

Getting Attention and Interest

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WHAT'S COVERED

1. Getting Attention and Interest
2. Strategies for the Opening
3. Repetition
4. Finding Inspiration

1. Getting Attention and Interest

Public speaking is essentially the art of convincing an audience to listen to you against all odds. How can you pry your listeners away from their day-to-day concerns? What would make you the most interesting person in their lives—at least until you finish your speech? You need to act fast, since first impressions tend to overshadow all other impressions. The opening of your speech will determine the audience's willingness to listen. Learn how to deliver a dynamite opening, and you can make that fact work in your favor.



2. Strategies for the Opening

Here are eight ways to open a speech with panache:

1. Make a provocative or controversial statement. You can back down from an extreme position later, but controversy is an effective way to capture the audience's attention.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The United States should control its population growth by imposing fines on parents who have more than one child.

2. State a surprising or little-known fact.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Did you know that eating blueberries can actually make you smarter by boosting neurotransmitters in your brain?

3. Open with a quote. If you can't think of an attention-grabbing sentence yourself, get some outside assistance (with proper attribution, of course).

➞ **EXAMPLE** Oscar Wilde once said, "Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much."

4. Open with a brief **anecdote**.

➞ **EXAMPLE** I was driving home from work on a cold, rainy day when I saw a scrawny cat by the side of the road. Her ribs were sticking out under her filthy, matted fur; she was clearly starving. I made the split-second decision to find a home for this cat, pulled over, lifted her up into the passenger seat, and began a journey that would change my life in ways I never could have imagined.

5. Make a case for your topic's relevance to the reader.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Genetically modified foods are filling grocery stores all over the country; they are unavoidable at this point. If you've eaten something today, you've eaten something genetically modified today.

6. Take a stand against something. Don't attack a "straw man," or a vague, made-up antagonist—be specific.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The hazing rituals of this university's fraternities and sororities are getting worse, not better.

7. Stake a position for yourself within an ongoing debate.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Corporate culture is evolving toward workspaces that encourage collaboration, such as open floor plans and inviting communal areas. Our company has resisted that trend. We still have an old-school lineup of offices with closed doors surrounding a honeycomb of high-walled cubicles, and guess what—the employees never mingle! I believe it is time to give the new workplace order a chance.

8. State a question.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When was the last time you donated money to charity?



TERM TO KNOW

Anecdote

An account or story which supports an argument, but which is not supported by scientific or statistical analysis.

3. Repetition

Repetition is boring, right? Who wants to hear the same thing more than once? Actually, experienced public speakers learn that repetition doesn't have to be redundant—there's more to it than saying the same thing twice. In this culture of distraction, choosing an anchoring word, phrase, or idea and returning to it periodically throughout your speech can help the audience find the connection between different points. Think about how it feels to listen to a good song: each verse builds the story with new lyrics, and then the chorus comes back to ground the song and bring it back home.

4. Finding Inspiration

If you get stuck, look to other speakers for inspiration. If you search video hosting sites such as YouTube and Vimeo for speeches, you can watch seasoned public speakers dealing with the very same problems you're facing. Decide for yourself what works and what falls flat.



SUMMARY

In this lesson you learned that the opening of a speech is the most important time to get the audience's attention and generate interest. There are many **methods to grab the audience's attention**, one way is to begin with something surprising, shocking, or controversial. If a subdued approach is more appropriate, try opening with a question. In academic contexts, it may be best to start by situating your talk within the existing conversation.

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