Chapter 2
Thinking about Controversies

To Make a Long Story Short...

One cannot speak well without knowledge and a clear sense of purpose.

Key Concepts

- Persuasive speeches are most effective when they address timely, significant, public controversies.
- Once the subject is fixed, the speaker should articulate the speech’s purpose.
- The persuasive speaker should begin speech preparation by determining what to say—in the form of a proposition: of fact, value, or policy.
- The proposition should be a single, literal, declarative sentence.
- Evidence is essential to a convincing persuasive speech, and primary evidence is better than secondary.
- Valuable evidence is timely, sufficient, relevant, credible, and consistent with what we know to be true.

Key Terms

- controversy
- purpose
- proposition
- propositions of fact, value, and policy
- evidence
- primary source/secondary source
Considering Controversies and Issues

What Is Worth Arguing?

Often it is easier to avoid confrontation. You ignore antagonistic remarks, unjust criticisms, and narrow points of view. Argument aggravates stress, and stress can be fatiguing, if not hazardous to your health. Yet there are times when you cannot be silent. Maybe you are outraged over a racist remark. Socially, your exasperation with a friend’s troublesome relationship unleashes a flood of warnings. Publicly you may hold a city councilor accountable. You decide, however reluctantly, to question what has been done or said and to propose an alternate view. So goes persuasion.

In interpersonal settings, of course, you may persuade people about scores of informal issues, such as where to go for a great pizza or which grocery chain has the best prices. Persuasive speeches are more public in nature. You develop persuasive speeches when you want to confront significant problems. Most of us know the gut-level tension that accompanies a decision of whether or not to speak out. If you are wise, you will consider whether a problem needs airing, whether it is significant. What makes a problem significant? It is one that has substantial consequences to you and to others.

In a persuasive speech, significance exists when a problem goes beyond personal concern. Significant problems are public, not personal or private. A decision on whether Miracle Whip or mayonnaise is better on a turkey sandwich is a personal preference, not a public problem. Parents’ decisions to send their children to public or private school are personal, not public concerns.

Personal problems become public when they are cast into a public framework. If Miracle Whip or mayonnaise constitutes a health threat to consumers or if private schools threaten the viability of public schools (or vice versa), the problem is probably worth addressing in a persuasive speech.

To be worth arguing, a persuasive speech would address what is durable or timely and relevant, which is to say the problem should not be passé, fleeting, or transitory. The question of whether to see the most recent Coen\textsuperscript{1} film is neither a public nor a durable problem; whether the Coens’ films show great artistry is both more public and more durable, since it considers an evaluation over time. The question of whether the people of Springfield should vote for Ballot Measure 8 is clearly public, but it is not timely or relevant if the election is past.
Finally, persuasion deals with the controversial. A controversy, a subject on which people disagree, is the catalyst for persuasion. If no one questions the truth or falsity of an issue, why argue it? For instance, not many rational people would question that child abuse is wrong or that the judicial system is an essential branch of the United States government. If an audience concurs on a proposition, there is no need to persuade them to accept it. Move on.

**When We Must Choose a Subject**

You may be asked to speak on a subject of your own choosing. The first hurdle is to uncover a pertinent controversy, applying the tests above: is it public, significant, timely, relevant, and controversial? Next, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. *What subjects do I faithfully follow?* If you find you consistently read articles and editorials or take notice when a certain subject is discussed—be it smokers’ rights, victims’ rights, alternative fuels—that subject may suit you well for a speech.

2. *About which subjects do I always have something to say?* If you find you cannot be silent on certain issues, those issues may be the ones on which you should speak.

3. *What controversies exist within my profession, area of study, or interests?* Educators may favor subjects dealing with educational reform, nurses with medical issues, lawyers with mandatory sentencing, union members with labor practices, athletes and sports fans with sport topics, and students with campus policies. Your speech subjects need simply be important to you and to the people you address.

**Landing Your Subject**

If you are an invited speaker or a student, try the *Speech Subject Brainstorm*, a worksheet on page 57, to help generate topic ideas for your speech.

The list below demonstrates the diversity of speech subjects across our public landscape at this writing:

- Merit pay for teachers
- Pay equity between genders
- Prayer in public schools
- Children and the internet
- Steroids and athletes
- Air traffic safety
- Childhood obesity
- Government health care
New controversies emerge daily in our communities, our nation, and the world. By the time you read this, the topics listed here may have lost their salience. You will need to look carefully at your community and audience to determine what issues make a difference to them. By scanning your job or career goals, your social interests and family life, you will recognize controversies that you and your audiences care about.

Focus on **Political Persuasion**

To Tip O’Neill, a United States Congressman from 1952 to 1987 and longtime Speaker of the House, all politics was local. But for twenty-first century audiences, all politics may be online, through wireless messaging, blogs, and video posts, such as YouTube. As of early 2008, the Pew Research Center found that 62% of Americans had access to wireless technology for public information, suggesting that the American public’s increased exposure to national and global issues may extend their interests beyond their personal lives.
Defining the Purpose

Every persuasive speech has at its root some particular purpose. As noted in Chapter One, the purpose may be to change audience beliefs, attitudes, or actions. The purpose or goal of the speech is simply the reason for the speech: it answers the question “Why am I giving this speech?” Another way to view the speech is to ask, “What do I want from my audience?” Do I want them to be convinced? excited? angry? indignant? elated? determined? The speech goal can specify the state of mind or emotion the speaker wants to evoke in the audience. This becomes particularly important when you deliver your speech.

Any subject may have a number of disparate purposes. If you want to question the policies of a school board on teaching human sexuality, your goal may be to have them consider alternatives to the current program, to resist modifying the program under pressure from certain groups, or to change the program’s emphasis and approach altogether. In most cases, the more precisely you define your purpose or goal, the more clearly you will convey your message.

Look at three different subjects and see how each could be developed into very different speeches:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gay marriage initiative</td>
<td>To get people to vote for it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To get people to vote against it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To generate sympathy for it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized testing for college admission</td>
<td>To inspire skepticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To defend the value of tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To get students to boycott the SAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile emissions standards</td>
<td>To downplay the danger of emissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To urge more stringent standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To get people to buy fuel-efficient cars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once you have clearly defined the speech’s purpose, you are closer to motivating your audience to listen. This will help you gather information and think about your audience with greater accuracy, as we will discuss in Chapter Five. In the end, a clear purpose will enable you to rouse the audience toward your goal.
Framing the Proposition

Whatever the setting or purpose, the most fundamental requirement of a meaningful act of persuasion is that it be clear. Presumably the speaker has a point to make. What is that point? The speaker’s first step in developing a speech is to become aware of what she or he wants to communicate. In persuasion we call this central point the proposition. And no matter what the persuasive setting, no matter how formal or informal, the speaker will have a proposition, whether conscious or subconscious. The proposition is the thesis statement of a persuasive speech. We call it a proposition because with it we are proposing that the audience adopt a particular point of view or action. Just as the thesis of a speech or essay is the central idea, or the core point to be communicated, so the proposition distills into a single declarative statement what the persuader wants to tell the audience. You may reflect here that we often engage in informal persuasion without writing or even imagining a proposition. Agreed. But in a public persuasive speech, the speaker’s and the audience’s focus depends on the speaker taking pains to clearly, consciously articulate a proposition.

For the proposition to do its job (the job being to keep our purpose clear), it helps to follow a few guidelines:

The proposition should be a sentence. You learned early in your educational experience that a sentence is a complete thought. As the controlling idea for the speech, so should the proposition be a complete thought. Notice how the following statements do not express complete thoughts. We can test them by imagining walking up to someone on the street and making the statement. If it makes no sense as a stand-alone statement, chances are it is not a complete thought.

Taking action on global warming
Drunk drivers’ punishment

The proposition should be a single sentence. See how the following propositions, because they contain more than one sentence, confuse the issues we want to discuss. With more than one main idea, the focus is obscured and diluted.

American citizens should reduce their dependence on cars.
They should recycle paper products, too.
Drunk drivers should be more severely punished. We need to make our streets safe and protect our children.

Speaking to Persuade
The proposition should be a declarative statement. This means the proposition should not pose a question. As a persuader, you take a stand on the issue; you do not force the audience to speculate on where you stand. You can see how the following questions do not make clear the position of the speaker or what the speaker expects from the audience.

Does global warming endanger our quality of life?
Are drunk drivers being punished too much or not enough?

The proposition should be stated directly and literally rather than in figures of speech or in slang terms. In the following statements the language does not promote a rational analysis of the problem. The proposition does not need to be exciting or profound; the rest of the speech can accomplish that. The proposition needs simply to be clear.

The slothful and greedy energy hogs that depend exclusively on their cars for transportation are ravaging the environment by fanning the flames of global warming.
Drunk drivers are society’s most treacherous thugs and should all be doing hard time.

Now see how these propositions might be reworded for clarity.

American drivers can reduce global warming by gradually reducing their automobile dependence.
State legislators should enact stricter mandatory penalties for drunk drivers.

A well stated proposition is no small hurdle for the persuasive speaker. It is the focus of the entire speech. It is this idea that the speaker wants the audience to remember if it remembers nothing else. This statement is the litmus test for speech content. Whatever supports the proposition stays; the rest is tossed. The proposition keeps the audience and the speaker centered on a single point, and its proof (or not) determines whether audience conviction is won or lost.

Types of Propositions

Each offensive pattern in football calls for a particular line-up on the field, and so does each kind of proposition call for an organization that fits its intent. Thus once you have worded the proposition, you need to determine what kind of proposition you have: a proposition of fact, value, or policy.
A proposition of fact is a statement asserting that something exists (or happens), will exist, or has existed. It claims (proposes) a fact about the past, present, or future. The formula for a proposition of fact is $X$ is (was/will be) so. Look at some examples:

Republicans will win the next presidential election.

Homeowners’ use of chemical weed killers pollutes the city water system.

Nuclear disarmament was the most important international issue of the twentieth century.

You may notice that we are not calling any of these statements indisputable facts or truths because we do not know for sure whether Republicans will win, that chemical weed killers enter the city water supply, and so on. This is what makes the statements propositions of fact rather than absolute facts. Depending on your level of knowledge, a proposition of fact is not immediately acceptable as a factual statement. If listeners know for certain the truth about each of these propositions, then the statements are not controversial. You would not need to persuade audiences about them, since a persuasive speech has as its subject a controversial issue. Rather, there is a degree of uncertainty about the statements in that they are controversial. Propositions of fact, then, are disputable assertions of the existence or non-existence of something in the past, present, or future.

A proposition of value states that a thing is good or bad, though it may not always use the terms good and bad. A proposition of value offers an evaluation of an idea, policy, person, or thing. This sort of proposition claims that something is beneficial or harmful, moral or immoral, effective or ineffective, right or wrong, just or unjust. The formula for a proposition of value is $X$ is good/bad. Here are some sample propositions of value:

The American Civil Liberties Union benefits American citizens.

The U.S. government is ineffective as a world police force.

The Electoral College is an unjust way to elect a president.

In each of these propositions you can find a value term: benefit, ineffective, unjust. The value term is inherently positive or negative, as you would not consider ineffectiveness a positive; it is a term that is itself negative. Likewise
a *benefit* is inherently positive. Thus, when the proposition contains value terms, or terms that are inherently positive or negative, the proposition is a proposition of value.

When a speaker proposes a value statement, she or he is attempting to persuade you that value term genuinely applies. Value statements can seem biased or unreasonable to you, but this is their nature. The value speech claims, and attempts to prove, that in light of evidence, the stated evaluation is accurate.

The **proposition of policy** is really the easiest type of proposition to recognize. *The proposition of policy states that something should or should not be done or that a policy is necessary or unnecessary.* The formula for a proposition of policy is *X should/should not be done.* Consider these sample propositions of policy:

- The college should eliminate speech as a general education requirement.
- The state courts should not rule on same-sex marriage.
- The city of Riverside should build a rapid-transit system.

While a speech of fact or value seeks the audience’s agreement, with a proposition of policy, the persuader is appealing to the audience to act or to support action.

Speeches of fact, also known as *forensic rhetoric*, are often found in the courtroom, where a judge or jury is persuaded, for example, to determine whether a crime occurred or, if it did, to rule on what the crime was and who committed it. Values speeches, or *epideictic rhetoric*, are speeches of praise and blame. You might hear this kind of speech at a graduation ceremony, where a speaker exhorts graduates to aspire to a particular value. Eulogies, where the dead are praised or blamed, are other common value speeches. One finds persuasion about policy, *deliberative rhetoric*, in legislative bodies, such as British Parliament, the United Nations, or the United States Congress and Senate. We will see in Chapter Six how each kind of proposition calls for a different kind of speech structure.

You can streamline your speech preparation by nailing down early a proposition that reflects accurately the *content* and *intent* of your persuasive speech. Once your proposition is set, the rest of your speech content will fall into place more readily.
Looking For and Using Evidence

Why Evidence?

Is there anyone who has not said of a speaker at one time or another, “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about?” And haven’t we each spoken from ignorance once or twice in our life?

Evidence makes a difference to an audience. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher who first formalized systematic speech training, pointed out that the speech exists for the audience. In essence the audience is the end and object of the speech. The audience is “the end” and “the object” because the speech is not for ourselves, but for the audience’s enlightenment. If an audience finds itself ill informed because the speaker is uninformed, its reaction may be disillusionment or worse: anger, outrage, or contempt for the speaker who deceived them. When you engage in dialectical persuasion (see Chapter One), your goal is not to defend a narrow perspective but to apply good judgment.

Earlier we pointed out that persuasion depends on the free choice of its listeners. Misinformation or absence of information does not promote free choice; it thwarts the audience’s ability to make a rational decision. The speaker becomes an impediment rather than an auxiliary to sound decision-making.

The information overload of the 21st century means that a responsible speaker is expected more than ever to provide an audience with the tools for reaching an informed conclusion on a controversy. The fundamental tool for establishing the validity of any claim is evidence. Evidence is any support offered to draw a conclusion or to substantiate that what we say is believable. Debate scholar Austin Freeley calls evidence “the raw material of argumentation;” it consists of facts, opinions, and objects used to prove one’s position.

Where does a speaker find evidence? The easiest way to begin is to look at what you already know to be true. If, for instance, you have some experience with the subject, sharing that experience with the audience constitutes evidence. Suppose you have been playing for the past four years with a city softball league. During last summer’s playoffs, it occurred to you that the teams had been improperly matched. Now at the next season’s opening, you bring your observation before the Parks and Recreation District. You address their board meeting, and though no one on the board has played in the league, you have. You use your experience to support your point of view.
Just as experience adds believability to your views, so does the knowledge you already possess. In speaking to the Parks and Recreation board, you could refer to a league in a nearby community where a friend of yours plays softball. You consider their system fairer. Again you call upon evidence you already have—your own knowledge.

In the same way, you can consult with friends or relatives to obtain their input on the subject. Whatever access you have to informed opinions or direct experience can serve as evidence for your speech.

Experience, prior knowledge, and informed opinions may suffice for evidence, but there may be times when an audience expects a higher quality of evidence. Listeners may demand information from a recognized authority on the subject. They may ask, for example, what the team sponsors thought of the tournament matching and why they had not complained. What of the coaches and umpires? Why had the board heard nothing about this inequity before your appearance? In this case, the audience is questioning your authority and requesting evidence to supplement your experience and knowledge. Where can you go for further support?

**Primary Versus Secondary Sources**

Your most useful information is likely to come from primary sources, the evidence most directly or closely connected to the subject. Primary sources include firsthand descriptions and records on the subject. For example, to analyze a bill being debated in Congress, a primary source would be the Congressional Record. On the other hand, a secondary source might be an article in The Washington Post describing the debates or a talk show interview with a congressional representative. The primary source is the actual record of the debates while the secondary source is a secondhand account of what was said, much like the difference between friends’ actual words and what someone said they said. The primary source gets closer to what actually took place. The further removed our source is from the subject matter, the less valuable it is as evidence. Look at some examples of primary and secondary evidence in the following table. It is true that in each of these cases, the source listed as “secondary” may have accurate information, but this is true only if that source has access to primary information in the first place.
Sources of Evidence

The Foundational Value of Electronic Information

Thanks to the Internet whatever your speech subject, as long as you have computer access, you will have plentiful information. Research has never been easier. The advantages of electronic resources over print include the following:

1. *Electronic resources save time.* It is much faster to scan Internet source lists than to search for print materials.

2. *Electronic resources are capable of being more up-to-date than print.* Print sources take time to compose, print, and distribute. Electronic resources can be updated minute by minute.

3. *Electronic resources are comprehensive and precise.* One can search for information over thousands of sites or may limit the search to certain terms or time periods. At this writing, a Google search of *communication apprehension* returns 6,140,000 results in 0.17 seconds. If I specify the period between 2005 and 2010, I get 1,680,000 results in 0.56 seconds. Finally, by using Google Scholar, I can locate 1,220 results in 0.10 seconds. In less than one minute and only three searches, I have accessed more than one thousand primary sources.

There are drawbacks, of course, to electronic research. You may wind up with thousands of sites that are only tangentially related or not at all. The sites you locate may contain only recent information, or they may cost the user, such as with investment and financial research through Bloomberg Professional Services, where an individual or institution must pay a hefty fee for access.
Focus on **Political Persuasion**

Many may decry public reliance on the internet for information, but the Pew *Internet and American Life* project discouraged that concern.

While all people like to see arguments that support their beliefs, Internet users are not limiting their information exposure to views that buttress their opinions. Instead, wired Americans are more aware than non-Internet users of all kinds of arguments, even those that challenge their preferred candidates and issue positions.7

Mainstream media began to bemoan the political influence of blogs in the early 2000s, but *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan credited Internet blogs for their service to the public. According to Noonan, blogs are valuable for

1. finding overlooked or hidden facts
2. not being governed by an ideology or by mainstream thinking
3. the freedom to post immediately any news of any length
4. their originality and insight
5. the fact that their product is free
6. the “correcting mechanism” of public opinion in disregarding incorrect or specious information
7. being tough on those they attack, that is, putting the facts forward in all their ugliness8

There is a lesson for persuasive speakers in the Pew project: that a speaker's influence is enhanced by

- seeking sound evidence
- showing independent thought
- presenting timely information
- not seeking material gain
- accountability to an audience

**Electronic Resources: Academic Searches**

If you are a student, your college or university will probably require a login with your student identification number to access specific fee-based databases in such research areas as government, law, medicine, science, and social science. If you have a public library, the databases available to
you may include only the library’s holdings. Such restrictions may limit you to free or public search engines and other government or institution-based search engines.

If you live in a city with a college or university research library, you can probably acquire a user card that will give you access. One of the best-known and broader databases is **EBSCO Host Research Databases**. EBSCO is a Massachusetts-based reference source for academic research (spanning virtually every academic discipline), hospitals and medical institutions, businesses, and government institutions. Through EBSCO, you can read full text articles online through a subject or database search.

Aside from EBSCO, there are countless other databases particular to the school, business, or institution for which you are conducting research. The library or research department director will likely provide some rudimentary information about where to begin.

General search engines, such as Google, have made inroads into academic searches with such search programs as Google Scholar. However, at this writing, Google Scholar still falls short of such academic searches as EBSCO in that Google provides fewer full-text articles and its results may request an additional fee.

### Electronic Resources: General Searches

When we leave the world of academic research to rely on general search engines, we encounter two major hurdles. First, any person with Internet access can easily suffer from information overload through any subject search. Second, because most Internet findings are not scrutinized for accuracy, we bear the responsibility for their accuracy ourselves.

The trick is to structure your search to maximize results while limiting irrelevant sources. Among the reputable free search engines are

**Google** ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) Having premiered in 1998, Google trumpets itself as “the world’s largest search engine—an easy-to-use free service that usually returns relevant results in a fraction of a second.”

Google responses are listed in order of relevance according to the terms entered and most popular sites or page rank; however, savvy information technologists can develop a web-ring to optimize their ranking, that is, to assure that their selected sites show up at the top of a Google search.

**Yahoo!** ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) Yahoo! pre-dated Google (1994) in its development as a search engine.
A distinctive Yahoo! feature is its shortcuts. Before beginning your search you can click into a subheading, such as finance, then narrow your search to personal finance, banking and budgeting, and finally checking and savings. By narrowing your search through shortcuts, you can reduce information overload and increase relevance in your results.

**Bing** (www.bing.com) Microsoft’s search engine since 2009 holds the third largest search engine market share at this writing, less than six percent, as compared to Google’s 83 percent and Yahoo!’s eight percent. Over time Bing has developed some appealing features, including a new home page image daily, thumbnail media previews of newsworthy items, instant information on sports, finance, traffic, and calculations (to name a few items), and integration with mail and social media, including Bing Tweets on hot topics. Yet as a research search engine, it will produce a fraction of the results produced by Google.

The University of California at Berkeley’s Library Tutorial does not evaluate Bing but compares Google, Yahoo!, and Exalead, a French search engine with extensive language and geographic options, but uncertain web permanence. The Berkeley tutorial labels Google’s results “immense,” Yahoo’s “huge,” and Exalead’s “large.” More significant is

![Figure 2.1](image) In 21st-century research, the computer is preeminent, print sources optional.

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their observation that different search engines use different algorithms, yielding different results. Times change, however, possibly far more quickly in the world of technology than elsewhere. What is there today can be gone tomorrow, while new methodologies take their place. In short, when researching your speech, your best bet to keep pace is to begin with a search for search engines, then check a variety of search results against one another.

About Wikipedia

Wikipedia is in a different world altogether from the world of search engines. Who has not turned to Wikipedia to check the biography of a previously unknown political figure or entertainer? What’s not to like? First of all, it’s free and at this writing has versions in at least 287 different languages. Second, Wikipedia provides diverse perspectives on any entry, often including those of experts in the subject matter. Third, it provides a general disclaimer on what it is and is not, the overarching disclaimer being that Wikipedia does not guarantee the validity of any of its information, the advantage of this being that at least they are telling the world the truth about content reliability on their site.

Since Wikipedia is straightforward about its shortcomings, you need to be aware of just how it works so you know what you have when you draw information from its pages. The Five Pillars of Wikipedia outline its fundamental principles and Wikipedia’s limitations as a resource:

- Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, intended to be reference-based as opposed to an open forum for personal opinion.
- Wikipedia strives to present a neutral point of view rather than advocating a single perspective.
- Wikipedia is free content, open to contributions from anyone, though not to copyrighted material.
- Wikipedia subscribes to a code of conduct that urges civility, consensus, and freedom from personal attacks.
- Wikipedia has no firm rules (aside from these pillars). Users are urged to be bold in submitting, editing and moving information.

Consequently, the content you uncover in Wikipedia may be useful for general background on a subject, but it is not entirely dependable. Wikipedia administrators urge users to rely for research purposes on older articles that have been subject to substantial updating and revision and
to be somewhat cautious of newer material that may contain significant misinformation not yet corrected.

Because posting information on the Internet is free and unregulated at this writing, the researcher needs to develop a critical eye in using any and all internet information, as illustrated in the guidelines on page 44.

**First-Hand Sources**

Getting information from people directly connected with an issue is a valuable and surprisingly easy research technique. When you think of sifting through reams of secondary source material for hours online or in the library, you may be stunned to find that you could have accomplished as much or more through a five-minute telephone call or a fifteen-minute interview.

Where should you begin to make contact: electronically, by telephone, by direct personal contact, or by handwritten communication? If *Wall Street Journal* writer Sarah Needleman is onto something, you should make a professional contact professionally. According to Needleman, youthful job hunters in the twenty-first century overuse the informal contact of e-mail or text-messaging by sending communiqués “hastily from their mobile phones,” a move that “suggests an on-the-fly mentality” and infringes on the recipient’s personal space. According to one company president, job candidates should compose a thoughtful email rather than firing off a hurried message.

The same advice holds for those seeking information from experts. If a contact is made electronically, it should be through a thoughtful and professional e-mail. If you find there is a local or nearby agency specializing in some aspect of your subject (which ordinarily can be found in the print or online Yellow Pages), you can either call directly to question a person affiliated with the issue or arrange a time to interview the expert first-hand. If the contact is direct, proceed through formal telephone channels or through an appointment with a receptionist, requesting as brief a time frame as possible.

The advantage of the interview is that the authority will set aside time for the interviewer and may be more carefully prepared with supporting and helpful materials. You may be permitted to record the information, which naturally makes recall easier. You may be reluctant to attempt an interview, humbly assuming the interviewer is too busy to talk to you. This is rarely
## EVALUATING WEBSITES

| Does the web address validate the source’s credibility? | • Does the URL indicate that the information comes from an appropriate domain, such as a government agency (.gov), an educational institution (.edu), or a non-profit organization (.org)?  
• Does the URL suggest the information is subjective? Is it from a personal site, by including a person’s name or a personal Internet service provider? (Example: sambates@comcast.com)  
• Does it identify a reputable publisher, such as washingtonpost.com? |
| --- | --- |
| Does the page layout and information establish its credentials? | • Is it dated (see the webpage footer) and current?  
• Who wrote it? Is there an “About” link to establish the authors’ qualifications for presenting the information?  
• Does the page provide links to document the information presented? |
| What is the site’s purpose? | • Is the site a spoof, or is it serious?  
• Is the intent to persuade or sell or to inform?  
• Does the site seem biased, unbalanced, or inconsistent with the best information available on the subject? Is there a sponsor for the page that validates the site’s authoritativeness or confirms its bias? |

Regardless of how interviewers acquire information, they must be prepared with a set of questions. These ought to be simple, direct, and well considered to elicit information of substance. The interviewer wants to learn from the interview; the better prepared the questions, the more useful the responses. Many textbooks in business and professional communication can assist the interviewer in setting the goal, structuring the interview, framing questions, and providing feedback within the interview. When you do seek first-hand information for a persuasive speech, you will not only be pleased with the substance it adds to your speech but will likely be amazed at its ability to bolster your credibility.

the case, however. Most experts love the chance to promote their cause in the form of an interview. You should offer to supply the expert with a transcript of any quotations used for the speech, which will increase the expert’s confidence that she or he has been accurately represented.
Types of Evidence

If a co-worker tells you your boss has resigned do you respond in celebration or in mourning a loss? Or as a critical thinker do you ask, “How do you know?” We must assume that our audiences are just as critical. No matter what your claims, audience members wonder, “How do I know that what you say is true?” The sources you gather are a beginning, but what do you glean from them? As you sift through your sources, try to look for a variety of “proofs” for your claims.

Testimony

For a start, notice how effective speakers draw on experts to defend their positions, as did General Douglas MacArthur when he defended his conduct of the 1950s Korean War:

Of the nations of the world, Korea alone, up to now, is the sole one which has risked its all against communism. The magnificence of the courage and fortitude of the Korean people defies description. They have chosen to risk death rather than slavery. Their last words to me were, “Don’t scuttle the Pacific.”

With this statement MacArthur supplies the evidence of the Koreans’ own words to fortify his claims.

Another use of testimony can be seen in the comic strategy of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” who the New York Times at one time considered “the most trusted man in America.”17 As the Times points out, one of the faux news show’s “signature techniques” is “using video montages to show politicians contradicting themselves.” This artful use of testimony to criticize political figures, the Times adds, “has [since] been widely imitated by ‘real’ news shows.”18

Examples

Both real personal and hypothetical examples can help prove the plausibility of your claims. Classical rhetoric scholar Edward Corbett says, “The more facts or instances that are observed, the narrower will be the gap of the unknown that has to be leaped.”19 An argument for handgun control laws could cite the stretch of school shootings from Columbine High School in Colorado to Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut to prove that handgun violence is out of control.
A hypothetical example could be used in place of a real example, although its impact might not be as dramatic:

Suppose you are a thirteen-year-old in a stable and happy family. One night as you are all seated around the kitchen table playing Scrabble, a mentally deranged man climbs in through a bathroom window and shoots your parents as you dive for the telephone. Your parents die before emergency crews arrive, but you survive to battle for handgun control, maybe not for yourself, but for other adolescents who may by your efforts save their families.

This example does not pretend to be factual, but it is meant to stir audience belief in your cause. One caution: a speech that relies solely on hypothetical examples and no other substantial evidence will be dismissed as unbelievable, so choose your examples broadly but your hypotheticals sparingly.

**Facts And Statistics**

A college student named Vicki was a committed skeptic. She maintained that the universe held no facts and whatever one called factual was nothing more than opinion based on individual perception. When asked “Couldn’t we call ‘two plus two equals four’ a fact?” Vicki replied, “Only on Earth and in the base-ten system.”

Most of us believe that facts do exist—wood comes from trees, the Earth revolves around the sun, and the universe changes. Audiences base their beliefs and disbeliefs on what they consider the “facts” of a case. For the purpose of persuasive speaking, let us consider facts not absolutes but information that is widely agreed upon both in the realm of public and expert discourse. With some issues, as with the issue of climate change, an abundance of experts maintain it is an indisputable threat. Nevertheless, there continue to be scientists unconvinced that 21st-century climate change is a reality.20 “Facts” can be found in many sources, particularly in those that strive to be objective, such as reputable encyclopedias, technical reports, professional journals, and public records, such as the *Congressional Record*.

Because public belief and opinion change according to new understanding and discoveries, what is fact for one audience may no longer be factual for another. As a persuasive speaker, then, you should eliminate
unsupported “facts” and offer additional support for what you consider factual.

Some facts are statistics. As useful as statistics can be in proving a speaker’s point, statistics are notorious for their ability to be manipulated and distorted. Mark Twain once said “Facts are stubborn, but statistics are more pliable,” and 18th-century British statesman George Canning was known to have said “I can prove anything by statistics, except the truth.” A history professor once demonstrated statistically that Germany was victorious over Allied forces at the conclusion of World War II. Now his claim could be a matter of historical interpretation, but the professor was trying to show how easily you can disprove accepted conclusions through statistics.

Any stock or mutual fund report is full of such maneuverings. Suppose my growth fund is down two per cent last quarter. Does the report dwell on the dismal return? Not a chance. Rather, I am told that the fund did remarkably well considering the unfortunate heavy pharmaceutical holdings that dragged the fund down; now that those holdings have been redistributed, the fund should see steadier growth. In other words, fund managers interpret statistics to send me the message: “Don’t sell!”

Since You Asked...

**Question:** I’ve been salmon fishing since I was six years old; with this much experience, why do I need to provide evidence for a speech about the Department of Fish and Wildlife’s handling of salmon habitat?

**Answer:** This is an interesting question echoing Aristotle’s own biases. He referred to *artistic proof* as the proof that comes from within oneself and one’s reasoning, as opposed to *inartistic proof*, which comes from other sources—from education or evidence. Even so, Aristotle and his followers (such as the Roman rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian) encouraged *inartistic* proofs drawn from the orator’s strong liberal education. And even though reference books were not available in ancient Greece and Rome, these writers recommended the use of written materials, such as contracts, for persuasive support.
Facts and statistics drawn from your research can enhance the believability of a speech, but they need to be used with caution and integrity—taking care that they are representative and accurate—and subjected to the tests of evidence mentioned in the next section.

Finally, for your evidence to matter in your speech, you must cite it. Avoid the insolence of presenting others’ findings as your own. Rather, attribute information to its source. By rightfully citing or attributing information, you build credibility as one who is well informed, and you wisely evade the risk of later being found a plagiarist!

**Evaluating Evidence**

In your desperation to locate evidence, you might forego examining it critically; yet in your worry that your audience will reject anything you say, you may doubt its worth. The five questions to ask of evidence shown in Figure 2.2 can help you assess the information you find. Once you are experienced in the ways of research, the questions become ingrained, and as a seasoned researcher you emerge a healthy skeptic.
Is the evidence relevant to the controversy? It is tempting to use every good story or impressive statistic that you uncover. The problem is that sometimes the information adds interest (at best) but nothing to help prove the proposition. Suppose you are giving a speech about colleges controlling corruption in their athletic programs. In your research you run across a story about a coach convicted of a misdemeanor unrelated to his coaching position. Tempting as it is to use the story for its shock value, the story has no direct bearing on your issue. In the long run, the evidence will make you out a scandal-bearer while it does nothing to help your case.

Is the evidence timely? Take a look at a cookbook from the 1940s or 1950s. What one considered wholesome in that time period was meat and potatoes, liberally doused with butter and gravy, with canned vegetables warmed to a slimy mass. You would not use one of these cookbooks today to represent a healthy diet. What we currently know about heart disease, cholesterol, and fat would render 1940s nutrition standards out-of-date. You need to determine if the time frame in which your evidence was recorded makes it inapplicable to the point you want to prove now. Any story, study, or statistic should be current enough for today’s audience.

What is “current enough”? If we find that subsequent studies have disproved, contradicted, or raised serious questions about the validity of earlier information, we are better off without it. For instance, we cannot cite test scores from 1998 to show that the educational system of our country is failing in 2018. If current studies produce the same results, we must use them, not the older ones.

Figure 2.2 Five questions to ask of our evidence.
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On the other hand, sometimes older information is not only acceptable; it is also essential. A speaker who chronicles the history of archaic contraceptive methods (to prove that humankind will go through uncommon extremes to avoid having children) will not want to restrict research to the most current. Information from the past is necessary for proving the proposition. In short, the date of your evidence should be contemporary with the time frame it references.

**Is the evidence sufficient?** One study does not make a proof. This idea was vividly illustrated when in 1989 scientists at the University of Utah claimed they had found how to produce nuclear fusion in cold water, a discovery that would have provided a new and inexpensive source of abundant energy. When other scientists tried to replicate the first cold-water fusion test, they found that they could not; the first study was seriously flawed—not a breakthrough.25

Whether the speech deals with cold-water fusion, climate change, or the institution of marriage, you cannot substantiate your position by quoting two close friends. Likewise, any poll requires representative sampling from an adequately sized group. Although we mostly deplore the word “never,” the speaker must be prudent in never relying on a single source. To be believed as a speaker, you need to test your information by holding it up to the light of comparative evidence.

**Is the evidence consistent with what we know to be true?** If you test your evidence for sufficiency, you will likely be testing it for consistency as well. Inconsistent evidence might be a statistic indicating that the majority of adults show symptoms from Alzheimer’s disease by the age of 40. We know that the phenomenon of Alzheimer’s has reached alarming proportions in the elderly, but our experience tells us that Alzheimer’s is not a widespread occurrence in forty-year-old adults.

Partisan politicians often question the consistency of their opponent’s claims. An opponent opposed new taxes during the campaign but swiftly imposed new taxes once elected, for example. If evidence states that the dangers of climate change are overstated, but goes on to say the dangers are well founded, the evidence is fundamentally inconsistent. If you find that evidence is insufficient to prove a point and is also inconsistent with what you know, certainly it will not augment the persuasiveness of your speech.

**Is the source of evidence credible?** We will address credibility later in this book, but for now let’s say that credibility refers to a person’s believability. Our evidence comes from one source or another; whatever the source, it must be perceived by the audience as believable.
Credibility depends on the *subject matter* addressed. Talk show host Oprah Winfrey acquired the status of credible opinion-wielder over many years. Now if Oprah had sounded off on U.S. trade policy, she would have put her credibility at risk by departing from her realm of expertise. *The source of information, then, is more credible in the source’s area of competence.*

Credibility is also *audience-related.* The pope, for instance, makes regular statements concerning faith and morals to the Roman Catholic faithful and pronouncements on other matters, such as economic injustice, to the world at large. There are some who will follow his words closely and seriously, others who will disregard the pope’s statements, and still others who will despise his remarks as presumptuous impositions on independent thought. *The source’s credibility depends on the audience being addressed.*

These examples refer to live sources. What of the printed word? Are some written sources more believable than others? The same rules hold for these. Some periodicals are believable on some subjects but not on others. *Wine*
Spectator may provide useful information on wines of the world, but it will not enlighten us much on the subject of psychology. While The National Review, a conservative political magazine is accepted by conservative readers, a more liberal audience will dismiss or ridicule its content. Likewise, some are captivated by an obscure but entertaining blog while others would never bother to read it much less lend it any credence.

Evidence, for all its usefulness, is best taken skeptically. If we fail to question evidence as we encounter it, we can be sure that our audience will hold us accountable.

In Summary

The persuasive speech begins with ideas: ideas about what you want to say and ideas that you gather from sources outside yourself. Once you have located a public controversy that is both significant and durable, you must establish what you want to say—in the form of a proposition or assertion. The proposition may be one of fact (asserting the plausibility that a thing is factual), value (evaluating a thing), or policy (proposing a plan of action).

Next you gather evidence that teaches you about the controversy and supports your views. This evidence may be drawn from your own knowledge and experience, but it can also be found in online and print references or in other people. Whatever evidence you discover, you need to subject it to analysis, determining whether it is relevant, sufficient, timely, credible, and consistent with what you know. If you adopt the attitude of skeptic in your research, your conclusions will be more dependable and your audience less inclined to doubt what you say.

Endnotes

1 Joel and Ethan Coen, independent filmmakers known for their films Fargo, No Country for Old Men, Inside Llewyn Davis, and Unbroken, to name a few, and winning Best Picture and Best Director Academy Awards in 2007.


3 There are many possible criteria for the proposition in persuasive speaking and debate. The ones listed here are generally agreed upon as fundamental to a useful proposition. See, for example, Austin J. Freely, Argumentation and Debate, 12th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 55–58.

Chapter 2
Thinking about Controversies

5 Freeley, 105.
16 See, for example, Dan O’Hair, Gustav W. Friedrich, and Lynda D. Dixon, Strategic Communication in Business and the Professions, 6th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2007).
18 Ibid. See more on Jon Stewart’s engendering trust in Chapter 4.

Aristotle, 15. The Freese translation uses artificial and inartificial rather than artistic and inartistic, although these latter are more frequent in modern translations.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Theory into Practice

1. For practice in selecting appropriate speech subjects, critique the following speech subjects according to the criteria given in Chapter Two.
   a. whether to attend the Bach Festival this weekend
   b. whether Bounty or Viva paper towels are superior
   c. whether Steve Colbert ought to run for President
   d. whether the United States is spending appropriate amounts of money on national defense
   e. whether this year’s consumer price index is higher or lower than last year’s

2. With another person or group, brainstorm for potential speech purposes for the subjects listed on page 29.

3. Critique the following propositions according to the criteria given in Chapter Two.
   a. Providing for our national defense
   b. How should the city increase downtown development?
   c. To care for the homeless in our community
   d. The Environmental Protection Agency should rescind protection for the American bald eagle.
   e. Our police department stinks and is letting our citizens rot to pamper local criminals.

4. Label which sort of proposition each of the following is:
   a. The Chicago Cubs is currently the best team in baseball’s National League.
   b. The city should offer free parking to promote downtown businesses.
   c. Senator Paul Ryan is the only viable Republican candidate for President in the next general election.
   d. The university should divert more of the athletic budget to general education programs.
   e. Reducing your driving speed will save fossil fuel consumption.

5. Suggest two likely sources of information for each of the propositions in number 3 above.
Speech Subject Brainstorm

If you have been asked to present a speech, and you are finding it difficult to land on a subject, try generating ideas with this worksheet. The idea is to list, for example, what jobs, books, sports issues, etc., interest you, then after reflection, enter a possible speech topic on the “Potential subject” line. You need not fill in the entire worksheet to locate a workable subject.

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