between speakers and listeners.

As these formidable barriers develop, the speaker may lose influence over the listener’s decoding. As most of us have learned from hard experience, what speakers intend and what listeners hear can be miles apart. Because of interference, messages may have unintended, unexpected, and unfortunate meanings. *The art of public speaking is an effort to overcome interference so that listeners can accept the invitation to meaning offered by the message.*

At the beginning of a public speaking course, the barriers of fear, suspicion, indifference, distraction, and prejudice may seem quite formidable. Figure 1.2 illustrates the frustration speakers and listeners may feel as they first confront this “Interference Mountain.” Figure 1.3 suggests that climbing this mountain is the first challenge students

confront in the public speaking class. It requires the best efforts of speakers and listeners to success-fully scale its slopes and meet at its summit. This book contains detailed in-structions on how to climb above these barriers both as speaker and listener. As you meet the challenge of Interference Mountain, you should discover -that you are also able to lower it, as Figure 1.4 indicates. Your communication anxiety will ebb, trust will begin to replace suspicion, involvement will over-come indifference, and respect will reduce, prejudice. By the end of the course, you will have made Interference Mountain into a molehill.

Is this a realistic representation of the problem of interference? From our experience, we can say it is. One of your authors once ran for the Con-gress of the United States and, during that six-month experience, spoke be.; fore many audiences. On one occasion he was speaking at a meeting of mothers who were dependent on welfare benefits to support their families. He had a good message and was expecting a warm reception. But the speech fell flat. Later someone explained to him that the welfare checks were late. The women's concern over this delay raised such a barrier of in-terference that no one could have addressed them successfully that day. They simply were in no mood for a speech. Happily, however, that was a rare example on the campaign trail!