

Chapter 11: Persuasive Speaking

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If you ever want to convince an audience to believe or act on something, then you need to know some basics about persuasive speaking. Sales presentations, job promotion requests, and trial hearings are all persuasive speeches. One could argue that the most valuable tool that the greatest political leaders and dictators possessed was their ability to persuasively speak in front of audiences. If you can cultivate this skill, you will have the power to potentially change the world.

What is persuasive speaking?

There are some key differences between persuasive and informative speaking. In persuasion, the speaker acts as an advocate instead of educator, while the audience acts as change agents rather than learners. The speaker's goal is to issue a call-to-action from the audience, rather than for them to simply process information. Persuasive speaking asks more of your audience than informative speeches.

Persuasive speaking also requires greater attention to your audience's disposition. You must consider your audience's natural resistance level to your proposition. When doing an informative speech, your audience will probably not resist learning a new topic. With persuasive speeches, however, you may be advocating for something that part or all of your audience may not agree with. Your audience's propensity to disagree with your proposition is their resistance level. The more controversial your topic, the more resistance you will have to overcome in your speech.

Types of persuasive speeches

Persuasive speech designs depend on whether you are seeking to change your audience's beliefs about facts, values, or a particular action. No matter which type you choose, you will need to provide substantial evidence supporting your claim, while refuting the mainstream arguments against your proposal. The first two steps in any persuasive speech is to decide the proposition statement that you want to advocate and what exactly you want your audience to do.

If you want to change your audience's mind about a particular fact, then you need to consider whether it is a past, present, or future fact. If you wanted to argue that the US never landed on the moon, then you would be challenging a historical fact. Suppose you want to convince your audience that humanity is actually becoming less violent overall, you are suggesting a present fact. If you want to argue that China will become the world superpower in the next 20 years, that's a future fact. You can distinguish these three types by the tense of your proposition. When you are arguing factual propositions, your goal is to show how support for your proposition is superior to any contrary positions. This effort should involve presenting and refuting counter arguments.

If you want to convince your audience to make a qualitative assessment about something, then you are arguing a value proposition. Value propositions pertain to attitudes, beliefs, and moral judgments about something. An example would be arguing that stem cell research is immoral. To support this claim, you cannot just provide facts about stem cell research. You also have to argue why these facts amount to the practice being considered immoral. To do that, you have to provide some kind of criteria of what morality is to your audience. Is morality simply a

utilitarian judgment of “the greatest good for the greatest number of people?” Or is it more deontological, “don’t use people solely as means to another end?” Or is it some other set of proclaimed values? You will have to make that judgment and show how stem cell research fails to uphold the moral calculus that your audience holds dear. Audience analysis becomes very important here.

If you want to convince your audience to personally do something, then you are giving a policy speech. In this case, you are not just presenting facts to your audience and getting them to agree with your assessment, you are also asking them to take action. For example, you might ask your audience to begin buying only fair trade coffee. If that was your argument, you need to provide evidence suggesting that the status quo of buying non-fair trade coffee is undesirable, and that the best course of action to remedy this problem is to buy only fair trade coffee. To indict the status quo, you need to provide facts and moral assessments that your audience can agree with. To sell the course of action, you have to demonstrate its practicality and effectiveness.

Persuading Effectively

The art of persuasion is its own course. For now, here are some tips that will help with the writing and delivery of your speech.

You must consider your audience’s resistance level to your proposition. A high-resistance audience is one who is inclined to disagree with your proposition, a low-resistance agrees. A low-resistance topic might be seen as “preaching to the choir” and may not be well-received by your instructor since it is far less challenging. If you pick a high-resistance topic, then you need to find points where you can build common ground with your audience. For example, suppose you want your proposition calling for more stem cell research. It’s possible that some of your

audience will have high-resistance to such a proposition because they argue that harvesting embryonic stem cells threatens the right to life. Instead of trying to argue that the right to life is not important, you can argue that stem cell research supports the right to life by providing treatments that can cure fatal illnesses. Start with your audience's values and align your proposition accordingly, rather than trying to "destroy" them. If it is not possible to align to their values, then find some areas of agreement to use them as a springboard for engaging areas of disagreement. Identify with your audience's concerns.

For your speech outline, your introduction should adequately grab the audience's attention and state your proposition. You do not want your audience unsure about what exactly you want them to do after the introduction. The speech should forefront your proposition, and allow the main points to be the support for it. Lastly, you should conclude with your summary, proposition, and a clincher for lasting effect.

Your main points will vary by the type of persuasive speech that you are giving. Regardless, you should have a point that explores the problem that your call to action is trying to solve. If you are trying to convince your audience to vote in the next presidential election, then one of your main points should discuss the harms of low voter turnout. If there is no problem to solve, then there is no reason for the audience to act. Part of your job as a persuasive speaker is to convince your audience that there is a problem that requires them to act. The problem has to be shown to be significant enough to warrant their attention, and also solvable enough for them to feel empowered to participate in the solution. These two tasks can trade off with each other, so you need strike a balance.

Also at some point, you should address the opposing arguments that would prevent your audience from adopting your proposition. To determine what these opposing arguments are, put

yourself in your audience's position. If you were antagonistic to your proposition, what would you argue against it? Address those arguments in your speech. Your call to action itself should also be addressed as a main point in your speech. If you are asking your audience to begin purchasing fair trade coffee, tell them where they can buy it. Convince your audience that your call to action is achievable. You should also find ways to help your audience enact your proposal. If you want them to write letters to their legislator, provide them with stamped envelopes with their legislator's address at the end of your speech. Then all your audience has to do is write the letter and mail it (and you could even include a form letter that they only have to sign to make it even easier!). The more "work" your audience has to do after your speech, the less likely they will do it.

As far as delivery, pictures are worth a thousand words. It is one thing to talk about starvation in developing countries, it is another to see pictures of real people perishing from it. The more strategically you can incorporate visual aids without creating a distraction from your message, the more effective your speech will be. Make sure you are well-trained in delivering PowerPoint presentations if you decide to use that as your medium. When PowerPoints are delivered poorly, the effectiveness of your words and pictures get lost in boredom or distraction. If you do not have training, just have a slideshow of pictures that you can purposefully use without any text. Use the pictures as "visual aids," rather than as part of a "PowerPoint Presentation." The key is to not be so verbal, use other kinds of media to prove your point.

Conclusion

Persuasive speaking is the most challenging and applicable of all speeches. There will be a time when you will have to persuade a small or large group of people to do or believe something. Make your proposition clear from the beginning, find common ground, knock down

any resistance barriers, and communicate your message using multiple channels. Persuasion is not just as about speaking, it's about leading.