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## Chapter 6

# Finding a Purpose and Selecting a Topic

## Finding Your Purpose

In the 2004 Tony Award–winning musical *Avenue Q*, the lead character sings a song about finding his purpose in life: “I don’t know how I know / But I’m gonna find my purpose / I don’t know where I’m gonna look / But I’m gonna find my purpose.” Although the song is about life in general, the lyrics are also appropriate when thinking about the purpose of your speech. You may know that you have been assigned to deliver a speech, but finding a purpose and topic seems like a formidable task. You may be asking yourself questions like, “What if the topic I pick is too common?”; “What if no one is interested in my topic?”; “What if my topic is too huge to cover in a three- to five-minute speech?”; or many others.



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Finding a speech’s purpose and topic isn’t as complex or difficult as you might believe. This may be hard to accept right now, but trust us. After you read this chapter, you’ll understand how to go about finding interesting topics for a variety of different types of speeches. In this chapter, we are going to explain how to identify the general purpose of a speech. We will also discuss how to select a topic, what to do if you’re just drawing a blank, and four basic questions you should ask yourself about the speech topic you ultimately select. Finally, we will explain how to use your general purpose and your chosen topic to develop the specific purpose of your speech.

## 6.1 General Purposes of Speaking

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Differentiate among the three types of general speech purposes.
2. Examine the basics of informative speech topics and some common forms of informative speeches.
3. Examine the basics of persuasive speech topics and some common forms of persuasive speeches.
4. Examine the basics of entertaining speech topics and some common forms of entertaining speeches.

What do you think of when you hear the word “purpose”? Technically speaking, a purpose can be defined as why something exists, how we use an object, or why we make something. For the purposes of public speaking, all three can be applicable. For example, when we talk about a speech’s purpose, we can question why a specific speech was given; we can question how we are supposed to use the information within a speech; and we can question why we are personally creating a speech. For this specific chapter, we are more interested in that last aspect of the definition of the word “purpose”: why we give speeches.



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Ever since scholars started writing about public speaking as a distinct phenomenon, there have been a range of different systems created to classify the types of speeches people may give. Aristotle talked about three speech purposes: deliberative (political speech), forensic (courtroom speech), and epideictic (speech of praise or blame). Cicero also talked about three purposes: judicial (courtroom speech), deliberative (political speech), and demonstrative (ceremonial speech—similar to Aristotle’s epideictic). A little more recently, St. Augustine of Hippo also wrote about three specific speech purposes: to teach (provide people with information), to delight (entertain people or show people false ideas), and to sway (persuade people to a religious ideology). All these systems of identifying public speeches have been attempts at helping people determine the general purpose of their speech. A **general purpose**<sup>1</sup> refers to the broad goal in creating and delivering a speech.

1. The broad goal that someone has for creating and delivering a speech.

These typologies or classification systems of public speeches serve to demonstrate that general speech purposes have remained pretty consistent throughout the history of public speaking. Modern public speaking scholars typically use a classification system of three general purposes: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain.

### To Inform

The first general purpose that some people have for giving speeches is to **inform**<sup>2</sup>. Simply put, this is about helping audience members acquire information that they do not already possess. Audience members can then use this information to understand something (e.g., speech on a new technology, speech on a new virus) or to perform a new task or improve their skills (e.g., how to swing a golf club, how to assemble a layer cake). The most important characteristic of informative topics is that the goal is to gain knowledge. Notice that the goal is not to encourage people to use that knowledge in any specific way. When a speaker starts encouraging people to use knowledge in a specific way, he or she is no longer informing but is persuading.

Let's look at a real example of how an individual can accidentally go from informing to persuading. Let's say you are assigned to inform an audience about a new vaccination program. In an informative speech, the purpose of the speech is to explain to your audience what the program is and how it works. If, however, you start encouraging your audience to participate in the vaccination program, you are no longer informing them about the program but rather persuading them to become involved in the program. One of the most common mistakes new public speaking students make is to blur the line between informing and persuading.

### Why We Share Knowledge

**Knowledge sharing**<sup>3</sup> is the process of delivering information, skills, or expertise in some form to people who could benefit from it. In fact, understanding and exchanging knowledge is so important that an entire field of study, called *knowledge management*, has been created to help people (especially businesses) become more effective at harnessing and exchanging knowledge. In the professional world, sharing knowledge is becoming increasingly important. Every year, millions of people attend some kind of knowledge sharing conference or convention in hopes of learning new information or skills that will help them in their personal or professional lives. Atwood, C. G. (2009). *Knowledge management basics*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.

2. A general purpose designed to help audience members acquire information that they currently do not possess.
3. The process an individual goes through when information, skills, or expertise is delivered in some form to other person's who could benefit from having that information, those skills, or the expertise.

People are motivated to share their knowledge with other people for a variety of reasons. Hendriks, P. (1999). Why share knowledge? The influence of ICT on the motivation for knowledge sharing. *Knowledge and Process Management*, 6, 91–100. For some, the personal sense of achievement or of responsibility drives them to share their knowledge (internal motivational factors). Others are driven to share knowledge because of the desire for recognition or the possibility of job enhancement (external motivational factors). Knowledge sharing is an important part of every society, so learning how to deliver informative speeches is a valuable skill.

### Common Types of Informative Topics

O’Hair, Stewart, and Rubenstein identified six general types of informative speech topics: objects, people, events, concepts, processes, and issues. O’Hair, D., Stewart, R., & Rubenstein, H. (2007). *A speaker’s guidebook: Text and reference* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins. The first type of informative speech relates to objects, which can include how objects are designed, how they function, and what they mean. For example, a student of one of our coauthors gave a speech on the design of corsets, using a mannequin to demonstrate how corsets were placed on women and the amount of force necessary to lace one up.

The second type of informative speech focuses on people. People-based speeches tend to be biography-oriented. Such topics could include recounting an individual’s achievements and explaining why he or she is important in history. Some speakers, who are famous themselves, will focus on their own lives and how various events shaped who they ultimately became. Dottie Walters is most noted as being the first female in the United States to run an advertising agency. In addition to her work in advertising, Dottie also spent a great deal of time as a professional speaker. She often would tell the story about her early years in advertising when she would push around a stroller with her daughter inside as she went from business to business trying to generate interest in her copywriting abilities. You don’t have to be famous, however, to give a people-based speech. Instead, you could inform your audience about a historical or contemporary hero whose achievements are not widely known.

The third type of informative speech involves explaining the significance of specific events, either historical or contemporary. For example, you could deliver a speech on a specific battle of World War II or a specific presidential administration. If you’re a history buff, event-oriented speeches may be right up your alley. There are countless historical events that many people aren’t familiar with and would find interesting. You could also inform your audience about a more recent or contemporary event. Some examples include concerts, plays, and arts festivals; athletic competitions; and natural phenomena, such as storms, eclipses, and

earthquakes. The point is to make sure that an informative speech is talking about the event (who, what, when, where, and why) and not attempting to persuade people to pass judgment upon the event or its effects.

The fourth type of informative speech involves concepts, or “abstract and difficult ideas or theories.” O’Hair, D., Stewart, R., & Rubenstein, H. (2007). *A speaker’s guidebook: Text and reference* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, p. 95. For example, if you want to explain a specific communication theory, E. M. Griffin provides an excellent list of communication theories on his website, [http://www.afirstlook.com/main.cfm/theory\\_list](http://www.afirstlook.com/main.cfm/theory_list). Whether you want to discuss theories related to business, sociology, psychology, religion, politics, art, or any other major area of study, this type of speech can be very useful in helping people to understand complex ideas.

The fifth type of informative speech involves processes. The process speech can be divided into two unique types: how-it-functions and how-to-do. The first type of process speech helps audience members understand how a specific object or system works. For example, you could explain how a bill becomes a law in the United States. There is a very specific set of steps that a bill must go through before it becomes a law, so there is a very clear process that could be explained to an audience. The how-to-do speech, on the other hand, is designed to help people come to an end result of some kind. For example, you could give a speech on how to quilt, how to change a tire, how to write a résumé, and millions of other how-to oriented topics. In our experience, the how-to speech is probably the most commonly delivered informative speech in public speaking classes.

The final type of informative speech involves issues, or “problems or matters of dispute.” O’Hair, D., Stewart, R., & Rubenstein, H. (2007). *A speaker’s guidebook: Text and reference* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, p. 25. This informative speech topic is probably the most difficult for novice public speakers because it requires walking a fine line between informing and persuading. If you attempt to deliver this type of speech, remember the goal is to be balanced when discussing both sides of the issue. To see an example of how you can take a very divisive topic and make it informative, check out the series *Point/Counterpoint* published by Chelsea House (<http://chelseahouse.infobasepublishing.com>). This series of books covers everything from the pros and cons of blogging to whether the United States should have mandatory military service.

### **Sample: Jessy Ohl’s Informative Speech**

The following text represents an informative speech prepared and delivered by an undergraduate student named Jessy Ohl. While this speech is written out as a text

for purposes of analysis, in your public speaking course, you will most likely be assigned to speak from an outline or notes, not a fully written script. As you read through this sample speech, notice how Ms. Ohl uses informative strategies to present the information without trying to persuade her audience.

In 1977, a young missionary named Daniel Everett traveled deep into the jungles of Brazil to spread the word of God. However, he soon found himself working to translate the language of a remote tribe that would ultimately change his faith, lead to a new profession, and pit him in an intellectual fistfight with the world-famous linguist Noam Chomsky. As *New Scientist Magazine* of January 2008 explains, Everett's research on a small group of 350 people called the Pirahã tribe has revealed a language that has experts and intellectuals deeply disturbed.

While all languages are unique, experts like Noam Chomsky have argued that they all have universal similarities, such as counting, that are hard-wired into the human brain. So as National Public Radio reported on April 8, 2007, without the ability to count, conceptualize time or abstraction, or create syntax, the Pirahã have a language that by all accounts shouldn't exist.

Daniel Everett is now a professor of linguistics at Illinois State University, and he has created controversy by calling for a complete reevaluation of all linguistic theory in light of the Pirahã. Exploration of the Pirahã could bring further insight into the understanding of how people communicate and even, perhaps, what it means to be human. Which is why we must: first, examine the unique culture of the Pirahã; second, explore what makes their language so surprising; and finally, discover the implications the Pirahã have for the way we look at language and humanity.

Taking a closer look at the tribe's culture, we can identify two key components of Pirahã culture that help mold language: first, isolation; and second, emphasis on reality.

First, while globalization has reached nearly every corner of the earth, it has not been able to penetrate the Pirahã natives in the slightest. As Dr. Everett told the *New Yorker* of April 16, 2007, no group in history has resisted change like the Pirahã. "They reject everything from outside their world" as unnecessary and silly. Distaste for all things foreign is the reason why the people have rejected technology, farming, religion, and even artwork.

The lack of artwork illustrates the second vital part of Pirahã culture: an emphasis on reality. According to the *India Statesman* of May 22, 2006, all Pirahã

understanding is based around the concept of personal experience. If something cannot be felt, touched, or experienced directly then to them, it doesn't exist, essentially eliminating the existence of abstract thought. Since art is often a representation of reality, it has no value among the people. During his work as a missionary, Everett was amazed to find that the natives had no interest in the story of Jesus once they found out that he was dead. The Pirahã psyche is so focused on the present that the people have no collective memory, history, written documents, or creation myths. They are unable to even remember the names of dead grandparents because once something or someone cannot be experienced, they are no longer important.

Since his days as a missionary, Everett remains the only Western professor able to translate Pirahã. His research has discovered many things missing with the language: words for time, direction, and color. But more importantly, Pirahã also lacks three characteristics previously thought to be essential to all languages: complexity, counting, and recursion.

First, the Pirahã language seems incredibly simple. Now, this isn't meant to imply that the people are uncivilized or stupid, but instead, they are minimalist. As I mentioned earlier, they only talk in terms of direct experience. *The London Times* of January 13, 2007, notes that with only eight consonants and three vowels, speakers rely on the use of tone, pitch, and humming to communicate. In fact, Pirahã almost sounds more like song than speech.

Second, Noam Chomsky's famous universal grammar theory includes the observation that every language has a means of counting. However, as reported in the June 2007 issue of *Prospect Magazine*, the Pirahã only have words for "one, two, and MANY." This demonstrates the Pirahã's inability to conceptualize a difference between three and five or three and a thousand. Dr. Everett spent six months attempting to teach even a single Pirahã person to count to ten, but his efforts were in vain, as tribal members considered the new numbers and attempts at math "childish."

Third, and the biggest surprise for researchers, is the Pirahã's apparent lack of recursion. Recursion is the ability to link several thoughts together. It is characterized in Christine Kenneally's 2007 book, *The Search for the Origins of Language*, as the fundamental principle of all language and the source of limitless expression. Pirahã is unique since the language does not have any conjunctions or linking words. Recursion is so vital for expression that the *Chicago Tribune* of June 11, 2007, reports that a language without recursion is like disproving gravity.



Although the Pirahã don't care what the outside world thinks of them, their language and world view has certainly ruffled feathers. And while civilization hasn't been able to infiltrate the Pirahã, it may ultimately be the Pirahã that teaches civilization a thing or two, which brings us to implications on the communicative, philosophical, and cultural levels. By examining the culture, language, and implications of the Pirahã tribe we are able to see how this small Brazilian village could shift the way that we think and talk about the world. Daniel Everett's research hasn't made him more popular with his colleagues. But his findings do show that more critical research is needed to make sure that our understanding of language is not lost in translation.

## To Persuade

The second general purpose people can have for speaking is to **persuade**<sup>4</sup>. When we speak to persuade, we attempt to get listeners to embrace a point of view or to adopt a behavior that they would not have done otherwise. A persuasive speech can be distinguished from an informative speech by the fact that it includes a call for action for the audience to make some change in their behavior or thinking.

## Why We Persuade

The reasons behind persuasive speech fall into two main categories, which we will call "pure persuasion" and "manipulative persuasion." **Pure persuasion**<sup>5</sup> occurs when a speaker urges listeners to engage in a specific behavior or change a point of view because the speaker truly believes that the change is in the best interest of the audience members. For example, you may decide to give a speech on the importance of practicing good oral hygiene because you truly believe that oral hygiene is important and that bad oral hygiene can lead to a range of physical, social, and psychological problems. In this case, the speaker has no ulterior or hidden motive (e.g., you are not a toothpaste salesperson).

**Manipulative persuasion**<sup>6</sup>, on the other hand, occurs when a speaker urges listeners to engage in a specific behavior or change a point of view by misleading them, often to fulfill an ulterior motive beyond the face value of the persuasive attempt. We call this form of persuasion manipulative because the speaker is not being honest about the real purpose for attempting to persuade the audience. Ultimately, this form of persuasion is perceived as highly dishonest when audience members discover the ulterior motive. For example, suppose a physician who also owns a large amount of stock in a pharmaceutical company is asked to speak before a group of other physicians about a specific disease. Instead of informing the group about the disease, the doctor spends the bulk of his time attempting to persuade the audience that the drug his company manufactures is the best treatment for that specific disease.

4. The process an individual goes through attempting to get another person to behave in a manner or embrace a point of view related to values, attitudes, or beliefs that he or she would not have done otherwise.

5. Occurs when a speaker urges listeners to engage in a specific behavior or change a point of view because the speaker truly believes that the change is in the best interest of the audience members.

6. Occurs when a speaker urges listeners to engage in a specific behavior or change a point of view by misleading them, often to fulfill an ulterior motive beyond the face value of the persuasive attempt.

Obviously, the key question for persuasion is the speaker's intent. Is the speaker attempting to persuade the audience because of a sincere belief in the benefits of a certain behavior or point of view? Or is the speaker using all possible means—including distorting the truth—to persuade the audience because he or she will derive personal benefits from their adopting a certain behavior or point of view? Unless your speech assignment specifically calls for a speech of manipulative persuasion, the usual (and ethical) understanding of a “persuasive speech” assignment is that you should use the pure form of persuasion.

### **Persuasion: Behavior versus Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs**

As we've mentioned in the preceding sections, persuasion can address behaviors—observable actions on the part of listeners—and it can also address intangible thought processes in the form of attitudes, values, and beliefs.

When the speaker attempts to persuade an audience to change behavior, we can often observe and even measure how successful the persuasion was. For example, after a speech attempting to persuade the audience to donate money to a charity, the charity can measure how many donations were received. The following is a short list of various behavior-oriented persuasive speeches we've seen in our own classes: washing one's hands frequently and using hand sanitizer, adapting one's driving habits to improve gas mileage, using open-source software, or drinking one soft drink or soda over another. In all these cases, the goal is to make a change in the basic behavior of audience members.

The second type of persuasive topic involves a change in attitudes, values, or beliefs. An **attitude**<sup>7</sup> is defined as an individual's general predisposition toward something as being good or bad, right or wrong, negative or positive. If you believe that dress codes on college campuses are a good idea, you want to give a speech persuading others to adopt a positive attitude toward campus dress codes.

A speaker can also attempt to persuade listeners to change some value they hold. **Value**<sup>8</sup> refers to an individual's perception of the usefulness, importance, or worth of something. We can value a college education, we can value technology, and we can value freedom. Values, as a general concept, are fairly ambiguous and tend to be very lofty ideas. Ultimately, what we value in life actually motivates us to engage in a range of behaviors. For example, if you value protecting the environment, you may recycle more of your trash than someone who does not hold this value. If you value family history and heritage, you may be more motivated to spend time with your older relatives and ask them about their early lives than someone who does not hold this value.

7. An individual's general predisposition toward something as being good or bad, right or wrong, negative or positive, and so on.

8. An individual's perception of the usefulness, importance, or worth of something.

Lastly, a speaker can attempt to persuade people to change their personal beliefs. **Beliefs**<sup>9</sup> are propositions or positions that an individual holds as true or false without positive knowledge or proof. Typically, beliefs are divided into two basic categories: core and dispositional. **Core beliefs**<sup>10</sup> are beliefs that people have actively engaged in and created over the course of their lives (e.g., belief in a higher power, belief in extraterrestrial life forms). **Dispositional beliefs**<sup>11</sup>, on the other hand, are beliefs that people have not actively engaged in; they are judgments based on related subjects, which people make when they encounter a proposition. Imagine, for example, that you were asked the question, “Can gorillas speak English?” While you may never have met a gorilla or even seen one in person, you can make instant judgments about your understanding of gorillas and fairly certainly say whether you believe that gorillas can speak English.

When it comes to persuading people to alter beliefs, persuading audiences to change core beliefs is more difficult than persuading audiences to change dispositional beliefs. If you find a topic related to dispositional beliefs, using your speech to help listeners alter their processing of the belief is a realistic possibility. But as a novice public speaker, you are probably best advised to avoid core beliefs. Although core beliefs often appear to be more exciting and interesting than dispositional ones, you are very unlikely to alter anyone’s core beliefs in a five- to ten-minute classroom speech.

### Sample: Jessy Ohl’s Persuasive Speech

The following speech was written and delivered by an undergraduate student named Jessy Ohl. As with our earlier example, while this speech is written out as a text for purposes of analysis, in your public speaking course, you will most likely be assigned to speak from an outline or notes, not a fully written script.

Take a few minutes and compare this persuasive speech to the informative speech Ms. Ohl presented earlier in this chapter. What similarities do you see? What differences do you see? Does this speech seek to change the audience’s behavior? Attitudes? Values? Dispositional or core beliefs? Where in the speech do you see one or more calls for action?

With a declining population of around 6,000, my home town of Denison, Iowa, was on the brink of extinction when a new industry rolled in bringing jobs and revenue. However, as the *Canadian Globe and Mail* of July 23, 2007, reports, the industry that saved Denison may ultimately lead to its demise.

Denison is one of 110 communities across the country to be revolutionized by the production of corn ethanol. Ethanol is a high-powered alcohol, derived from plant

- 9. Propositions or positions that an individual holds as true or false without positive knowledge or proof.
- 10. Beliefs that people have actively engaged in and created over the course of their lives.
- 11. Beliefs that people have not actively engaged in; judgments based on related subjects, which people make when they encounter a proposition.

matter, that can be used like gasoline. According to the *Omaha World Herald* of January 8, 2008, our reliance on foreign oil combined with global warming concerns have many holding corn ethanol as our best energy solution. But despite the good intentions of helping farmers and lowering oil consumption, corn ethanol is filled with empty promises. In fact, *The Des Moines Register* of March 1, 2008, concludes that when ethanol is made from corn, all of its environmental and economic benefits disappear. With oil prices at 100 dollars per barrel, our nation is in an energy crisis, and luckily, the production of ethanol can be a major help for both farmers and consumers, if done correctly. Unfortunately, the way we make ethanol—over 95% from corn—is anything but correct. Although hailed as a magic bullet, corn ethanol could be the worst agricultural catastrophe since the Dust Bowl.

The serious political, environmental, and even moral implications demand that we critically rethink this so-called yellow miracle by: first, examining the problems created by corn ethanol; second, exploring why corn ethanol has gained such power; and finally, discovering solutions to prevent a corn ethanol disaster.

Now, if you have heard anything about the problems of corn ethanol, it probably dealt with efficiency. As the *Christian Science Monitor* of November 15, 2007, notes, it takes a gallon of gasoline or more to make a gallon of ethanol. And while this is an important concern, efficiency is the least of our worries. Turning this crop into fuel creates two major problems for our society: first, environmental degradation; and second, acceleration of global famine.

First, corn ethanol damages the environment as much as, if not more than, fossil fuels. The journal *Ethanol and Bio-diesel News* of September 2007 asserts that the production of corn ethanol is pushing natural resources to the breaking point. Since the Dust Bowl, traditional farming practices have required farmers to “rotate” crops. But with corn ethanol being so profitable, understandably, farmers have stopped rotating crops, leading to soil erosion, deforestation, and fertilizer runoff—making our soil less fertile and more toxic. And the story only gets worse once the ethanol is manufactured. According to National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation* of February 10, 2008, corn ethanol emits more carbon monoxide and twice the amount of carcinogens into the air as traditional gasoline.

The second problem created from corn ethanol is the acceleration of global famine. According to the US Grains Council, last year, 27 million tons of corn, traditionally used as food, was turned into ethanol, drastically increasing food prices. The March 7, 2007, issue of *The Wall Street Journal* explains that lower supplies of corn needed for necessities such as farm feed, corn oil, and corn syrup have increased our food costs in everything from milk to bread, eggs, and even beer as much as 25 percent.

*The St. Louis Post Dispatch* of April 12, 2007, reports that the amount of corn used to fill one tank of gas could feed one person for an entire year. In October, Global protests over corn ethanol lead the United Nations to call its production “a crime against humanity.”

If you weren't aware of the environmental or moral impacts of corn ethanol, you're not alone. The *Financial Times* of May 27, 2007, reports that the narrative surrounding corn ethanol as a homegrown fuel is so desirable that critical thinking is understandably almost nonexistent. To start thinking critically about corn ethanol, we need to examine solutions on both the federal and personal levels.

First, at the federal level, our government must end the ridiculously high subsidies surrounding corn ethanol. On June 24, 2007, *The Washington Post* predicted that subsidies on corn ethanol would cost the federal government an extra 131 billion dollars by 2010.

This isn't to say that the federal government should abandon small farmers. Instead, let's take the excitement around alternative fuels and direct it toward the right kinds of ethanol. *The Economist* of June 2, 2007, reports that other materials such as switch grass and wood chips can be used instead of corn. And on July 6, 2011, *The New York Times* reported on ethanol made from corn cobs, leaves, and husks, which leaves the corn kernels to be used as food. The government could use the money paid in subsidies to support this kind of responsible production of ethanol. The point is that ethanol done right can honestly help with energy independence.

On the personal level, we have all participated in the most important step, which is being knowledgeable about the true face of corn ethanol. However, with big business and Washington proclaiming corn ethanol's greatness, we need to spread the word. So please, talk to friends and family about corn ethanol while there is still time. To make this easier, visit my website, at <http://www.responsibleethanol.com>. Here you will find informational materials, links to your congressional representatives, and ways to invest in switch grass and wood ethanol.

Today, we examined the problems of corn ethanol in America and discovered solutions to make sure that our need for energy reform doesn't sacrifice our morality. Iowa is turning so much corn into ethanol that soon the state will have to import corn to eat. And while my hometown of Denison has gained much from corn ethanol, we all have much more to lose from it.

## To Entertain

The final general purpose people can have for public speaking is to entertain. Whereas informative and persuasive speech making is focused on the end result of the speech process, entertainment speaking is focused on the theme and occasion of the speech. An entertaining speech can be either informative or persuasive at its root, but the context or theme of the speech requires speakers to think about the speech primarily in terms of audience enjoyment.

## Why We Entertain

Entertaining speeches are very common in everyday life. The fundamental goal of an entertaining speech is audience enjoyment, which can come in a variety of forms. Entertaining speeches can be funny or serious. Overall, entertaining speeches are not designed to give an audience a deep understanding of life but instead to function as a way to divert an audience from their day-to-day lives for a short period of time. This is not to say that an entertaining speech cannot have real content that is highly informative or persuasive, but its goal is primarily about the entertaining aspects of the speech and not focused on the informative or persuasive quality of the speech.

## Common Forms of Entertainment Topics

There are three basic types of entertaining speeches: the after-dinner speech, the ceremonial speech, and the inspirational speech. The after-dinner speech is a form of speaking where a speaker takes a serious speech topic (either informative or persuasive) and injects a level of humor into the speech to make it entertaining. Some novice speakers will attempt to turn an after-dinner speech into a stand-up comedy routine, which doesn't have the same focus. Roye, S. (2010). Austan Goolsbee a funny stand-up comedian? Not even close... [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.realfirststeps.com/1184/austan-goolsbee-funny-standup-comedian-close> After-dinner speeches are first and foremost speeches.

A ceremonial speech is a type of entertaining speech where the specific context of the speech is the driving force of the speech. Common types of ceremonial speeches include introductions, toasts, and eulogies. In each of these cases, there are specific events that drive the speech. Maybe you're introducing an individual who is about to receive an award, giving a toast at your best friend's wedding, or delivering the eulogy at a relative's funeral. In each of these cases, the speech and the purpose of the speech is determined by the context of the event and not by the desire to inform or persuade.

The final type of entertaining speech is one where the speaker's primary goal is to inspire her or his audience. Inspirational speeches are based in emotion with the goal to motivate listeners to alter their lives in some significant way. Florence Littauer, a famous professional speaker, delivers an emotionally charged speech titled "Silver Boxes." In the speech, Mrs. Littauer demonstrates how people can use positive comments to encourage others in their daily lives. The title comes from a story she tells at the beginning of the speech where she was teaching a group of children about using positive speech, and one of the children defined positive speech as giving people little silver boxes with bows on top (<http://server.firefighters.org/catalog/2009/45699.mp3>).

### **Sample: Adam Fink's Entertainment Speech**

The following speech, by an undergraduate student named Adam Fink, is an entertainment speech. Specifically, this speech is a ceremonial speech given at Mr. Fink's graduation. As with our earlier examples, while this speech is written out as a text for purposes of analysis, in your public speaking course you will most likely be assigned to speak from an outline or notes, not a fully written script. Notice that the tenor of this speech is persuasive but that it persuades in a more inspiring way than just building and proving an argument.

Good evening! I've spent the last few months looking over commencement speeches on YouTube. The most notable ones had eight things in common. They reflected on the past, pondered about the future. They encouraged the honorees. They all included some sort of personal story and application. They made people laugh at least fifteen times. They referred to the university as the finest university in the nation or world, and last but not least they all greeted the people in attendance. I'll begin by doing so now.

President Holst, thank you for coming. Faculty members and staff, salutations to you all. Distinguished guests, we are happy to have you. Family members and friends, we could not be here without you. Finally, ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2009, welcome to your commencement day here at Concordia University, Saint Paul, this, the finest university in the galaxy, nay, universe. Really, it's right up there with South Harlem Institute of Technology, the School of Hard Knocks, and Harvard. Check and check!

Graduates, we are not here to watch as our siblings, our parents, friends, or other family walk across this stage. We are here because today is our graduation day. I am going to go off on a tangent for a little bit. Over the past umpteen years, I have seen my fair share of graduations and ceremonies. In fact, I remember getting dragged along to my older brothers' and sisters' graduations, all 8,000 of them—at least it

seems like there were that many now. Seriously, I have more family members than friends. I remember sitting here in these very seats, intently listening to the president and other distinguished guests speak, again saying welcome and thank you for coming. Each year, I got a little bit better at staying awake throughout the entire ceremony. Every time I would come up with something new to keep myself awake, daydreams, pinching my arms, or pulling leg hair; I was a very creative individual. I am proud to say that I have been awake for the entirety of this ceremony. I would like to personally thank my classmates and colleagues sitting around me for slapping me every time I even thought about dozing off. Personal story, check—and now, application!

Graduates, don't sleep through life. If you need a close friend or colleague to keep you awake, ask. Don't get bored with life. In the words of one of my mentors, the Australian film director, screen writer, and producer Baz Luhrman, "Do one thing every day that scares you." Keep yourself on your toes. Stay occupied but leave room for relaxation; embrace your hobbies. Don't get stuck in a job you hate. I am sure many of you have seen the "Did You Know?" film on YouTube. The film montages hundreds of statistics together, laying down the ground work to tell viewers that we are approaching a crossroad. The way we live is about to change dramatically. We are living in exponential times. It's a good thing that we are exponential people.

We are at a crossing point here, now. Each of us is graduating; we are preparing to leave this place we have called home for the past few years. It's time to move on and flourish. But let's not leave this place for good. Let us walk away with happy memories. We have been fortunate enough to see more change in our time here than most alumni see at their alma mater in a lifetime. We have seen the destruction of Centennial, Minnesota, and Walther. Ladies, it might not mean a lot to you, but gentlemen, we had some good times there. We have seen the building and completion of the new Residence Life Center. We now see the beginnings of our very own stadium. We have seen enough offices and departments move to last any business a lifetime. Let us remember these things, the flooding of the knoll, Ultimate Frisbee beginning at ten o'clock at night, and two back-to-back Volleyball National Championship teams, with one of those championship games held where you are sitting now. I encourage all of you to walk out of this place with flashes of the old times flickering through your brains. Reflection, check!

Honorees, in the words of Michael Scott, only slightly altered, "They have no idea how high [we] can fly." Right now you are surrounded by future politicians, film critics, producers, directors, actors, actresses, church workers, artists, the teachers of tomorrow, musicians, people who will change the world. We are all held together right here and now, by a common bond of unity. We are one graduating class.



In one of his speeches this year, President Barack Obama said, “Generations of Americans have connected their stories to the larger American story through service and helped move our country forward. We need that service now.” He is right. America needs selfless acts of service.

Hebrews 10:23–25 reads, “Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Let us not leave this place as enemies but rather as friends and companions. Let us come back next fall for our first reunion, the Zero Class Reunion hosted by the wonderful and amazing workers in the alumni department. Let us go and make disciples of all nations, guided by His Word. Let us spread God’s peace, joy, and love through service to others. Congratulations, graduates! I hope to see you next homecoming. Encouragement, check!

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are three general purposes that all speeches fall into: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. Depending on what your ultimate goal is, you will start by picking one of these general purposes and then selecting an appropriate speech pattern that goes along with that general purpose.
- Informative speeches can focus on objects, people, events, concepts, processes, or issues. It is important to remember that your purpose in an informative speech is to share information with an audience, not to persuade them to do or believe something.
- There are two basic types of persuasion: pure and manipulative. Speakers who attempt to persuade others for pure reasons do so because they actually believe in what they are persuading an audience to do or think. Speakers who persuade others for manipulative reasons do so often by distorting the support for their arguments because they have an ulterior motive in persuading an audience to do or think something. If an audience finds out that you’ve been attempting to manipulate them, they will lose trust in you.
- Entertainment speeches can be after-dinner, ceremonial, or inspirational. Although there may be informative or persuasive elements to your speech, your primary reason for giving the speech is to entertain the audience.

## EXERCISES

1. Imagine you're giving a speech related to aardvarks to a group of fifth graders. Which type of informative speech do you think would be the most useful (objects, people, events, concepts, processes, and issues)? Why?
2. Imagine you're giving a speech to a group of prospective voters supporting a specific political candidate. Which type of persuasive speech do you think would be the most useful (change of behavior, change of attitude, change of value, or change of belief)? Why?
3. Imagine that you've been asked to speak at a business luncheon and the host has asked you to keep it serious but lighthearted. Which type of entertainment speech do you think would be the most useful (the after-dinner speech, the ceremonial speech, or the inspirational speech)? Why?

## 6.2 Selecting a Topic

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the four primary constraints of topic selection.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of how a topic is narrowed from a broad subject area to a manageable specific purpose.

One of the most common stumbling blocks for novice public speakers is selecting their first speech topic. Generally, your public speaking instructor will provide you with some fairly specific parameters to make this a little easier. You may be assigned to tell about an event that has shaped your life or to demonstrate how to do something. Whatever your basic parameters, at some point you as the speaker will need to settle on a specific topic. In this section, we're going to look at some common constraints of public speaking, picking a broad topic area, and narrowing your topic.



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### Common Constraints of Public Speaking

When we use the word “constraint” with regard to public speaking, we are referring to any limitation or restriction you may have as a speaker. Whether in a classroom situation or in the boardroom, speakers are typically given specific instructions that they must follow. These instructions constrain the speaker and limit what the speaker can say. For example, in the professional world of public speaking, speakers are often hired to speak about a specific topic (e.g., time management, customer satisfaction, entrepreneurship). In the workplace, a supervisor may assign a subordinate to present certain information in a meeting. In these kinds of situations, when a speaker is hired or assigned to talk about a specific topic, he or she cannot decide to talk about something else.

Furthermore, the speaker may have been asked to speak for an hour, only to show up and find out that the event is running behind schedule, so the speech must now be made in only thirty minutes. Having prepared sixty minutes of material, the speaker now has to determine what stays in the speech and what must go. In both of these instances, the speaker is constrained as to what he or she can say during a

speech. Typically, we refer to four primary constraints: purpose, audience, context, and time frame.

### **Purpose**

The first major constraint someone can have involves the general purpose of the speech. As mentioned earlier, there are three general purposes: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. If you've been told that you will be delivering an informative speech, you are automatically constrained from delivering a speech with the purpose of persuading or entertaining. In most public speaking classes, this is the first constraint students will come in contact with because generally teachers will tell you the exact purpose for each speech in the class.

### **Audience**

The second major constraint that you need to consider as a speaker is the type of audience you will have. As discussed in the chapter on audience analysis, different audiences have different political, religious, and ideological leanings. As such, choosing a speech topic for an audience that has a specific mindset can be very tricky. Unfortunately, choosing what topics may or may not be appropriate for a given audience is based on generalizations about specific audiences. For example, maybe you're going to give a speech at a local meeting of Democratic leaders. You may think that all Democrats are liberal or progressive, but there are many conservative Democrats as well. If you assume that all Democrats are liberal or progressive, you may end up offending your audience by making such a generalization without knowing better. Obviously, the best way to prevent yourself from picking a topic that is inappropriate for a specific audience is to really know your audience, which is why we recommend conducting an audience analysis, as described in [Chapter 5 "Audience Analysis"](#).

### **Context**

The third major constraint relates to the context. For speaking purposes, the context of a speech is the set of circumstances surrounding a particular speech. There are countless different contexts in which we can find ourselves speaking: a classroom in college, a religious congregation, a corporate boardroom, a retirement village, or a political convention. In each of these different contexts, the expectations for a speaker are going to be unique and different. The topics that may be appropriate in front of a religious group may not be appropriate in the corporate boardroom. Topics appropriate for the corporate boardroom may not be appropriate at a political convention.

### Time Frame

The last—but by no means least important—major constraint that you will face is the time frame of your speech. In speeches that are under ten minutes in length, you must narrowly focus a topic to one major idea. For example, in a ten-minute speech, you could not realistically hope to discuss the entire topic of the US Social Security program. There are countless books, research articles, websites, and other forms of media on the topic of Social Security, so trying to crystallize all that information into ten minutes is just not realistic.

Instead, narrow your topic to something that is more realistically manageable within your allotted time. You might choose to inform your audience about Social Security disability benefits, using one individual disabled person as an example. Or perhaps you could speak about the career of Robert J. Myers, one of the original architects of Social Security. See, for example, Social Security Administration (1996). Robert J. Myers oral history interview. Retrieved from <http://www.ssa.gov/history/myersorl.html> By focusing on information that can be covered within your time frame, you are more likely to accomplish your goal at the end of the speech.

### Selecting a Broad Subject Area

Once you know what the basic constraints are for your speech, you can then start thinking about picking a topic. The first aspect to consider is what subject area you are interested in examining. A **subject area**<sup>12</sup> is a broad area of knowledge. Art, business, history, physical sciences, social sciences, humanities, and education are all examples of subject areas. When selecting a topic, start by casting a broad net because it will help you limit and weed out topics quickly.

Furthermore, each of these broad subject areas has a range of subject areas beneath it. For example, if we take the subject area “art,” we can break it down further into broad categories like art history, art galleries, and how to create art. We can further break down these broad areas into even narrower subject areas (e.g., art history includes prehistoric art, Egyptian art, Grecian art, Roman art, Middle Eastern art, medieval art, Asian art, Renaissance art, modern art). As you can see, topic selection is a narrowing process.

### Narrowing Your Topic

Narrowing your topic to something manageable for the constraints of your speech is something that takes time, patience, and experience. One of the biggest mistakes that new public speakers make is not narrowing their topics sufficiently given the constraints. In the previous section, we started demonstrating how the narrowing

12. A broad area of knowledge (e.g., art, business, history, physical sciences, social sciences, humanities, education).

process works, but even in those examples, we narrowed subject areas down to fairly broad areas of knowledge.

Think of narrowing as a funnel. At the top of the funnel are the broad subject areas, and your goal is to narrow your topic further and further down until just one topic can come out the other end of the funnel. The more focused your topic is, the easier your speech is to research, write, and deliver. So let's take one of the broad areas from the art subject area and keep narrowing it down to a manageable speech topic. For this example, let's say that your general purpose is to inform, you are delivering the speech in class to your peers, and you have five to seven minutes. Now that we have the basic constraints, let's start narrowing our topic. The broad area we are going to narrow in this example is Middle Eastern art. When examining the category of Middle Eastern art, the first thing you'll find is that Middle Eastern art is generally grouped into four distinct categories: Anatolian, Arabian, Mesopotamian, and Syro-Palestinian. Again, if you're like us, until we started doing some research on the topic, we had no idea that the historic art of the Middle East was grouped into these specific categories. We'll select Anatolian art, or the art of what is now modern Turkey.

You may think that your topic is now sufficiently narrow, but even within the topic of Anatolian art, there are smaller categories: pre-Hittite, Hittite, Uratu, and Phrygian periods of art. So let's narrow our topic again to the Phrygian period of art (1200–700 BCE). Although we have now selected a specific period of art history in Anatolia, we are still looking at a five-hundred-year period in which a great deal of art was created. One famous Phrygian king was King Midas, who according to myth was given the ears of a donkey and the power of a golden touch by the Greek gods. As such, there is an interesting array of art from the period of Midas and its Greek counterparts representing Midas. At this point, we could create a topic about how Phrygian and Grecian art differed in their portrayals of King Midas. We now have a topic that is unique, interesting, and definitely manageable in five to seven minutes. You may be wondering how we narrowed the topic down; we just started doing a little research using the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website (<http://www.metmuseum.org>).

Overall, when narrowing your topic, you should start by asking yourself four basic questions based on the constraints discussed earlier in this section:

1. Does the topic match my intended general purpose?
2. Is the topic appropriate for my audience?
3. Is the topic appropriate for the given speaking context?
4. Can I reasonably hope to inform or persuade my audience in the time frame I have for the speech?

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Selecting a topic is a process. We often start by selecting a broad area of knowledge and then narrowing the topic to one that is manageable for a given rhetorical situation.
- When finalizing a specific purpose for your speech, always ask yourself four basic questions: (1) Does the topic match my intended general purpose?; (2) Is the topic appropriate for my audience?; (3) Is the topic appropriate for the given speaking context?; and (4) Can I reasonably hope to inform or persuade my audience in the time frame I have for the speech?

### EXERCISES

1. Imagine you've been asked to present on a new technology to a local business. You've been given ten minutes to speak on the topic. Given these parameters, take yourself through the narrowing process from subject area (business) to a manageable specific purpose.
2. Think about the next speech you'll be giving in class. Show how you've gone from a large subject area to a manageable specific purpose based on the constraints given to you by your professor.

## 6.3 What If You Draw a Blank?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand and conduct a basic personal inventory.
2. Explain how to identify and use finding aids for topic selection.
3. Examine the importance of polling one's audience to determine speech topics.

Uh-oh, what if you have no clue what to speak about at all? Thankfully, there are many places where you can get help finding a good topic for you. In this section, we're going to talk about a range of ways to find the best topic.



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### Conduct a Personal Inventory

The first way to find a good topic is to conduct what we call a personal inventory. A **personal inventory**<sup>13</sup> is a detailed and descriptive list about an individual. In this case, we want you to think about you. Here are some basic questions to get you started:

- What's your major?
- What are your hobbies?
- What jobs have you had?
- What extracurricular activities have you engaged in?
- What clubs or groups do you belong to?
- What political issues interest you?
- Where have you traveled in life?
- What type of volunteer work have you done?
- What goals do you have in life?
- What social problems interest you?
- What books do you read?
- What movies do you watch?
- What games do you play?
- What unique skills do you possess?

13. A detailed and descriptive list about an individual.



After responding to these questions, you now have a range of areas that are unique to you that you could realistically develop into a speech. Here are some unique inventory items that could be turned into speeches for some of the authors of this textbook:

### Jason S. Wrench

1. Grew up as an air force dependent and lived on the island of Crete
2. Is a puppeteer
3. Has two puggles (half pug/half beagle) named Daikin and Teddy

### Anne Goding

1. Worked as a teacher for the Medicine Chief of the Bear Tribe Medicine Society in Spokane, Washington
2. Was codirector of Bear Tribe Publishing Company
3. Specializes in storytelling

### Danette Ifert-Johnson

1. Is an avid fan of the Baltimore Orioles
2. Spent a month in South Korea as part of a study/travel group
3. Is a history buff who likes visiting historic sites and national parks

### Bernardo Attias

1. Briefly lived in the Dominican Republic with his family as a young boy
2. Is a DJ
3. Occasionally practices yoga

We wanted to note these interesting facts about our personal lives to illustrate the fact that each and every one of us has done unique and interesting things in our lives that could make really interesting and informative, persuasive, or entertaining speeches.

### Use Finding Aids

If you're still just stumped after conducting a personal inventory, the next recommendation we have for helping you find a good topic is to use a finding aid. A **finding aid**<sup>14</sup> is a tool that will help you find lists of possible topics. Let's look at four of them: best-seller lists, organizations that tally information, media outlets, and the Internet.

14. A tool that will help you find lists of possible topics.

### Best-Seller Lists

A best-seller list is a list of books that people are currently buying. These lists often contain various subdivisions including fiction, nonfiction, business, advice, or graphic novels. [Table 6.1 "Best-Seller Lists"](#) contains a range of best-seller lists to examine:

Table 6.1 Best-Seller Lists

Name	Website
New York Times	<a href="http://www.nytimes.com/pages/books/bestseller">http://www.nytimes.com/pages/books/bestseller</a>
Amazon.com	<a href="http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books">http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books</a>
USA Today	<a href="http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/leb1.htm">http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/leb1.htm</a>
American Booksellers	<a href="http://www.bookweb.org/indiebound/bestsellers.html">http://www.bookweb.org/indiebound/bestsellers.html</a>
Publisher’s Weekly	<a href="http://www.publishersweekly.com">http://www.publishersweekly.com</a>
The Washington Post	<a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/artsandliving/books/bestsellers-list">http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/artsandliving/books/bestsellers-list</a>
Business Week	<a href="http://www.businessweek.com/lifestyle/books.htm">http://www.businessweek.com/lifestyle/books.htm</a>
CNN	<a href="http://www.cnn.com/books/bestsellers">http://www.cnn.com/books/bestsellers</a>

It is important to realize that your goal in looking at best-seller lists is not to choose a book to serve as the topic of your speech—unless you’ve been assigned to give a book review! The point is that while all these lists indicate what people are reading, you can use them to find out what topics people are generally interested in right now.

### Polling Organizations

In addition to numerous sources for best sellers, there are also a number of polling organizations that regularly conduct research on the American public. Not only are these organizations good for finding interesting research, but generally the most recent polls are an indication of what people are interested in understanding today. For example, The Gallup Organization regularly conducts polls to find out Americans’ perceptions of current political issues, business issues, social issues, and a whole range of other interesting information. Often just looking at the Gallup Organization’s website can help you find very interesting speech topics.

Table 6.2 Tallied Information

Name	Website
The Gallup Organization	<a href="http://www.gallup.com">http://www.gallup.com</a>
US Census Bureau	<a href="http://www.census.gov">http://www.census.gov</a>
Polling Report	<a href="http://www.pollingreport.com">http://www.pollingreport.com</a>
Rasmussen Reports	<a href="http://www.rasmussenreports.com">http://www.rasmussenreports.com</a>
Zogby International	<a href="http://www.zogby.com">http://www.zogby.com</a>
Pew Research Center	<a href="http://pewresearch.org">http://pewresearch.org</a>

### Media Outlets

The next great ways to find interesting topics for your speeches are watching television and listening to the radio. The evening news, the History Channel, and the National Geographic channel can all provide ideas for many different speech topics. There are even a host of television shows that broadcast the latest and most interesting topics weekly (e.g., *Dateline*, *20/20*, *60 Minutes*). Here are some recent segments from *20/20* that could make interesting speeches: former *Tarzan* actor, Steve Sipek, has lived with tigers for forty years; the science behind the *Bachelor* phenomenon; the world of childhood schizophrenia; and a girl born with a rare “mermaid” condition.

As for listening to the radio, talk radio is often full of interesting possibilities for speech topics. Many of the most prominent talk radio shows have two or three hours to fill five days a week, so the shows’ producers are always looking for interesting topics. Why not let those producers do the investigative work for you? If you’re listening to talk radio and hear an interesting topic, write it down and think about using it for your next speech.

As with the best-seller list, it is important to realize that your goal is not to use a given television or radio program as the basis for your speech, much less to repeat the exact arguments that a talk radio host or caller has made. We are not advocating stealing someone’s ideas—you need to do your own thinking to settle on your speech topic. You can certainly use ideas from the media as contributions to your speech; however, if you do this, it is only ethical to make sure that you correctly cite the show where you heard about the topic by telling your audience the title, station, and date when you heard it.

## The Internet

You can, of course, also look for interesting speech topics online. While the Internet may not always provide the most reliable information, it is a rich source of interesting topics. For example, to browse many interesting blogs, check out <http://www.blogcatalog.com/> or <http://www.findblogs.com/>. Both websites link to hundreds of blogs you could peruse, searching for a topic that inspires you.

If you find yourself really stumped, there are even a handful of websites that specialize in helping people, just like you, find speech topics. Yes, that's right! Some insightful individuals have posted long lists of possible topics for your next speech right on the Internet. Here are some we recommend:

- <http://www.hawaii.edu/mauispeech/html/infotopichelp.html>
- <http://web.sau.edu/WastynRonaldO/topics.html>
- [http://daphne.palomar.edu/kerbe/documents/inform\\_speech\\_topics.pdf](http://daphne.palomar.edu/kerbe/documents/inform_speech_topics.pdf)
- <http://cas.bethel.edu/dept/comm/nfa/journal/vol9no2-6.pdf>

Using the Internet is a great way to find a topic, but you'll still need to put in the appropriate amount of your own thinking and time to really investigate your topic once you've found one that inspires you.

## Poll Your Audience for Interests and Needs

The last way you can find a great topic is to conduct a simple poll of your audience to see what their interests and needs are. Let's handle these two methods separately. When you ask potential audience members about their interests, it's not hard to quickly find that patterns of interests exist in every group. You can find out about interests by either formally handing people a questionnaire or just asking people casually. Suppose it's your turn to speak at your business club's next meeting. If you start asking your fellow club members and other local business owners if there are any specific problems their businesses are currently facing, you will probably start to see a pattern develop. While you may not be an expert on the topic initially, you can always do some research to see what experts have said on the topic and pull together a speech using that research.

The second type of poll you may conduct of your potential audience is what we call a needs analysis. A **needs analysis**<sup>15</sup> involves a set of activities designed to determine your audience's needs, wants, wishes, or desires. The purpose of a needs analysis is to find a gap in information that you can fill as a speaker. Again, you can use either informal or formal methods to determine where a need is. Informally,

15. A set of activities designed to determine your audience's needs, wants, wishes, and desires.

you may ask people if they have problems with something specific like writing a business plan or cooking in a wok. The only problem that can occur with the informal method is that you often find out that people overestimate their own knowledge about a topic. Someone may think they know how to use a wok even though they've never owned one and never cooked in one. For that reason, we often use more formal methods of assessing needs.

The formal process for conducting a needs analysis is threefold: (1) find a gap in knowledge, (2) figure out the cause, and (3) identify solutions. First, you need to find that a gap in knowledge actually exists. Overall, this isn't very hard to do. You can have people try to accomplish a task or just orally have them explain a task to you, and if you find that they are lacking you'll know that there is a possible need. Second, you need to figure out what is causing the gap. One of the mistakes that people make is assuming that all gaps exist because of a lack of information. This is not necessarily true—it can also be because of lack of experience. For example, people may have learned how to drive a car in a driver education class, but if they've never been behind the wheel of a car, they're not really going to know how to drive. Would giving a speech on how to drive a car at this point be useful? No. Instead, these people need practice, not another speech. Lastly, when you determine that the major cause of the need is informational, it's time to determine the best way to deliver that information.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Conducting a personal inventory is a good way to start the topic selection process. When we analyze our own experiences, interests, knowledge, and passions, we often find topics that others will also find interesting and useful.
- A speaker can investigate finding aids when searching for a good topic. Various finding aids have their positives and negatives, so we recommend investigating several different finding aids to see what topic ideas inspire you.
- One way to ensure a successful speech is to identify your audience's interests or needs. When the speaker's topic is immediately useful for the audience, the audience will listen to the speech and appreciate it.

## EXERCISES

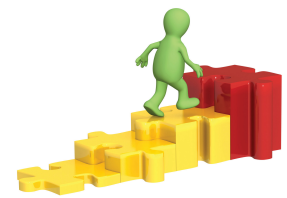
1. Look at the questions posed in this chapter related to conducting a personal inventory. Do you see any potential speech ideas developing from your personal inventory? If yes, which one do you think would impact your audience the most?
2. Take a broad subject area and then use two of the different finding aids to see what types of topics appear. Are you finding similarities or differences? The goal of this activity is to demonstrate how taking a very broad topic can be narrowed down to a more manageable topic using finding aids.
3. For an upcoming speech in your public speaking class, create a simple survey to determine your audience's needs. Find out what your audience may find interesting. Remember, the goal is to find out what your audience needs, not necessarily what you think your audience needs.

## 6.4 Specific Purposes

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the process of extending a general purpose into a specific purpose.
2. Integrate the seven tips for creating specific purposes.

Once you have chosen your general purpose and your topic, it's time to take your speech to the next phase and develop your specific purpose. A **specific purpose**<sup>16</sup> starts with one of the three general purposes and then specifies the actual topic you have chosen and the basic objective you hope to accomplish with your speech. Basically, the specific purpose answers the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* questions for your speech.



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### Getting Specific

When attempting to get at the core of your speech (the specific purpose), you need to know a few basic things about your speech. First, you need to have a general purpose. Once you know whether your goal is to inform, persuade, or entertain, picking an appropriate topic is easier. Obviously, depending on the general purpose, you will have a range of different types of topics. For example, let's say you want to give a speech about hygiene. You could still give a speech about hygiene no matter what your general purpose is, but the specific purpose would vary depending on whether the general purpose is to inform (discussing hygiene practices around the globe), to persuade (discussing why people need to adopt a specific hygiene practice), or to entertain (discussing some of the strange and unique hygiene practices that people have used historically). Notice that in each of these cases, the general purpose alters the topic, but all three are still fundamentally about hygiene.

16. A statement starting with one of the three general purposes (to inform, to persuade, or to entertain), but is then followed by a specification of one's audience, the actual topic a speaker has chosen, and the basic objective the speaker hopes to accomplish with the speech.

Now, when discussing specific purposes, we are concerned with *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how* questions for your speech. Let's examine each of these separately. First, you want to know *who* is going to be in your audience. Different audiences, as discussed in the chapter on audience analysis, have differing desires, backgrounds, and needs. Keeping your audience first and foremost in your thoughts

when choosing a specific purpose will increase the likelihood that your audience will find your speech meaningful.

Second is the “what” question, or the basic description of your topic. When picking an effective topic, you need to make sure that the topic is appropriate for a variety of constraints or limitations within a speaking context.

Third, you need to consider when your speech will be given. Different speeches may be better for different times of the day. For example, explaining the importance of eating breakfast and providing people with cereal bars may be a great topic at 9:00 a.m. but may not have the same impact if you’re giving it at 4:00 p.m.

Fourth, you need to consider where your speech will be given. Are you giving a speech in front of a classroom? A church? An executive meeting? Depending on the location of your speech, different topics may or may not be appropriate.

The last question you need to answer within your speech is why. Why does your audience need to hear your speech? If your audience doesn’t care about your specific purpose, they are less likely to attend to your speech. If it’s a topic that’s a little more off-the-wall, you’ll really need to think about why they should care.

Once you’ve determined the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* aspects of your topic, it’s time to start creating your actual specific purpose. First, a specific purpose, in its written form, should be a short, declarative sentence that emphasizes the main topic of your speech. Let’s look at an example:

Topic	The military
Narrower Topic	The military’s use of embedded journalists
Narrowed Topic	The death of British reporter Rupert Hamer in 2010 in a roadside bombing in Nawa, Afghanistan, along with five US Marines

In this example, we’ve quickly narrowed a topic from a more general topic to a more specific topic. Let’s now look at that topic in terms of a general purpose and specific purpose:

General Purpose	To inform
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Specific Purpose	To inform my audience about the danger of embedded journalism by focusing on the death of British reporter Rupert Hamer
General Purpose	To persuade
Specific Purpose	To persuade a group of journalism students to avoid jobs as embedded journalists by using the death of British reporter Rupert Hamer as an example of what can happen

For the purpose of this example, we used the same general topic area, but demonstrated how you could easily turn the topic into either an informative speech or a persuasive speech. In the first example, the speaker is going to talk about the danger embedded journalists face. In this case, the speaker isn't attempting to alter people's ideas about embedded journalists, just make them more aware of the dangers. In the second case, the specific purpose is to persuade a group of journalism students (the audience) to avoid jobs as embedded journalists.

### Your Specific Statement of Purpose

To form a clear and succinct statement of the specific purpose of your speech, start by naming your general purpose (to inform, to persuade, or to entertain). Follow this by a capsule description of your audience (my peers in class, a group of kindergarten teachers, etc.). Then complete your statement of purpose with a prepositional phrase (a phrase using "to," "about," "by," or another preposition) that summarizes your topic. As an example, "My specific purpose is to persuade the students in my residence hall to protest the proposed housing cost increase" is a specific statement of purpose, while "My speech will be about why we should protest the proposed housing cost increase" is not.

Specific purposes should be statements, not questions. If you find yourself starting to phrase your specific purpose as a question, ask yourself how you can reword it as a statement. [Table 6.3 "My Specific Purpose Is..."](#) provides several more examples of good specific purpose statements.

Table 6.3 My Specific Purpose Is...

General Purpose	Audience	Topic
To inform	my audience	<b>about</b> the usefulness of scrapbooking to save a family's memories.

General Purpose	Audience	Topic
To persuade	a group of kindergarten teachers	to adopt a new disciplinary method for their classrooms.
To entertain	a group of executives	by describing the lighter side of life in “cubicle-ville.”
To inform	community members	about the newly proposed swimming pool plans that have been adopted.
To persuade	my peers in class	to vote for me for class president.
To entertain	the guests attending my mother’s birthday party	by telling a humorous story followed by a toast.

### Basic Tips for Creating Specific Purposes

Now that we’ve examined what specific purposes are, we are going to focus on a series of tips to help you write specific purposes that are appropriate for a range of speeches.

#### Audience, Audience, Audience

First and foremost, you always need to think about your intended audience when choosing your specific purpose. In the previous section, we talked about a speech where a speaker is attempting to persuade a group of journalism students to not take jobs as embedded journalists. Would the same speech be successful, or even appropriate, if given in your public speaking class? Probably not. As a speaker, you may think your topic is great, but you always need to make sure you think about your audience when selecting your specific purpose. For this reason, when writing your specific purpose, start off your sentence by including the words “my audience” or actually listing the name of your audience: a group of journalism students, the people in my congregation, my peers in class, and so on. When you place your audience first, you’re a lot more likely to have a successful speech.

#### Matching the Rhetorical Situation

After your audience, the second most important consideration about your specific purpose pertains to the rhetorical situation of your speech. The **rhetorical situation**<sup>17</sup> is the set of circumstances surrounding your speech (e.g., speaker, audience, text, and context). When thinking about your specific purpose, you want to ensure that all these components go together. You want to make sure that you are the appropriate speaker for a topic, the topic is appropriate for your audience,

17. The set of circumstances surrounding your speech (e.g., speaker, audience, text, and context).

the text of your speech is appropriate, and the speech is appropriate for the context. For example, speeches that you give in a classroom may not be appropriate in a religious context and vice versa.

### **Make It Clear**

The specific purpose statement for any speech should be direct and not too broad, general, or vague. Consider the lack of clarity in the following specific purpose: “To persuade the students in my class to drink more.” Obviously, we have no idea what the speaker wants the audience to drink: water, milk, orange juice? Alcoholic beverages? Furthermore, we have no way to quantify or make sense of the word “more.” “More” assumes that the students are already drinking a certain amount, and the speaker wants them to increase their intake. If you want to persuade your listeners to drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water per day, you need to say so clearly in your specific purpose.

Another way in which purpose statements are sometimes unclear comes from the use of colloquial language. While we often use colloquialisms in everyday life, they are often understood only by a limited number of people. It may sound like fun to have a specific purpose like, “To persuade my audience to get jiggy,” but if you state this as your purpose, many people probably won’t know what you’re talking about at all.

### **Don’t Double Up**

You cannot hope to solve the entire world’s problems in one speech, so don’t even try. At the same time, you also want to make sure that you stick to one specific purpose. Chances are it will be challenging enough to inform your audience about one topic or persuade them to change one behavior or opinion. Don’t put extra stress on yourself by adding topics. If you find yourself using the word “and” in your specific topic statement, you’re probably doubling up on topics.

### **Can I Really Do This in Five to Seven Minutes?**

When choosing your specific purpose, it’s important to determine whether it can be realistically covered in the amount of time you have. Time limits are among the most common constraints for students in a public speaking course. Usually speeches early in the term have shorter time limits (three to five minutes), and speeches later in the term have longer time limits (five to eight minutes). While eight minutes may sound like an eternity to be standing up in front of the class, it’s actually a very short period of time in which to cover a topic. To determine whether you think you can accomplish your speech’s purpose in the time slot, ask yourself

how long it would take to make you an informed person on your chosen topic or to persuade you to change your behavior or attitudes.

If you cannot reasonably see yourself becoming informed or persuaded during the allotted amount of time, chances are you aren't going to inform or persuade your audience either. The solution, of course, is to make your topic narrower so that you can fully cover a limited aspect of it.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Moving from a general to specific purpose requires you to identify the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* of your speech.
- State your specific purpose in a sentence that includes the general purpose, a description of the intended audience, and a prepositional phrase summarizing the topic.
- When creating a specific purpose for your speech, first, consider your audience. Second, consider the rhetorical situation. Make sure your specific purpose statement uses clear language, and that it does not try to cover more than one topic.
- Make sure you can realistically accomplish your specific purpose within the allotted time.

### EXERCISES

1. You've been asked to give a series of speeches on the importance of health care in poverty-stricken countries. One audience will consist of business men and women, one audience will consist of religious leaders, and another audience will consist of high school students. How would you need to adjust your speech's purpose for each of these different audiences? How do these different audiences alter the rhetorical situation?
2. For the following list of topics, think about how you could take the same topic and adjust it for each of the different general purposes (inform, persuade, and entertain). Write out the specific purpose for each of your new speech topics. Here are the three general topic areas to work with: the First Amendment to the US Constitution, iPods, and literacy in the twenty-first century.

## 6.5 Conclusion

After reading this chapter, we hope that you now have a better understanding not only of the purpose of your speech but also of how to find a really interesting topic for yourself and your audience. We started this chapter citing lyrics from the *Avenue Q* song “Purpose.” While the character is trying to find his purpose in life, we hope this chapter has helped you identify your general purpose, choose a topic that will interest you and your audience, and use these to develop a specific purpose statement for your speech.

## 6.6 Chapter Exercises

### SPEAKING ETHICALLY

Rona is a huge supporter of Gerry Mitchell in the mayoral campaign. Rona decides to volunteer for Mitchell's campaign and is soon asked to speak at various rallies when Mitchell can't attend.

One Saturday evening, Rona is asked to speak before a group of retirees at a local retirement center. As a campaign insider, Rona knows that Mitchell has privately acknowledged that he's probably going to have to drastically cut city support for a number of programs that help the elderly. Of course, this information hasn't been made public. Rona also realizes that the group she is speaking before would not vote for Mitchell if they knew what his future plans are.

1. If Rona attempts to persuade the retirees without divulging the information about the future cuts, is she a pure persuader or a manipulative persuader?
2. Does a political operative have an ethical obligation to be honest when the information being disseminated to a group of people isn't complete?
3. If you were Rona, what would you do?

## END-OF-CHAPTER ASSESSMENT

1. Modern scholars generally describe the three general purposes of speaking as
  - a. entertain, persuade, and debate
  - b. persuade, inform, and perpetuate
  - c. celebrate, perpetuate, and inform
  - d. inform, persuade, and entertain
  - e. deliberative, epideictic, and forensic
  
2. “To persuade a group of local residents to buy a car from Mitken’s Car Dealership” is an example of which type of purpose?
  - a. celebratory
  - b. specific
  - c. systematic
  - d. supplemental
  - e. general
  
3. Benji wanted to speak on the elements of jazz music, but his instructor told the class that they could only choose from a specific list of topics. This is an example of
  - a. poor topic selection
  - b. constraints
  - c. a bad speech
  - d. poor narrowing
  - e. topic shortage aversion
  
4. Which of the following would be a good scope for a speech that is five to seven minutes in length?
  - a. the history of the United States
  - b. military maneuvers in the nineteenth century
  - c. women in the Battle of Lewisburg
  - d. religion in Asia
  - e. changes in state-sponsored militias

5. Tika is speaking on the benefits of sleep, but does not include a call for action to get more sleep. Which type of general purpose does Tika have?
- a. to inform
  - b. to persuade
  - c. to entertain
  - d. to console
  - e. to educate

**ANSWER KEY**

- 1. d
- 2. b
- 3. b
- 4. c
- 5. a