CHAPTER

5

Selecting Topic, Purpose, and Central Idea

OUTLINE

OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. Select appropriate and interesting speech topics.
2. Specify the general purpose of a speech.
3. Develop a clear, concise specific purpose statement for every speech you prepare.
4. Develop a clear, coherent central idea for every speech you prepare.
5. Understand how the specific purpose and the central idea fit into the overall design of a speech.

WHEN HE WAS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT in a small city in India, Amol Bhave was bored with his classes. Then one day while surfing the Internet, he discovered a repository of online video courses from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Bhave immediately signed up. The courses were free, and he found them interesting and challenging. He performed so well that the prestigious school gave him a full scholarship. He excelled in engineering and computer science classes and became a teaching assistant.

Because of his academic success, Bhave is invited to give talks to students and television audiences, and he always chooses a topic about which he is passionate: why people should take advantage of online courses, which are often free, to gain valuable information and learn new skills.[1]

For Bhave, choosing a topic for a speech is easy. But some speakers—on campus and beyond—select topics they are not passionate about, and they end up boring the audience. Other speakers are enthusiastic about their topics, but they fail to have clear objectives. They meander and roam, causing listeners to become irritated and confused.

During a television program sponsored by *The New York Times* in New York City, MIT student Amol Bhave explains why he is enthusiastic about online courses.

To help you avoid these mistakes, the first half of this chapter shows how to choose a good topic, and the second half explains how to develop clear objectives using three valuable tools: general purpose, specific purpose, and central idea.

Selecting a Topic

For some speeches that you will give as part of a job, your topic will be chosen by someone else. Your boss, for example, may instruct you to present a new policy to your fellow employees.

In most public speaking classes, students are permitted to choose their own topics—a freedom that causes some students a great deal of agony, as they moan to friends, "I have to give a speech next week and I can't think of a thing to talk about." Don't let yourself get stuck at this stage. Choose your topic far in advance, because you will need to spend your time and energy on researching, outlining, and practicing. If you are indecisive and delay, you may find yourself without enough time to prepare the speech adequately.

While you are taking this course, keep a notepad or smartphone handy and record ideas for topics as they come to you so that you will have a stockpile from which to draw. In the weeks ahead, you can add to your list as you come up with more ideas.

Here are some important points to bear in mind as you look for a topic.

Select a Topic You Care About

Has anything ever happened to you that was so exciting or interesting or infuriating you could hardly wait to tell your friends about it? That's the way you should feel about your speech topic. It should be something you care about, something you are eager to communicate to others. Are you exhilarated by the sport of kayaking? Speak on how to get started in kayaking. Are you angry over the rising number of car thefts in your community? Speak on how to foil car thieves.

Enthusiasm is contagious. If you are excited, your excitement will spread to your listeners. If you are not excited about your topic, you are likely to do a lackluster job of preparing the speech, and your delivery will probably come across as dull and unconvincing.

Select a Topic You Can Master

A nightmare scenario: You give a speech on a subject about which you know very little. In the question-and-answer period, some listeners (who know the subject well) point out your omissions and errors.

This nightmare happened to me once in college, and it has happened to many other speakers, but it need not happen to you. Make things easy for yourself. Speak on a subject with which you are already thoroughly familiar—or about which you can learn through research.

Here are several ways to probe for topics about which you already know (or can learn) a lot.

Personal Experiences

If you are permitted to choose your own topic, start your search with the subject on which you are the world's foremost expert—your own life.

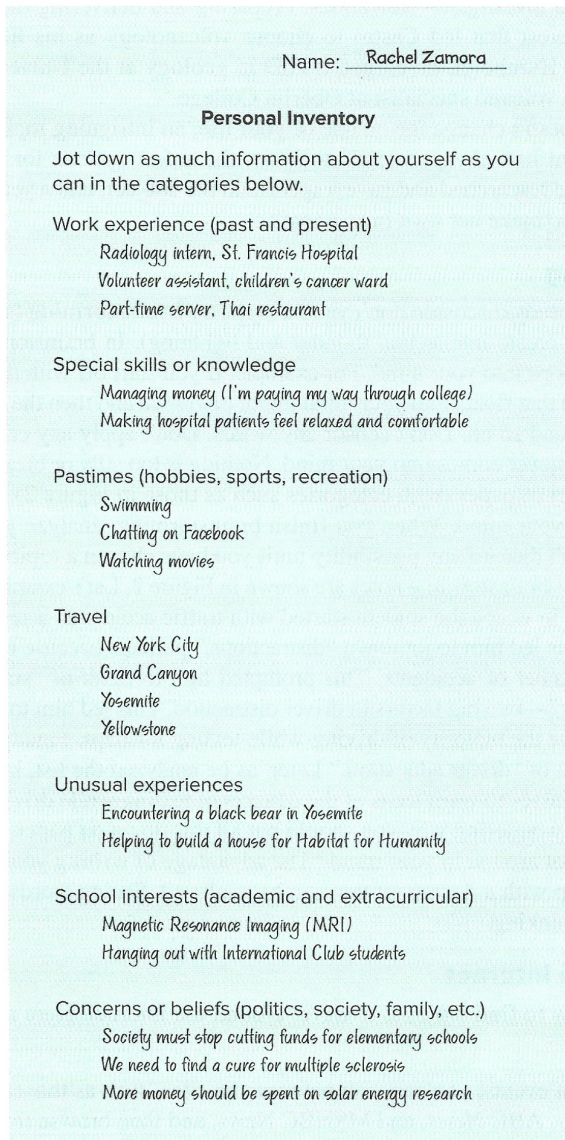
"But my life isn't very interesting or exciting," you might say. Not so. Maybe you are not an international celebrity, but there are dozens of aspects of your life that could make compelling speeches. Here are some examples, all involving students:

- After a friend was defrauded by a student-loan scam, Christina Morales researched the crime and told classmates how to find honest, reliable lenders for student loans.

- Michael Kaplan demonstrated how to make a crepe (a type of thin pancake) filled with spinach, cheese, and tomato.
- Yuna Paragas gave a classroom speech on how she responded to a malicious effort to embarrass her on a social media site.

These students were *ordinary* people who chose to speak on *ordinary* aspects of their lives, but their speeches turned out the way all good speeches should turn out—interesting. When you are searching for a topic, start by looking for intriguing experiences in your own life.

To help you assess your interests, you can create a personal inventory using the categories shown in Figure 1. After you have filled in the inventory, go back and analyze the list for possible speech topics. You may want to ask a friend or an instructor to help you.



Name: Rachel Zamora

Personal Inventory

Jot down as much information about yourself as you can in the categories below.

Work experience (past and present)
- Radiology intern, St. Francis Hospital
- Volunteer assistant, children's cancer ward
- Part-time server, Thai restaurant

Special skills or knowledge
- Managing money (I'm paying my way through college)
- Making hospital patients feel relaxed and comfortable

Pastimes (hobbies, sports, recreation)
- Swimming
- Chatting on Facebook
- Watching movies

Travel
- New York City
- Grand Canyon
- Yosemite
- Yellowstone

Unusual experiences
- Encountering a black bear in Yosemite
- Helping to build a house for Habitat for Humanity

School interests (academic and extracurricular)
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Hanging out with International Club students

Concerns or beliefs (politics, society, family, etc.)
- Society must stop cutting funds for elementary schools
- We need to find a cure for multiple sclerosis
- More money should be spent on solar energy research

Figure 1
A personal inventory, as filled in by one student

A college classroom speech on volcanoes changed the course of Jonathan Castro's life.

All the items in this inventory are potentially good speech topics. The best one would be whichever the student is most eager to share with the audience.

Exploring Interests

Can you identify a topic that intrigues you—a topic that you have always wanted to know more about? If you choose such a topic, you will not only have fun researching, but you will also gain a stockpile of new and interesting information.

Your topic might even influence the direction of your life. In a freshman public speaking class at Humboldt State University in California, Jonathan Castro chose a topic that he had always wanted to investigate—volcanoes. Preparing and delivering the speech ignited a passionate interest that led Castro to choose volcanology as his life's work. After graduating from Humboldt, he earned a PhD in geology at the University of Oregon, and today he is a volcano specialist at Oberlin College.[2]

Even if it doesn't change the course of your life, an intriguing topic can yield benefits. One student had always wanted to know the safest options for investing in the stock market. She researched and gave a speech on the subject, and a year later, she used the information to make her own investments.

Brainstorming

brainstorming generating many ideas quickly and uncritically.

If the methods already discussed don't yield a topic, try **brainstorming** (so called because it is supposed to create intellectual thunder and lightning). In brainstorming, you write down whatever pops into your mind. For example, if you start off with the word *helicopter,* the next word that floats into your mind might be *rescue* and then the next word might be *emergencies,* and so on. Don't censor any words. Don't apply any critical evaluation. Simply write whatever comes into your mind. Nothing is too silly or bizarre to put down.

Using a sheet of paper (with categories such as those in Figure 2), jot down words as they come to your mind. When you finish brainstorming, analyze your list for possible topics. Don't discard any possibility until you have chosen a topic.

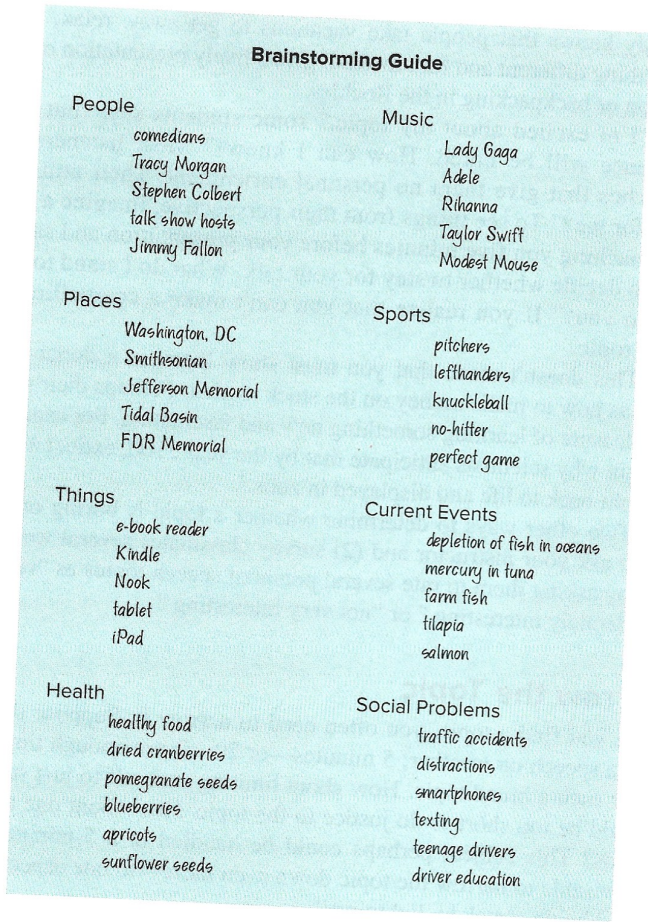
One student's brainstorming notes are shown in Figure 2. Let's examine one category, Social Problems, in which the student started with traffic accidents, a serious problem in society today. This led him to jot down "distractions," perhaps because distracted drivers cause a large number of accidents. This prompted him to think of "smartphones," followed by "texting"—two big factors in driver distraction. This led him to think of teenage drivers, who cause the majority of driving-while-texting mishaps. Finally, his brainstorm produced the idea of "driver education." Later, as he analyzed the list, he chose to speak on the need for classes to warn teens of the dangers of texting while driving.

You may be wondering why you should put all this down on paper. Why not just let all your ideas float around in your mind? The advantage of writing your thoughts down is that you end up with a document that can be analyzed. Seeing words on a page helps you focus your thinking.

Exploring the Internet

An enjoyable way to find topics is to travel around the Internet. Here are some sample approaches:

- For current events, you can visit news media sites, such as those of the *New York Times,* ABC News, and MSNBC News, and then browse through various sections (Health, Technology, Business, etc.).



Brainstorming Guide

People
- comedians
- Tracy Morgan
- Stephen Colbert
- talk show hosts
- Jimmy Fallon

Places
- Washington, DC
- Smithsonian
- Jefferson Memorial
- Tidal Basin
- FDR Memorial

Things
- e-book reader
- Kindle
- Nook
- tablet
- iPad

Health
- healthy food
- dried cranberries
- pomegranate seeds
- blueberries
- apricots
- sunflower seeds

Music
- Lady Gaga
- Adele
- Rihanna
- Taylor Swift
- Modest Mouse

Sports
- pitchers
- lefthanders
- knuckleball
- no-hitter
- perfect game

Current Events
- depletion of fish in oceans
- mercury in tuna
- farm fish
- tilapia
- salmon

Social Problems
- traffic accidents
- distractions
- smartphones
- texting
- teenage drivers
- driver education

Figure 2
One student's entries on a brainstorming guide

- For general-interest articles, look through the websites of National Public Radio, *Psychology Today,* and *National Geographic.*
- Social media outlets and web databases can be helpful tools for finding inspiration. If you are stumped, try browsing Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, or another informational hub that you are familiar with. Make notes about what catches your attention. Most of these sites are not adequate bibliographic sources on their own, but they can help you cycle through lots of ideas quickly and give you a jumpstart.

Select a Topic That Will Interest the Audience

To engage your audience, choose a topic that is timely, worthwhile, and interesting. A talk on why people decide to take vacations would be dull and obvious—everyone

Examining Your Ethics

For her next speech in a public speaking class, Adrienne wants to recycle the key materials that she developed in a research paper in a psychology class last semester. Which course of action should she take?

A. Ask her speech instructor for permission to recycle the old materials in her upcoming speech.
B. Recycle the old materials in her speech without informing anyone of her decision.
C. Recycle the old materials in her speech but state clearly in the introduction that she did her research in another class.

For the answer, see the last page of this chapter.

One student wanted to know if "extreme" roller coasters are safe, but she didn't know if her classmates were interested in the topic. She queried six of them, and they all expressed great interest, which helped her select this topic.

already knows that people take vacations to get away, relax, and experience something different and fun. Instead, give a lively presentation on sightseeing in Boston or backpacking in the Rockies.

"I'm excited about my topic," some students say, "but I'm afraid the audience will be bored. How can I know?" Most listeners are bored by speeches that give them no personal enrichment. Their attitude is "What's in it for me?" To see things from their perspective, imagine a typical listener approaching you five minutes before your presentation and saying, "I'm trying to decide whether to stay for your talk. What do I stand to gain by listening to you?" If you realize that you can't make a compelling case, change your topic.

This doesn't mean that you must show listeners a dollar-and-cents gain, such as how to make money on the stock market. Perhaps their payoff is simply the pleasure of learning something new and fascinating. For example, you could explain why scientists anticipate that by the year 2100, extinct animals could be brought back to life and displayed in zoos.[3]

Two other ways to determine whether a topic is boring or interesting are to (1) ask your instructor and (2) survey classmates several weeks before your talk by asking them to rate several potential speech topics as "very interesting," "moderately interesting," or "not very interesting."

Narrow the Topic

Once you find a topic, you often need to narrow it. Suppose that you want to give a speech on weather; 5 minutes—or 20—is not enough time to adequately cover such a broad topic. How about limiting yourself to just storms? Again, 5 minutes would be too short to do justice to the topic. How about one type of storm—thunderstorms? This subject perhaps could be handled in a 5-minute speech, but it would be advisable to narrow the topic down even more—to one aspect of the subject: "how to avoid being struck by lightning."

Narrowing a topic helps you control your material. It prevents you from wandering in a huge territory and allows you to focus on one small piece of ground. Instead of talking on the vast subject of elections, you might limit yourself to explaining how some states conduct voting online.

Ask yourself this question: Is my topic one that can be adequately and comfortably discussed in the time limit I've been given? If the honest answer is no, you can keep the topic, but you must narrow the focus.

Here are some examples of broad topics and how they can be narrowed:

Too broad:	Native Americans
Narrowed:	Shapes, colors, and legends in Pueblo pottery
Too broad:	Prisons
Narrowed:	Gangs in federal and state prisons
Too broad:	Birds
Narrowed:	How migrating birds navigate

An important way to narrow your topic is to formulate a specific purpose, which will be discussed later in this chapter. First, let's take a look at your general purpose.

The General Purpose

general purpose the broad objective of a speech.

Establishing a **general purpose** for your speech will help you bring your topic under control. Most speeches have one of the following purposes:

- To inform
- To persuade
- To entertain

Other purposes, such as to inspire, to pay tribute, and to introduce, will be discussed in the chapter on special occasion speeches.

To Inform

In an informative speech, your goal is to give new information to your listeners. You can define a concept (such as bitcoins); explain a situation (why honeybees are essential for agriculture); demonstrate a process (how earthquakes occur); or describe a person, place, or event.

Your main concern in this kind of speech is to have your audience understand and remember new information. You are in effect a teacher—not a preacher, a salesperson, or a debater.

Here is a sampling of topics for informative speeches:

- The pros and cons of Internet dating sites
- Bullies in the workplace
- How your credit score is figured

To Persuade

Your aim in a persuasive speech is to win your listeners to your point of view. You may want them to change or discontinue a certain behavior (for example, convince them to stop buying ivory and other products from elephants) or prompt them to take action (for instance, persuade them to buy and drive an all-electric car).

In this kind of speech, you can try to persuade people to

- walk or jog one hour per day.
- vote for your candidate for a public office.
- donate money for autism research.

To Entertain

An entertaining speech is aimed at amusing or diverting your audience. It is light, fun, and relaxing.

Some students mistakenly think that an entertaining speech is a series of jokes. Although jokes are an obvious component of many entertaining speeches, you can amuse or divert your audience just as easily with other types of material: stories, anecdotes, quotations, examples, and descriptions. (For more details, see the chapter on special occasion speeches.)

Here are some examples of topics for entertaining speeches:

- My life with a parrot named Alex
- The five most outrageous excuses for absenteeism at work
- Being an "extra" in a Hollywood movie

Tips for Your Career

TIP 1

Examine Your Hidden Purposes

Professor Jane Tompkins confessed that earlier in her career, while teaching at Columbia University, she was more concerned about making a good impression than meeting students' needs. She was focused on "three things: (a) to show the students how smart I was, (b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and (c) to show them how well-prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me."

If other speakers were as candid as Professor Tompkins, they would admit that they, too, often have hidden, unstated objectives that are far afield from listener-focused purposes such as "to inform" or "to persuade." If their purposes were written out, they might look like this:

- To dazzle my boss with my presentation skills
- To get listeners to like me and consider me smart and funny

Hidden objectives are not necessarily bad. We all have unstated goals such as looking our best and delivering a polished speech. But we should watch for ulterior purposes that make us self-centered and insensitive to our listeners' needs.

Tompkins, Jane, "Pedagogy of the Distressed" *College English* 52(6) October 1990.

The Specific Purpose

specific purpose
the precise goal that a speaker wants to achieve.

After you have chosen a topic and determined your general purpose, your next step is to formulate a **specific purpose,** stating exactly what you want to accomplish in your speech. Here is an example:

Topic:	Student loans
General Purpose:	To inform
Specific Purpose:	To tell my listeners how to find student loan services that are trustworthy and fair

The specific purpose is an important planning tool because it can help you to bring your ideas into sharp focus so that you don't wander aimlessly in your speech and lose your audience.

Let's say you choose "protection of the environment" as a topic for a speech. It's a good topic, but much too broad—you might make the mistake of cramming too many different issues into the speech. How about "protecting national parks"? Now your topic is more manageable, especially if you devise a specific purpose that focuses on just one park:

Topic:	Preserving Yosemite National Park
General Purpose:	To persuade
Specific Purpose:	To persuade my audience to support steps to reverse overcrowding and neglect in Yosemite National Park

Now you have a sharp focus for your speech. You have limited yourself to a topic that can be covered adequately in a short speech.

Here are some guidelines for formulating a specific purpose statement.

Begin the Statement with an Infinitive

An **infinitive** is a verb preceded by *to*—for example, *to write, to read.* By beginning your purpose statement with an infinitive, you clearly state your intent.

infinitive
a verb form beginning with "to."

Poor: Solar energy

Better: To explain to my audience how to use solar energy to power all home appliances

For informative speeches, your purpose statement can start with such infinitives as "to explain," "to show," and "to demonstrate." For persuasive speeches, your purpose statement can start with infinitives such as "to convince," "to prove," and "to get the audience to believe."

Include a Reference to Your Audience

Your specific purpose statement should refer to your audience. For instance, "To convince my listeners that . . ." This may seem like a minor matter, but it serves to remind you that your goal is not just to stand up and talk but also to communicate your ideas to real flesh-and-blood human beings.

Poor: To explain how some employers are using psychological tests to determine whether prospective employees are honest

Better: To explain to my listeners how some employers are using psychological tests to determine whether prospective employees are honest

Limit the Statement to One Major Idea

Resist the temptation to cover several big ideas in a single speech. Limit your specific purpose statement to only one idea.

Poor: To persuade the audience to support efforts to halt the destruction of rain forests in Central and South America, and to demand higher standards of water purity in the United States

Better: To persuade the audience to support efforts to halt the destruction of rain forests in Central and South America

In the first example, the speaker tries to cover two major ideas in one speech. Although it is true that both themes pertain to the environment, they are not closely related and should be handled in separate speeches.

Make Your Statement as Precise as Possible

Strive to formulate a statement that is clear and precise.

Poor: To help my audience brighten their relationships

Better: To explain to my listeners three techniques people can use to communicate more effectively with loved ones

The first statement is fuzzy and unfocused. What is meant by "to help"? What is meant by "brighten"? And what kind of relationships are to be discussed: marital, social, business? The second statement is one possible improvement.

Achieve Your Objective in the Time Allotted

Don't try to cover too much in one speech. It is better to choose a small area of knowledge that can be tightly focused than to select a huge area that can't be covered completely.

Poor: To tell my audience about endangered species

Better: To convince my audience that international action should be taken to prevent poachers from slaughtering elephants

The first statement is much too broad for a speech; you would need several hours to cover the subject. The second statement narrows the topic to one animal so that it can be covered easily in a short speech.

Don't Be Too Technical

You have probably sat through a speech or lecture that was too technical or complicated for you to understand. Don't repeat this mistake when you stand at the lectern.

Poor: To explain to my listeners the biological components of the *Salmonella enterica* bacterium, a common cause of food poisoning

Better: To explain to my audience the steps to take to avoid food poisoning

The first statement is too technical for the average audience. Many listeners would find the explanation tedious and over their heads. The second statement focuses on valuable information that people can use to safeguard their health.

central idea
the key concept of a speech.

The Central Idea

In a college class, a counselor from an alcohol rehabilitation center spoke on alcoholism, giving many statistics, anecdotes, and research findings. I did not hear the speech, but afterward, I overheard some of the listeners arguing about it. Several contended that the speaker's message was "Drink moderately—don't abuse alcohol," while others thought the speaker was saying, "Abstain from alcohol completely." Still others said they were confused—they didn't know what the speaker was driving at.

If you give a speech and people later wonder or debate exactly what point you were trying to make, you have failed to accomplish your most important task: to communicate your **central idea.**

The central idea is the core message of your speech expressed in one sentence. It is the same as the *thesis sentence, controlling statement,* or *core idea*—terms you may have encountered in English courses. If you were forced to boil your entire speech down to one sentence, what would you say? *That* is your central idea. If, one month after you have given your speech, the audience remembers only one thing, what should it be? *That* is your central idea.

As we will see in later chapters, the central idea is a vital ingredient in your outline for a speech. In fact, it *controls* your entire speech. Everything you say in your speech should develop, explain, illustrate, or prove the central idea. Everything? Yes, everything—all your facts, anecdotes, statistics, and quotations.

If you are unclear in your own mind about your central idea, you will be like the counselor who caused such confusion: listeners will leave your speech wondering, "What in the world was that speaker driving at?"

Devising the Central Idea

Let's imagine that you decide to give a speech on why governments should spend money to send powerful radio signals into outer space. The specific purpose statement of your speech might look like this:

Specific Purpose: To persuade my listeners to support government funding of radio transmissions into outer space

How are you going to persuade your audience? Can you simply say, "Folks, please support radio transmissions into outer space"? No, because merely stating your position won't sway your listeners. To convince them, you need to sell the audience on a central idea that, if believed, might cause them to support your position:

Central Idea: Most scientists agree that radio transmissions are the best means for making contact with extraterrestrial civilizations (if any exist).

If you can sell this idea, you will probably succeed in your specific purpose: To persuade the listeners to support public funding of radio transmissions. They will be persuaded because the central idea is so intriguing: Most people like the notion of communication with aliens from faraway planets, and if most scientists back the idea, it cannot be considered far-out and impractical. "Yes," the listeners will say, "let's spend some of our tax dollars to find other life."

After you decide on a central idea, your task in preparing the rest of the speech is to find materials—such as examples, statistics, and quotations—to explain and prove the central idea. In this case, you would need to explain the technology and cite the testimony of eminent scientists who support radio transmissions into space.

Some students have trouble distinguishing between the specific purpose and the central idea. Is there any significant difference? Yes. The specific purpose is written from your point of view—it is what *you* set out to accomplish. The central idea is written entirely from the listeners' point of view—it is the message *they* go away with.

To learn to distinguish between the specific purpose and the central idea, study the examples in Table 1.

Table 1 How Topics Can Be Developed

Topic	General Purpose	Specific Purpose	Central Idea
Space junk	To inform	To inform my audience about the dangers of "space junk" (dead satellites and bits of expended rocket stages) that orbits the earth	More than 9,000 pieces of debris orbit the earth, threatening commercial and scientific satellites.
Buying a car	To persuade	To persuade my audience to avoid high-pressure sales tactics when buying a car	By comparing prices and using reputable car guides, consumers can avoid being "taken for a ride" by car salespeople.
Driving tests	To entertain	To amuse my audience with the true story of my abysmal failure to pass my first driving test	Taking the test for a driver's license is a scary and sometimes disastrous event.

Central Idea for a persuasive speech: Sugar consumption by children should be limited because of the risk of weight gain and diabetes.

In planning your speech, write the specific purpose statement first—before you start gathering material. In many cases, you will be able to write the central idea immediately afterward. Sometimes, however, you may need to postpone the central idea until you have completed your research. For example, let's say you are planning a speech on the use of steroids by athletes and bodybuilders. Here is your goal:

Specific Purpose: To convince my audience not to use steroids for building muscle

You haven't done any research yet, so you can't really write a central idea. But after you spend a few days studying articles on steroids, you are able to create your central idea:

Central Idea: Individuals who chronically use steroids risk kidney and liver damage.

Guidelines for the Central Idea

1. **Include only one central idea in your speech.** Why not two? Or three? Because you will be doing well if you can fully illuminate just one big idea in a speech. If you try to handle more than one, you run the risk of overwhelming the listeners with more information than they can absorb.
2. **Put the central idea on paper.** Writing it down gives you a clear sense of the direction your speech will take.
3. **Limit the central idea to a single sentence.** Whenever theatrical producer David Belasco was approached by people with an idea for a play, he would hand them his business card and ask them to write their concept on the back. If they protested that they needed more space, that proved they didn't have a clear idea.
4. **Make an assertion rather than an announcement or a statement of fact.** A common mistake is to formulate the central idea as a mere announcement:

   Ineffective: I will discuss robots as surgeons. *(This is a good topic, but what idea does the speaker want to communicate?)*

Another mistake is to put forth nothing more than a statement of fact:

Ineffective: Several operations at Johns Hopkins Medical Center have been performed by surgeons using robots. *(This is interesting, but it is just a fact—a piece of information that can be included in the speech but does not stand alone as an overarching theme.)*

Now let's turn to a better version—one that makes an assertion:

Effective: Robots are valuable assistants in surgery because they can work with great precision and no fatigue. *(This is a good central idea because it asserts a worthwhile point that can be developed in a speech.)*

5. **Let the central idea determine the content of the entire speech.** As you prepare your outline, evaluate every potential item in light of the central idea. Does Fact A help explain the central idea? If yes, keep it. If no, throw it out. Does Statistic B help prove the central idea? If yes, keep it. If no, throw it out.

Overview of Speech Design

How do the items discussed in this chapter fit into the overall design of a speech? If you look at Figure 3, which is an overview of a typical plan for a speech, you will see this chapter's items—general purpose, specific purpose, and central idea—listed in the top oval, labeled "Objectives." These items are planning tools to help you create a coherent speech. They are *not* the opening words of your speech. The bottom oval, "Documentation," is also a planning tool and does not represent the final words of a speech. The actual speech that you deliver is shown in the rectangles: Introduction, Transition, Body, Transition, and Conclusion.

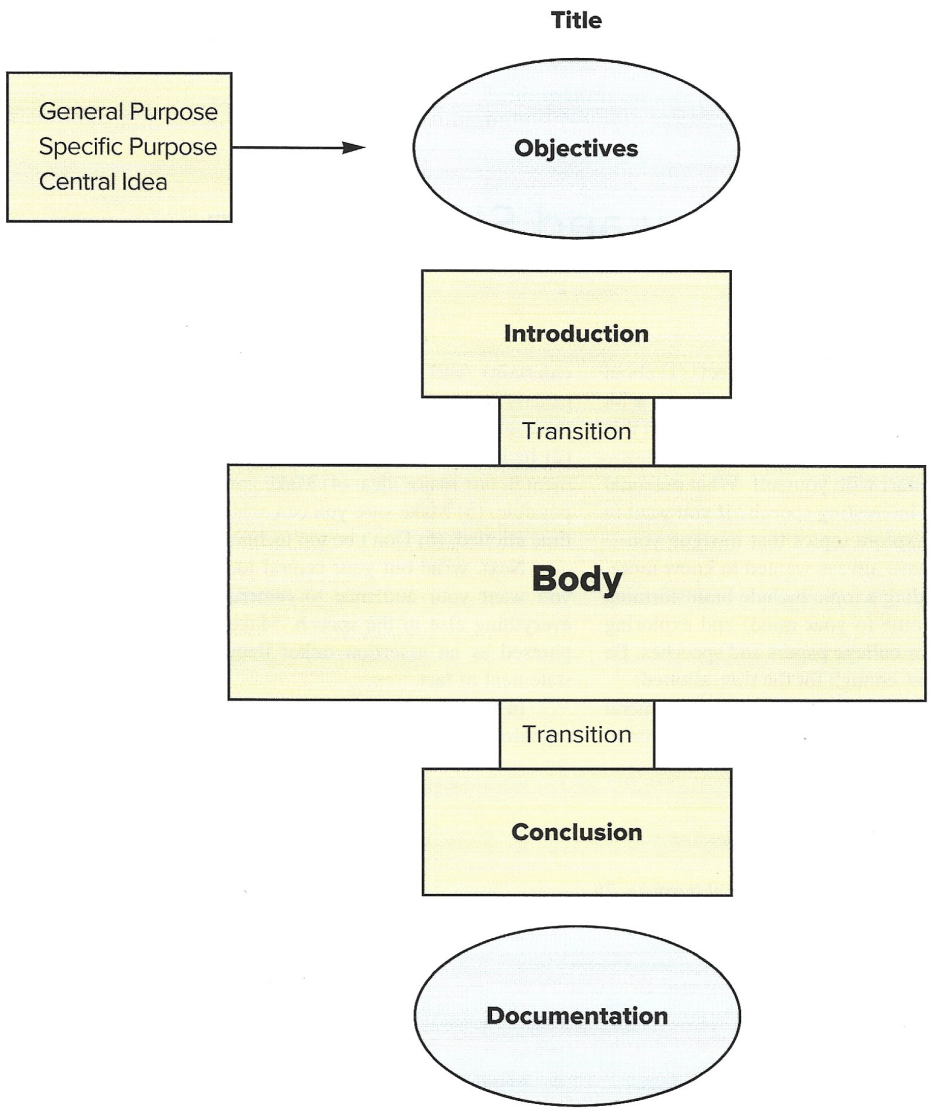


Figure 3
An overview of a typical plan for a speech. "Objectives" are explained in this chapter. The other terms will be covered in later chapters.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that a speaker should create the rectangles from top to bottom, in the order in which they appear. For reasons that will be obvious later, it makes sense to work on the body first, and then tackle the introduction and the conclusion.

Let's pause a moment to consider where we are headed. The next seven chapters will show you how to build a strong speech. First we will look at how to find good primary research materials and finesse them with raw materials. Next we will examine how to develop the body of the speech, the introduction, and the conclusion. Finally, we will discuss how to arrange all the parts in your outline and your speaking notes.

All this work may seem wasteful of your time and energy, but in the long run, it pays rich dividends. It channels your thinking and prevents you from scattering your efforts across too wide a field. It helps you fashion an orderly, understandable speech, increasing the chances that you will enlighten, rather than confuse or bore, your listeners.

Resources for Review and Skill Building

Summary

In choosing a topic for your speech, think of subjects (1) about which you care a great deal, (2) about which you know a lot (either now or after you complete your research), and (3) that your audience will find interesting.

In looking for topics, start with yourself. What personal experiences might yield an interesting speech? If you want to go outside your own life, explore topics that intrigue you—subjects about which you have always wanted to know more.

Other methods for finding a topic include brainstorming (writing down ideas that come to your mind) and exploring websites that list subjects for college papers and speeches. Be sure to choose a topic narrow enough for the time allotted.

After you choose a topic, decide upon your general purpose in speaking (such as to inform, to persuade, or to entertain) and then formulate your specific purpose—exactly what you hope to accomplish in the speech. Follow these guidelines: (1) Begin the statement with an infinitive. (2) Include a reference to your audience. (3) Limit the statement to one major idea. (4) Make your statement as precise as possible. (5) Make sure you can achieve your objective in the time allotted. (6) Don't be too technical.

Next, write out your central idea: the one key idea that you want your audience to remember even if they forget everything else in the speech. Make sure the central idea is phrased as an assertion rather than an announcement or a statement of fact.

In the long run, these preliminary steps will help you organize your ideas in a coherent, understandable form.

Key Terms

brainstorming, *76*
central idea, *82*
general purpose, *79*
infinitive, *81*
specific purpose, *80*

Review Questions

1. When a speaker is enthusiastic about his or her ideas, how do listeners usually react?
2. Name the three main strategies for selecting a good speech topic.
3. How does brainstorming work?
4. List three *general* purposes for speeches.
5. Are jokes required for an entertaining speech? Explain your answer.
6. What are hidden purposes, and how should you handle them?

7. List the six criteria discussed in this chapter for writing a specific purpose statement.
8. What is the central idea of a speech?
9. What is the difference between the specific purpose and the central idea?
10. For the central idea, is an assertion or an announcement better? Explain your answer.

Building Critical-Thinking Skills

1. If handled poorly, "painting a room" could be a boring topic. How would you make it interesting to an audience of college students?
2. "Telling about white collar crime." How could you improve this statement of specific purpose?
3. If the central idea of a speech is "The best computer passwords relate to obscure places and events known only to you," what do you think the specific purpose is?
4. Narrow down the following broad subjects to specific, manageable topics:
   a. Outdoor recreation
   b. Musical groups
   c. Illegal drugs
   d. Saving money
   e. Cloning
5. All but one of the specific purpose statements below are either inappropriate for a brief classroom speech or incorrectly written. Identify the good one, and rewrite the bad ones so that they conform to the guidelines in this chapter:
   a. To inform my audience of the basics of quantum inelastic scattering and photodissociation code
   b. To inform my listeners about creativity on the job, getting raises, and being an effective manager
   c. To explain to my audience how to perform basic yoga exercises
   d. How persons with disabilities can fight back against job discrimination
   e. Immigration since 1800
   f. To persuade my audience to be careful

Building Teamwork Skills

1. Before you meet, each group member should list five potential speech topics. In your group, evaluate each topic: Is it interesting and appropriate for a classroom speech?
2. In a group, brainstorm topics that would be boring or inappropriate for speeches in your class. Choose one person to write down the topics. Remember that no one should criticize or analyze during the brainstorming session. Afterward, the group (or the class) can discuss each choice (Does everyone agree? Why is the topic inappropriate?).
3. Follow the instructions for item 2, except brainstorm topics that would be interesting and appropriate for speeches in your class.

Examining Your Ethics

Answer: A. You should know—and respect—your instructor's policy. Some instructors may give permission, while others may prefer that you conduct fresh research.

End Notes

1. Laura Pappano, "How Colleges Are Finding Tomorrow's Prodigies," *Christian Science Monitor* online, csmonitor.com (accessed June 16, 2015); "Roll Over IIT, MIT Is Here," *The Telegraph* (Calcutta, India), www.telegraphindia.com (accessed June 16, 2015); Avijit Chatterjee, "Short Cut to MIT," *The Telegraph* (Calcutta, India), www.telegraphindia.com (accessed December 7, 2015).
2. Jonathan Castro, Oberlin College, e-mail interview, May 14, 2015.
3. Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Future* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), pp. 160–164; Marcus Hall (ed.), *Restoration and History* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 288–230.