

Determining Your Topic

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about several strategies you can use to help select and narrow a speech topic appropriately, as well as how those strategies can lead to the development of your thesis.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Topic Selection Strategies

When you join an employer, you will likely be asked at some point to prepare a presentation as part of the job; often, you will not be able to choose your own topic, and there will be clear guidelines on what is acceptable.

In the real world, the luxury of time for preparation and topic selection are uncommon; however, in a classroom setting you are often given more of a chance to choose. That choice should not be taken lightly, and should be viewed as an opportunity. The classroom is a training ground, and your freedom to explore and experiment is designed to build skills and strengths.

So, even if you can't choose your own topic for a presentation at work, the strategies below will help you draw on your professional skill of self and social awareness to assess how best to represent your topic. Remember that the topic itself will not exclusively make a "good" or "bad" speech. How you develop that topic and discuss its points and issues, however, will make a significant impact.

1a. Know Yourself and Your Audience

The first strategy is to identify an area of knowledge or an issue that deeply interests you and consider how it relates to your purpose.

Talking about what you know will make you a more credible speaker, but it must clearly connect with your employer's goals for your presentation.

You thus might start by identifying three broad subject areas where you have some knowledge or experience, and then considering at least one link to business and industry for each area. Next, you will want to decide which of these areas would work best for your speech, and how to narrow it down.



Self and Social Awareness: Why Employers Care

Employers seek individuals who understand their own point of view, but who can also consider the points of view of their audience. Our own perception of the world is not always accurate, and there is

no substitute for thorough, objective research when preparing a speech. Still, the more you know about yourself and those you are addressing, the better you can prepare to meet their needs and accomplish your goals as a speaker. If you find the topic interesting, your enthusiasm will show and your audience will become interested, too.

1b. Consider Appeal, Appropriateness, and Ability

Appeal involves the power of arousing a sympathetic, stimulated response from the audience. Your audience will have expectations of you as a speaker and of your purpose for speaking. So, when considering a topic, think about the visual or auditory images that come to mind, or how you might represent it to an audience in ways other than your words. This can guide you as you proceed to select your topic, thinking about what you can make appealing to your audience.

It also follows that appeal applies to the speaker as well as the audience. You need to be attracted to, interested in, or find your topic appealing in order to convey this appeal to your audience. Find something that catches your interest, and that same spark is what you will cultivate to stimulate curiosity in your audience.

Appropriateness involves choosing a topic that is especially suitable or compatible with your audience's interests, expectations, norms, or customs. Everyone will have expectations about roles and outcomes associated with your speech. Some may be looking for information, while others may already know something about your topic and want to learn more. You will need to reach both groups within the audience.

Additionally, you should always choose topics that will not promote harmful or illegal actions. It is also important to consider whether your topic might offend members of the audience. Similarly, if your topic is controversial and you know that your audience has strong feelings about it, consider how you can convey your message without alienating or antagonizing your listeners.

Ability involves the natural aptitude or acquired proficiency to be able to present on your topic.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you have a lot of prior information on flying, gained over years of experience being at the controls of an aircraft, you may have a natural aptitude and knowledge base to use to your advantage. If, however, you've never flown before, you may need to gather information and go visit an airport to be able to approach a proficient level of understanding to discuss the topic.

In addition to your ability to draw on your natural strengths, you'll also want to consider your ability to perform adequate research on a topic. If you want to develop a speech on a particular topic, but you find information hard to come by, this will make your job even harder and could possibly have a detrimental impact on your speech.



The three factors of appeal, appropriateness, and ability are related to one another, but by systematically focusing on each one, you will help address the strengths and weaknesses of your chosen topic.

2. Writing Your Thesis Statement

Once you have explored further and identified a definite topic, it's time to write a thesis statement. This thesis statement should be a short, specific sentence capturing the central idea of your speech.

In their book *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach*, Steven and Susan Beebe (1990) recommend five guiding principles when considering your thesis statement.

The thesis statement should:

- Be a declarative statement
- Be a complete sentence
- Use specific language, not vague generalities
- Be a single idea
- Reflect consideration of the audience

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you plan to inform a general audience about the Ford Mustang, a good thesis statement might be, "Ford produced five 'generations' of the Mustang, each with a distinctive body style that audience members can learn to recognize."

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you plan to persuade a group of investors that a beachfront property could be threatened by rising sea levels, a good thesis statement might be, "Sea levels are predicted to rise because of global warming, and if these predictions are correct, the beachfront property my audience is considering investing in may be threatened."

The thesis statement is key to the success of your speech. If your audience has to work to find out what exactly you are talking about, or what your stated purpose or goal is, they will be less likely to listen to, be impacted by, or recall your speech.

By stating your point clearly in your introduction, and then referring back to it during your speech, you promote the cognitive strategies of emphasis, clarity, and conciseness, and help your audience to listen while meeting the expectations of the rhetorical context.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the importance of **topic selection strategies** such as **knowing yourself and your audience**, and considering the **appropriateness and appeal** of your ideas alongside your **ability** to develop them in the time allotted. By considering these factors, you can select a topic for your speech that will set you up for success.

Once your topic has been identified, you should **write a thesis statement** that clearly defines the main idea of your speech. Your thesis statement should be concise, complete, and specific so that your audience can easily understand your message.

Best of luck in your learning!

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