

Choosing a Topic

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn more about the process of selecting your speech topic. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Choose Your Topic
2. Brainstorming
 - a. Word Association
 - b. Clustering
 - c. Freewriting
3. Distill Your Ideas into One Topic
4. Do a Little Homework

1. Choose Your Topic

As you begin to prepare for any speech, it's important to pin down exactly about what you plan to talk. You might have been given a specific **topic** by a professor or supervisor, or you may be simply invited to speak at an event where the topic is up to you. Knowing how to carefully select your topic is an important first step in preparing for a successful speech.

Start by thinking about your venue. Where will you be giving your speech? To whom will you be speaking? We'll get to analyzing your audience in the next section.

Then, start to think about what you know about the topic, and move towards those subjects or tangents about which you don't know. It's helpful to speak about a topic with which you are already familiar, but sometimes you may be called into situations where you have no prior knowledge about a given subject.

In either instance, it's helpful to approach your topic through brainstorming.



TERM TO KNOW

Topic

Subject; theme; a category or general area of interest.

2. Brainstorming

One of the best ways to help solidify your speech topic is to **brainstorm**.

You can brainstorm by yourself, or you might want to bring in a few friends, colleagues or classmates to help you come up with ideas in a group setting.

You can brainstorm using a number of different exercises.



TERM TO KNOW

Brainstorming

A method of problem solving in which individuals or members of a group contribute ideas spontaneously.

2a. Word Association

Start with a broad topic idea. What words, topics, or other subjects do you associate with that first topic?

Now what words, topics, or other subjects do you associate with the following word?

Continue this chain of word association to give you a broad spectrum of ideas.

2b. Clustering

Also known as mind-mapping, clustering gives your word association a visual form. Start with your main idea and draw a circle around it, thinking of it like the hub of a wheel.

Now, begin to write other associated ideas, topics, or subcategories related to that main topic around the hub, and connect them as separate spokes.

From each spoke, begin to jot down other associated ideas and thoughts. As your cluster begins to grow, you might want to connect smaller spokes to one another and create new links between subjects.



2c. Freewriting

This is probably the simplest brainstorm method of all. Set a timer and begin writing whatever thoughts or ideas come to mind about your particular subject.

You might find it easier to type your freewriting instead of writing it by hand, so you can keep up with your thoughts faster. Whatever you do, don't stop writing.

Another way of freewriting is to record yourself talking for a set period of time and then transcribing your key points to go back to and clarify later. Once your time is up, go back and highlight or circle relevant points or topics that stick out for you. You'll refine these later.

3. Distill Your Ideas into One Topic

Once you've brainstormed your many ideas, it's time to refine your ideas and **distill** them into one topic.

Look for themes, patterns, and commonalities when going through your brainstorming notes.

Use these themes to help guide you toward a singular topic.



TERM TO KNOW

Distill

To extract the essence of; concentrate; purify.

4. Do a Little Homework

While you will definitely research your topic, you might want to do some "presearch"—that is, a little research before the real research.

Do a quick scan to see what others have said or written about your topic.

This might give you even more ideas of how to refine and distill your topic, or more appropriately adapt it to your audience or venue.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that before you can begin writing your speech, you must first **choose the main topic** about which you plan to speak. **Brainstorm** early and often! You can try a variety of techniques to get your mental juices flowing, such as **word association**, **clustering**, and **freewriting**. Even just talking through your ideas with another person as a sounding board is a great way to get ideas. Once you have **distilled your ideas into one topic**, **do a little homework**. See what others may have written or said about your general topic; reading their ideas may help give you some new ideas or directions of your own.

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