

# CHOOSING A SPEECH TOPIC

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# Learning Objectives

## CHAPTER 4

- 1 Move from the general purpose to a topic and specific purpose and to an effective thesis statement.
- 2 Generate creative and challenging topic ideas from your experience, the media, and current events.
- 3 Craft the right thesis statement for the speaking situation, your audience, and you

**J**ulio Martinez is a veterinarian. He was recently invited to speak at a charity event for a local animal shelter. He believes his audience expects to hear a speech about animals but doesn't know how to focus his speech to encourage donations.

Joe Kelly's grandfather recently passed away and his grandmother has asked him to speak at the funeral. Joe has strong, positive memories of his grandfather but doesn't know how to express his feelings to an audience of family and friends. He's also worried about becoming emotional in front of so many people.

Kate Black is a sophomore enrolled in an introductory public speaking course. The first speech is an informative one and students are allowed to pick their topic. Kate feels lost. She doesn't feel like she knows enough about anything that would be interesting to the other students and she doesn't want to make a fool of herself.

In each of the introductory scenarios, the prospective public speaker must clarify a purpose, topic, and thesis in order to develop an effective speech. The process of speech preparation formally begins with topic development. For both novice and experienced speakers, the identification of an appropriate topic can appear daunting. The selection of an appropriate speech topic requires precision, organization, and planning.

Even when you are happy with your topic, you must refine and narrow it to fit the speech's purpose. Pick too broad a topic and you won't have time to address it well within your time



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**FIGURE 4.1** Thinking of the right speech topic can be a challenge.

limit. On the other hand, too narrow a topic will likely fail to keep an audience's interest. You also may not be able to fill the time allotted if your subject area is too small.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter presents strategies for the selection and refinement of a speech topic and purpose. The chapter begins with a discussion of the various factors likely to influence the development of the speech topic and purpose. These include the speaking event, the audience, and the characteristics of the speaker. These factors can place constraints and requirements upon the speech topic and purpose.

Much of this chapter focuses upon the process of developing a speech topic and purpose, which involves three steps: the general purpose, the specific purpose, and the thesis statement. The goal of topic selection is to move from broad considerations of the speech event, the knowledge and interests of the audience, and the speaker's own competence through a process of refinement that leads to the fashioning of a clear thesis that describes the central idea of the speech.

The general purpose describes the overarching goal of the speech. Three types of general purposes exist: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. Selecting a general purpose provides the foundation for the development of the specific purpose and the thesis statement. The specific purpose is the combination of the general purpose and the speech topic. The topic is the general theme or subject of the speech. Many strategies for topic selection may be used, including brainstorming, personal interest lists, mind maps, and media prompts. The thesis statement is the key argument or idea of the speech.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the most common mistakes made when choosing a topic and purpose. These mistakes include overgeneralization, the selection of a topic that doesn't interest the audience, the selection of a topic that doesn't interest the speaker, and the selection of an unfamiliar subject.

## GETTING TO YOUR THESIS



FIGURE 4.2 The right topic is constrained by the speaking situation, the audience, and you.

Speech topics do not occur in a vacuum. A **topic**, which is the general theme or subject of a speech, arises through the interaction of place, time, and person. Your topic must be appropriate for the context, or surrounding environment. The context is composed of three factors. They are the speaking situation, the audience, and you, the speaker.

Each of these factors may place constraints and requirements on the speech topic and purpose. A **constraint** is a restriction or limitation. Within some contexts, you are likely to find the range of topics limited to an acceptable list of topics. Within your public speaking class, for example, your instructor may place constraints on the topic of your speeches. He or she may specifically ask you to avoid particular topics that are overdone, too controversial, or too technical to treat adequately within the given speech assignment.

A **requirement** is an obligation or expectation. For example, you are likely to be given a time requirement for your speeches in class. Your instructor is likely to ask you to deliver an informative speech that is between five and seven minutes long, with penalties imposed for speeches that are too short or too long. This requirement will influence the selection of your speech topic and purpose because you must talk about something that can be sufficiently covered within the designated time.

### THE SPEAKING SITUATION

The speaker's freedom to select topics is often limited by the event at which they will present. Outside of the classroom, the speaking event will likely help to dictate the general purpose. For example, if you are asked to speak at a wedding, you know that the content of your speech must involve congratulating the new couple. Similarly, the topic of a eulogy or a speech of presentation will often be readily apparent. The eulogy will involve speaking about the deceased being honored at the funeral, whereas the speech of presentation will discuss the award and the recipient.

The classroom also serves as a speaking event that will include particular constraints and requirements imposed by your instructor. For example, time requirements are a common restriction imposed by instructors. This requirement is instructive, requiring you to condense your topic into a manageable speech length. The requirement is also practical allowing several speeches to be delivered within a single class period.

Another common requirement is the use of references in class. For a speech assignment, your instructor is likely to require that you use a minimum number of references to support your main points. References increase the credibility of your speech and illustrate your effort as a researcher.

Often, instructors avoid placing many restrictions on the topic of a speech. Instead, they will give their students considerable latitude to select a topic of interest to them. Students should view this freedom as both an advantage and an encouragement to be creative. Experienced pub-

lic speaking instructors hear hundreds of topics a semester. They want to hear topics that are interesting and challenging. However, students often fail to view topic selection as an opportunity to share their interests with others. Instead, they become paralyzed by the fear of coming up with a topic.

## THE AUDIENCE

Audiences can impose particular constraints on the topic of a speech. As a speaker, part of your job is to consider how your audience will respond to potential speech topics. The first relevant consideration is the demographics of the audience. **Demographics** are the characteristics that describe the audience as a collective whole. Examples of demographic features include size, age range, level of educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. In addition, the heterogeneity of the audience, or the level of diversity among its individual members, will help to determine how much each individual demographic characteristic is likely to influence the audience's response to a given topic.

The response of the audience to your speech will also be influenced by the audience's psychology. The **psychology of the audience** reflects the prevailing moods, attitudes, and feelings of the individual audience members. Audience members have their own self-interests and needs that shape their interpretation of the speech.

Audiences also enter the event with their own collective expectations about the content of the speech. The expectations of the audience will reflect the prevailing culture. **Culture** is defined as the collective social development of values, meanings, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and institutions. Cultures shape communication norms, such as the rate of speech delivery, the expected degree of eye contact, and the type of language used. They also influence the appropriateness of potential topics. A diverse audience may contain individuals representing many different cultures, with each culture characterized by their own set of preexisting expectations.

The interaction between the speaking event and the audience can shape audience expectations and their ultimate response to a given speech. For example, the psychology of an audience at a wedding listening to a toast offered by the best man will be very different from the psychology of an audience attending a funeral. One audience is feeling happy and celebratory whereas the other is in mourning. Members of the audience within the wedding expect a toast that is positive and congratulatory. Members of the wake are dealing with their own feelings about the death of an individual. Both events may have religious significance for some members of the audience and members of the audience may attach particular cultural expectations to a speech delivered for each occasion. Both audiences reasonably expect that the content of any speeches offered at their events will appropriately reflect the overall mood.

The brief discussion of audience demographics, psychology, and culture serves to highlight some of the ways that audience characteristics can influence topic selection. Ideally, your job as a speaker is to understand your audience and select a topic appropriate for the audience. However, you must also be aware of the risk of stereotyping your audience. **Stereotyping** is an overgeneralization based on the assumption that all members of a group are the same.

Ultimately, successful topic selection begins with an audience analysis. The process of audience analysis was explored in Chapter 3 and prior to selecting a topic. You should review that chapter and conduct a formal audience analysis. The analysis of your audience will help you to identify any relevant topic constraints and requirements. It will also help you to select a topic



**FIGURE 4.3** The best topics are ones that come from your own knowledge and experience.

that will suit your audience's characteristics. The failure to conduct an audience analysis can undermine your speech's purpose through the selection of an inappropriate topic. If your audience is apathetic or skeptical about the topic, their bias will make delivering your speech much more difficult.

## THE SPEAKER

Finally, the topic selection process is influenced by the characteristics of the speaker. Like an audience, your characteristics as a speaker include your demographic background, your psychology, and your culture. The same speech can be delivered by three different speakers to the same audience and elicit three very different responses. That is because the speaker's characteristics, including appearance, dress, voice, and delivery technique, will influence the audience's reception.

For example, audiences tend to respond favorably to a speaker with strong topic knowledge. As a speaker, your personal interests, knowledge, and experience will also frame the selection of your speech topic.

If Michio Kaku is invited to speak at a college campus, he will speak about a topic related to science. If Toni Morrison is invited to speak, she is likely to discuss American literature and politics. When they speak, these and other famous persons share their personal experiences and convey their expert knowledge to the audience. Their specific knowledge is why they are invited to speak.

Similarly, you have your own personal areas of expertise and topics of interests. Few aspects of speech writing are less frustrating than topic development. Many students, when working on their first speech, fear that they lack the knowledge needed to talk about anything interesting. However, the truth is that everyone is different and that difference provides rich opportunities for interesting topic development. Some students discuss their health conditions, or the condition of a family member. Others speak about their favorite sport or team. Your past vacations, jobs, schools, hobbies, favorite television shows, books, and video games may all provide fertile ground for topics.

Remember to view a speech as an opportunity, rather than an obstacle. A speech provides you with the chance to advance your goals and to explore your interests. If you support a particular charity, policy agenda, political party, or social organization, the speech will give you the chance to share that interest with others.

For example, Jerod is a forty-five-year-old firefighter enrolled in a public speaking class. The class is required for his professional advancement. As a nontraditional student, he enters the classroom apprehensive about his ability to deliver a speech to the other students, who he views as young kids. When assigned an informative speech, he does not feel that he knows enough about a subject that will appeal to his younger classmates.

However, Jerod can draw readily upon his professional experience as a firefighter to craft an interesting speech. He can choose to discuss topics such as fire prevention and safety or the most

common causes of house fires. Alternatively, he can write an informative speech about a particular firefighting event, such as when his unit was flown to New York to assist in the recovery effort following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Furthermore, Jerod's topic choices are not limited to his work. He can also write a speech about what it is like to be a nontraditional student. As a working adult, he chose to return to the classroom. Although his schoolwork is important, he also has to juggle his responsibilities to his wife, children, boss, and coworkers. If Jerod is correct about the relative youth of the other students, they will not be familiar with the challenges associated with being nontraditional students.

Any of these topics fit Jerod's background. They all have the potential to interest his classmates. However, to identify these topics as appropriate for a speech, Jerod must go through the three step topic selection process. This process begins with the identification of the speech's general purpose, which is the subject of the next section.

## GENERAL PURPOSE

The **general purpose** describes the overarching goal of the speech. Outside of class, the general purpose is likely to be indicated by the event or person asking you to speak. For example, an invitation to give a guest lecture may ask that you help educate the audience about a new policy or initiative. Within the classroom, the general purpose will typically be assigned to you by your instructor. Three types of general purposes exist: informing, persuading, and the special occasion speeches.

## SPEECHES TO INFORM

Speeches to inform provide new information to the audience. The general purpose of the informative speech is to convey new knowledge to others. When you give a speech to inform, you assume the role of an instructor.

Informative speeches take many forms. The process-demonstration is a common type of informative speech. This informative speech shows the audience how to do something. The speaker is typically an expert with specialized knowledge relevant to the topic. For example, chefs on cooking shows engage in process demonstration when they show their viewers how to cook a particular recipe. Another type of informative speech is the biography. This speech describes the life, challenges, and accomplishments of an individual person. The general exposition is a third type of informative speech. The structure and preparation of speeches to inform are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10.

## SPEECHES TO PERSUADE

Speeches to persuade aim to motivate or convince the members of the audience to hold a particular viewpoint. A persuasive speech begins by outlining a specific argument or position the speaker supports. The body of the speech then offers arguments to support the speaker's perspective.

The goal of the persuasive speech may take one of three forms. First of all, persuasive speeches may reinforce an existing belief. If invited to speak at a convention of Young Republic-

cans, you are more likely to write a speech praising that party rather than trying to convince the members of the party to join the Democratic party. Your speech will aim to increase the commitment of the audience to the organization and to create a strong, positive feeling about the political party to the audience.

Second, a persuasive speech can seek to change the audience's belief. For example, politicians in Congress will offer persuasive speeches to endorse or reject a policy goal, prospective law, or political appointment. In such cases, persuasion may take the form of creating a positive or negative feeling that will motivate the change in belief. In addition, the persuasive speech may try to weaken the existing viewpoint in order to make change easier.

Finally, a persuasive speech may motivate the audience to take a specific action. The goal of this type of persuasive speech is to convince listeners that they should do something, such as give to a particular charity or register to vote. These persuasive speeches are sometimes referred to as speeches to actuate. The structure and preparation of speeches to persuade are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 11.

## SPECIAL OCCASION SPEECHES

Special occasion speeches describe a diverse range of speeches and events. A special occasion speech is a presentation delivered for a celebratory, congratulatory, or ceremonial event. The general purpose of the special occasion speech is to entertain or to inspire the members of the audience. However, the method of entertainment can vary considerably. For example, some special occasion speeches call for the use of humor whereas, for others, the use of humor may be regarded as inappropriate. The different types of special occasion speeches are detailed in Chapter 15.

## SPECIFIC PURPOSE

Your general purpose gives you a broad understanding of the direction of your speech. However, the general purpose doesn't tell you the actual subject of your speech. Instead, the general purpose should point you in the direction for narrowing your topic. For example, if you are assigned to offer an informative speech in your public speaking course, you need to decide what you will discuss. Your general purpose is to share information in an efficient, accurate, and clear manner. You want to bolster the audience's interest in your topic. What do you want your audience to learn from your speech? On the other hand, if you plan to give a persuasive speech, you need to determine what you want your audience to believe. What argument or position will your speech support?

For a special occasion speech, you should question the needs of the event and the desired purpose of your speech. What do you hope to accomplish when you get up to speak?



FIGURE 4.4 Moving from the general purpose to the specific purpose requires choosing the right topic.



The answer to these questions is your specific purpose. The **specific purpose** is the general purpose plus the topic. The specific purpose narrows your topic to focus upon a goal consistent with your general purpose. By crafting your specific purpose, you will gain clarity on what exactly you want to aim to accomplish during your speech.

As you develop your specific purpose, you will see how the general purpose directly influences your topic to create your specific purpose. Two speeches may discuss the topic of 3D printers but their specific purpose will vary considerably based upon whether the general purpose is to inform or persuade.

## GENERATING IDEAS FOR TOPICS

Many strategies can be used by you to develop your specific purpose. Brainstorming is one popular strategy for topic development. The process of **brainstorming** involves the creation of a list of potential topics in an uncritical manner. You should think about potential speech topics, asking yourself, “What can I talk about?” Write down your first answer immediately. Then, continue to write out ideas as they come to you. During this initial stage of free writing, don’t worry about whether an idea is good and don’t cross out ideas. The goal of brainstorming is to produce many different options within a relatively short period of time. Even if you write down something that doesn’t seem like a good idea initially, that idea could lead you to the ideal topic later.

### Example: Develop a Specific Purpose

General purpose: To inform	Topic: Three-dimensional printers
Specific purpose: To explain how 3D printers work.	
General purpose: To persuade	Topic: Three-dimensional printers
Specific purpose: To convince the audience to buy a 3D printer.	

After the initial list is generated, the process of refinement can commence. Review the list and cross out items that you don’t want to talk about, that you don’t think will appeal to your audience, or that won’t fit neatly within a speech’s time limit. Don’t force yourself to follow the original ideas perfectly. Use them to inspire additional subjects or ideas until you find a useful topic.

**Personal interest lists** provide another method of specific purpose development. Like brainstorming, your goal is to identify many different potential topic options. However, personal interest lists are more structured than brainstorming.

These lists touch on subjects like your educational background, your hobbies and interests, your employment experience, and key events in your life. They also include subjects that fascinate you that you would like to explore further.

The completion of these lists will reveal potential subjects to integrate into your specific purpose. For example, if you like to read, compiling the list of things you enjoy may remind you of specific books that you really enjoyed. A biography could provide the basis for an informative speech about a person. Alternatively, if you ever experienced an earthquake, tornado, or other weather event, the development of the list may remind you of the subject, leading to a speech about how to best survive a natural disaster.

82 CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPEAKING

Often, novice public speakers fear that they aren't familiar with subjects that an audience would find appealing. However, some of the best speeches touch on one of these personal experience topics, areas that the audience members don't know or haven't experienced firsthand. For example, one student worked in retail and developed an informative speech on how to deal with difficult customers. Her audience was composed of individuals who had never worked in retail. They enjoyed her anecdotes about crazy customers and returns. They also learned strategies that could be applied to many professional settings outside of retail.

### Personal Interest Lists

Things you know.

Things you enjoy.

Things you do and have done.

Things you have experienced.

Things you would like to know more about.



FIGURE 4.5

If you prefer a visual strategy for topic development, trying building a mind map. A **mind map** is a diagram illustrating connections between categories, words, concepts, and ideas. A mind map will typically begin when you write a word in the center of the page. Circle that word. Then, add subtopics that directly relate to your central idea. Draw lines to represent connections between the center word and the subtopics. Once you are satisfied with your list of subtopics, move to each subtopic, circle it, and surround it with lower level subtopics. Connect these ideas to each other in relationships that are meaningful to you.

The process of building a mind map is useful for several reasons. First, like brainstorming, the mind map encourages you to identify many different topics within a relatively quick period of time. In addition, the

mind map offers more organization than the list generated by brainstorming. By requiring you to link subjects, you can begin to formulate ideas or consider potential main points to support your speech topic.

**Media prompts** provide another popular strategy for topic selection. Media prompts are references written by other authors. They include newspapers, magazines, websites, and other materials.

The review of media prompts can require a considerable time investment. Set aside some time to peruse some newspapers or magazines. Go online and surf the web. You can find topic

inspiration through these references. As you read, make note of the stories and headlines you find most interesting. Explore those topics further to see if there is enough information to support a speech. Never limit yourself to just one type of media or one author. Other authors may be biased and referencing several different resources will help you to develop a balanced perspective. Media prompts can provide a very timely topic for a speech, such as a current campaign or political election, a policy being debated, or a recent crime.

Media prompts can also be especially effective in helping you to narrow a topic. Let's say you are interested in talking about human health. However, health is a huge subject area. It includes topics related to biology, medicine, and psychology. It includes specific conditions, symptoms, and treatments. As you try to narrow your topic, you can visit the website of a major health organization, like the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO offers an alphabetical list of health subjects that may make excellent speech topics. Just perusing the list offered by WHO can inspire you to think of another topic not even listed on the website.

However, you need to be careful to not over-use media references during topic development. Your goal in selecting a topic is to provide your own point of view, not regurgitate the views of someone else. If you rely too heavily on the thoughts and arguments of someone else, your own interest and enthusiasm for the topic may be negatively affected. Furthermore, if you copy the words or ideas of media writers, you may quickly find yourself in trouble for plagiarism. Any references used should be noted in your speech's bibliography.

When engaging in topic development, it is important to keep in mind that the different strategies for topic development and refinement are not mutually exclusive. Often, you will find that the best topics arise out of utilizing more than one strategy.

## SPECIFIC PURPOSE WALKTHROUGH

Mia is an English major enrolled in a public speaking class. In order to develop an informative topic, Mia begins by brainstorming.

Mia's initial brainstorming attempt generates a diverse list of potential subjects that she may choose for her informative speech.

The list generated by brainstorming helps Mia to refine her general purpose into a specific purpose. Mia looks at her completed list and finds option #1 most appealing. For her informative, she decides that she wants to introduce the audience to a literary work. She feels comfortable talking about books and poetry because these are subjects she regularly covers within her major classes. She knows that she is enthusiastic about this subject and hopes that she can share her own enthusiasm with the audience.

### EXAMPLE: BRAINSTORMING TOPICS

- Books
- Television shows
- Local politics
- Campus activities
- Pet adoption
- Health issues
- Fashion trends

### EXAMPLE: NARROWING TOPICS

1. *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James
2. *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf
3. *Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin
4. *Beowulf*
5. *Othello* by William Shakespeare
6. *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton
7. *The Snow Queen* by Joan D. Vinge

However, Mia can't talk about all books or every piece of poetry. She needs to refine her topic further to something manageable within the allotted time. Mia continues to work on her topic by constructing a personal list. On her list of "Things You Know," Mia lists the books that she has read over the last year.

Mia feels reasonably confident that she could write an effective informative speech on any of these books. She has read them all recently and has discussed them with her peers. She knows that each of these books have published reviews that could help her to learn more about the book's themes, date of publication, and authors. However, none of these options really inspire Mia.

Therefore, Mia changes topic development strategies. She creates a mind map based on her personal list. On a blank sheet of paper, she draws several circles and places each of the seven books into a circle. Then, she takes the time to focus upon each book and draws lines to identify topics or points that each book inspires. For example, the *Game of Thrones* book leads Mia to reference the hit HBO television series, her favorite performers on the show, and her favorite characters. When she moves on to *Othello*, she draws lines connecting *Othello* to other works by Shakespeare, such as *Romeo & Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*. Persuasion similarly inspires notes about other Jane Austen classics, like *Pride & Prejudice* and *Emma*. The circle containing *Mrs. Dalloway* leads Mia to list other works by Woolf in addition to famous works by other significant early feminist authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The part of the mind map devoted to *The Snow Queen* leads Mia to consider other respected works of science fiction with themes similar to Vinge's novel, such as Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

As she works on her mind map, Mia also begins to note particular themes, such as marriage, female education, and social class. These themes begin to create links between works by different authors. For example, Mia connects the social class theme in *Persuasion* to *Othello* and *The Age of Innocence*. Mia also links themes about women's work and magic to several works. Mia's mind map gradually leads her to select a biography of Mary Wollstonecraft as the subject of her informative speech.

In Mia's case, her final specific purpose is not her original specific purpose. Mia expected to focus her speech on a book and instead changed the focus of her speech to a biography. There is nothing wrong with this and shifting topics is actually quite common. In fact, as you work on your speech topic, you may be surprised to find that your ultimate subject is very different from what

you originally intended to discuss. Topic selection often requires considerable time and effort to select a specific purpose that is consistent with the general purpose, manageable within the time allotted, and capable of meeting all other speech requirements. Therefore, it is important for you to give yourself enough time to refine and revise your specific purpose until you settle upon a choice that you really like.



FIGURE 4.6 Topic selection is an opportunity for creative self-reflection.

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The attainment of a specific purpose is an important milestone within the topic development process. However, it is not the end of the process. Rather, once you have a workable specific purpose, you may engage in a further process of revision in order to craft your thesis statement.

## THESIS STATEMENT

The process of topic selection is complete once the speaker crafts a thesis sentence. The **thesis statement** is a single-sentence statement of the one main idea developed by the speech. The thesis statement clearly and succinctly articulates the narrowed subject that will be discussed within your speech.

The thesis statement is said as part of the introduction in the speech. Often, it is the final line of the introduction. It should follow your catchy opening and come before the transitional shift into the body of the speech.

In addition, the thesis statement will reappear within the conclusion of your speech. You can choose to repeat it or you can rewrite it to change the language but keep the meaning of the thesis. When offered within the conclusion, the thesis statement will remind the audience of the content that they just heard within the speech's body.

Example of general purpose, specific purpose, and thesis statement:

General Purpose: To persuade

Specific Purpose: To persuade the audience to donate blood

Thesis Statement: Today, I am going to convince you to donate blood at next week's campus blood drive.

## EXCEPTIONAL THESIS STATEMENTS

When crafting a thesis statement, remember to look for the hook. A speech is an opportunity to leave your personal imprint on your selected topic. You don't want to simply restate someone else's opinion or discovery. Instead, be creative. Take your topic, turn it and twist it to make it different from others, to grab the attention of your audience and to give your speech meaning.

For example, within your public speaking course, you will likely be asked to write and deliver a persuasive speech. Many students elect to write a persuasive speech to actuate—a speech that asks the audience to take a specific action. If your topic is automotive safety and your general purpose is to persuade, your specific purpose may be “to get more people to wear their seatbelts.” With this specific purpose, you still have many options for your thesis statement. One option is “wear your seatbelt.” Although simple and straightforward, this is a terrible thesis statement. It is too easy and obvious. It is also noncontroversial and will bore your audience.

Instead, you need to develop a thesis statement that makes seat belts interesting to your audience. For example, your thesis statement may become, “we should pass a law requiring automobile manufacturers to develop and install self-buckling seatbelts for new models.” This is a much better thesis. It is a bit provocative due to its use of the law to enforce company behavior while still relying on your general purpose, specific purpose, and topic.

Cell phone technology would provide an alternative direction for a speech to persuade.

General Purpose:	To Persuade
Topic:	Automobile Safety
Specific Purpose:	To stop people from texting while driving.
Bad Thesis Statement:	You need to stop texting while driving.
Good Thesis Statement:	We should program cell phones to automatically disable when in a moving vehicle.

Sometimes, speakers will avoid stating their thesis directly during their introduction. This decision forces the audience to determine the speaker's thesis for themselves. This strategy is a mistake for several reasons. An unstated thesis invites room for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. One audience member may identify a thesis statement that is very different from the conclusion determined by another audience member. The difference in opinion may cause some in the audience to miss the speaker's intended point entirely. A clear stated thesis statement prevents such confusion.

Within your college level course, you should expect your instructor to require you to state your thesis statement. You should always take the time to carefully write a thesis statement during your topic development. A clear thesis statement will help you to keep your topic focused and avoid straying onto unnecessary tangents. As you continue to write your speech, always go back and reference your thesis statement. If you find yourself writing about issues that do not support your thesis statement, they likely do not belong within the speech.

## COMMON MISTAKES

Both new and experienced speakers often make common mistakes during the process of topic selection. The first common error is overgeneralization. The purpose of your thesis statement is to offer a clear focus for the direction and content of your speech. Overgeneralization can also occur during the development of your specific purpose.

General Purpose:	To Persuade
Topic:	Feminist Movement
Specific Purpose:	To Show Support for the Feminist Movement
Overgeneralization:	All Men are Chauvinists

A second common mistake is the selection of a topic that won't interest others. In particular, you should be aware of the risk of apathetic or hostile audiences. An audience analysis will help you to avoid choosing a topic that will anger or bore your audience.

Topics that a speaker doesn't know much about often lead to poor speeches. Initially, you may find the prospect of researching a new topic appealing. However, if you aren't familiar with the topic, you'll quickly find that every part of the speech is more difficult and time consuming to write. Also, the lack of familiarity is likely to be evident to your audience. The translation of new information into a speech format is a difficult process and the risk of mistakes will be high.

Furthermore, the relationship between the speaker's psychology and topic selection is too important to be ignored. Early in this chapter, the significance of the speaker's psychology was discussed as a relevant consideration for the topic selection process. Speech delivery can be a very frustrating and frightening process.

Even experienced speakers often acknowledge struggling with anxiety or stage fright. However, the speaker's familiarity with the speech's topic can have a significant influence over the speaker's psychology. Knowledge and familiarity can bolster a speaker's confidence and decrease the associated anxiety. In contrast, if you are unfamiliar with your topic, you will be more likely to feel nervous about delivering the speech.

Your anxiety will be justified if members of the audience are likely to know more about your topic than you. You don't want to try to give a speech to an audience more knowledgeable than you. Embarrassment is likely if people in the audience know more about the topic than you do, particularly if they correct your errors. In general, sticking to what you know is the far safer topic selection strategy.

The selection of a topic that doesn't interest you, the speaker, is another common mistake. You should strive to select a topic that you are passionate about, or at least one that you find interesting. With the near infinite number of potential speeches, you should be able to find something to excite you. Otherwise, you'll be unlikely to do the work to craft a quality speech. You may procrastinate and throw your speech together at the last minute. You'll be unlikely to creatively engage the topic. If you don't care about your topic, the audience will pick up on your attitude. If you don't care, why should they?

### COMMON TOPIC CHOICE MISTAKES

- Overgeneralization
- Choosing unfamiliar topics
- Lack of personal interest

## SUMMARY

For many, topic selection is one of the most challenging parts of speech-writing. However, the process of topic selection is relatively simple and structured. The development of your speech requires you to move from the general to the specific. The process of topic development involves three steps: the general purpose, the specific purpose, and the thesis statement. The general purpose identifies the overarching goal of the speech. The three general purposes are to inform (the speech to inform), to persuade (the speech to persuade), and to entertain or inspire (the special occasion speech). If you are writing a speech for a class, your instructor will often give you the general purpose.

Determining the general purpose allows the development of the specific purpose. The specific purpose is the combination of the general purpose and the topic. The best topics will promote enthusiasm and interest in both you and your audience. They reflect your personal knowledge and unique perspective.

Once you have your specific purpose, you must continue to refine your topic. The specific purpose should be narrowed in order to produce your thesis statement—the focused sentence that clearly identifies the key content of the speech. Good thesis statements will provoke audience interest and demonstrate your unique take on your topic. The topic selection process is complete once you have your thesis statement.

Topic selection can be enabled through the use of many different strategies, including brainstorming, mind mapping, personal interest lists, and media prompts. Brainstorming involves freely and uncritically developing a list of potential subjects. Mind mapping involves the creation of a diagram illustrating the connections between different topic options. Personal interest lists involve the structured identification of personal interests, knowledge, and experiences. The

use of media prompts involves the search of different reference materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and Internet websites, for speech topic inspiration. These different topic selection strategies are not mutually exclusive. You may find one strategy works best for you or you may want to try a combination of strategies as you work toward the development of your thesis statement.

When developing your topic and thesis statement, you should be wary of common pitfalls. Common errors include overgeneralization, lack of familiarity with a topic, and a lack of interest. If working with media prompts, always be wary of the risk of plagiarism. Relying too heavily on someone else's words is a **serious mistake** that creates a host of ethical concerns. Your speech should be original. It should not regurgitate the views of someone else. Rather, recognize that the speech is your opportunity to convey your personal perspective on your selected topic.

## Review Questions

- 1 Distinguish between a general purpose, a topic, a specific purpose, and a thesis.
- 2 What are the three basic general purposes of a public speech?
- 3 Describe brainstorming, personal lists, and mind maps.
- 4 What media and social media do you participate in regularly?
- 5 Why is audience analysis important for crafting a thesis statement?

## Glossary

**Brainstorming:** A strategy used for topic identification that involves the process of quickly listing potential speech topics in an uncritical manner.

**Constraint:** A restriction or limitation.

**Culture:** The collective social development of values, meanings, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and institutions.

**Demographics:** The individual characteristics that help to describe the audience as a collective whole, such as size, age range, level of educational attainment, and socioeconomic status.



**General purpose:** The overarching goal of the speech. Three types of general purposes exist: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain.

**Media prompts:** Reference materials reviewed as inspiration for topic selection, such as newspapers, magazines, and Internet websites.

**Mind map:** A diagram illustrating connections between different categories, words, concepts, and ideas.

**Personal interest lists:** Structured identification of personal interests, knowledge, and experiences useful in the development of a specific purpose.

**Psychology of the audience:** The prevailing moods, attitudes, and feelings of the audience members.

**Requirement:** An obligation or expectation.

**Specific purpose:** The specific purpose is the combination of the general purpose and the speech topic.

**Stereotyping:** An overgeneralization based on the assumption that all members of a group are the same.

**Thesis statement:** The thesis statement describes the specific purpose of the speech by identifying the key content or argument.

**Topic:** The general theme or subject of the speech.

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