ORGANIZING YOUR PRESENTATION

At this point you now have a working thesis statement and are ready to move forward to structuring the speech. If you have not, please return here and develop a thesis before continuing.

Consider this basic outline for constructing a speech:

Introduction
Thesis Statement
Preview

Point I
Sub-point A
Sub-point B
Sub-point C

Point II
Sub-point A
Sub-point B

Point III
Sub-point A
Sub-point B
Sub-point C
Sub-point D

Point ?? (as necessary)
Sub-points ?? (as necessary)

Restate Thesis
Review
Conclusion

What do I do first?

It is important to construct the body of the speech first (see introductions below). The body of the speech is made up of several points, each of which supports the thesis statement. You need to determine an organizational pattern which works best for you. After you do that, you can put the arguments and subsequent support into main points.

Common organizational patterns

While you can devise any approach to organizing the body of the speech, there are several common patterns which may help you develop your presentation. We'll use the controversial topic of capital punishment as an example.
1) Chronological—This pattern is based on linear time. You might discuss the history of capital punishment, how it is used today, and how it may change in the future. This type of organizational method is usually used in presentations to inform.

2) Cause/Effect—You organize your speech by proving a cause and effect relationship. Your speech might focus on capital punishment as a deterrent. Each point of the speech proves or disproves the relationship of capital punishment to deterring crime as it progresses. This pattern is more commonly used in persuasive speeches.

3) Compare/Contrast—Comparing two different points of view, such as pro and con, may be an effective way to inform the audience of capital punishment. You could compare the United States with a country that has banned capital punishment. A third point could include a country which has never had capital punishment.

4) Problem/Cause/Solution—A common persuasive method, this pattern first demonstrates that there is a problem, then investigates the causes of that problem, and finally addresses solutions. For example, a problem with capital punishment may be that it is very costly (in terms of money) to society. A cause of this might be the layering of appeals and resulting court costs. A solution might consist of limiting the number of appeals or (if the point is to remove capital punishment) show that life imprisonment is a more cost-effective option.

There are other patterns to consider. You may create your own as well. Remember: the structure should make you better organized as a speaker, support your thesis, and help the audience understand your presentation. At this point, you can sketch out an outline by using your thesis, goal, choice of organizational pattern, and the evidence in front of you. Don't write it out in complete sentences—this can cause you to manuscript. Just use key words and ideas.

How many main points should I have?

You can have any number of main points, although time limits should be considered very carefully. If you have ten minutes or less, you might consider only two or three main points. If you have 20-30 minutes, you can have five or more.

A very common number is two or three for brief presentations. However, you can have a wide number of sub-points under those main points. It depends on your goal, thesis, and the support (research).

Let's look at number 4 above. My first main point will stress the monetary costs of capital punishment. I may have just that as the main point, with 3 or 4 sub-points showing where the money goes (this is where the research stage is SO important—what does the evidence suggest?). I may have two primary causes—maybe there are more. I may have three reasonable solutions at the federal level, the state level, and the personal level; on the other hand, I may only have one solution that I feel strongly about. It varies a lot, and you have to make choices based upon all of these elements. What do you want to emphasize the most?
What do you want your audience to do? Remember, you must have support for your claims, based on evidence and critical reasoning. The audience can call into question any element of your presentation. Put the source citation on your outline.

Introductions

At this point you should have a basic sketch of the body of the speech—using your thesis statement, you have chosen an organizational pattern and noted your main points and sub-points, with evidence included. At this point, you can now develop your introduction.

Many students ask: Why can't I start with the introduction instead of the body? Well, if you have a great mental picture of where your speech is going, you might be able to do that. However, STAR recommends that students construct the body of the speech first so that they know what they are introducing. In addition, in the process of organizing arguments and research into the body of the speech, you will know what you have left for an introduction, or what to change/modify/work in to make your introductory references more effective and cohesive (brings the speech together).

There are many different types of introductions (see below). However, the function of the introduction is the key. A good introduction should:

1) Get the audience's attention--wake up the audience and set up the speech for them; you could, for example, tell a story about someone who was sentenced to death and then released due to DNA testing

2) Show significance and relevance for the audience--in this example, show how many sentences have been overturned or sustained by DNA testing and how it impacts society

3) Lead into the thesis statement--you can end the introduction by transitioning from a high impact statement into your thesis

Avoid the simple use of your topic as an introduction. "Today I'm discussing capital punishment." It's abrupt, leaves you nowhere to go but the body of the speech, and does not create interest. In addition, avoid saying your name. Have someone else introduce you.

Types of introductions

Rhetorical question--you ask the audience a question that contains an important or startling fact or statement, but you do not expect an answer. However, you must be careful, because some audiences respond to rhetorical questions, and others do not!

Story--if you have a great human-interest story, especially suspenseful or interesting, you might want to get us in the mood and set the tone by beginning with the story. However, be sure the story is documented and true, or the audience may feel betrayed if they later find out it's not true.
Staccato – this is a series of images. You can create a great atmosphere by sharing images of a better (or, for reverse impact, a worse) tomorrow which is shaped by your topic. While this can be effective, it can also be seen as corny, which will hurt your message instead of aiding it.

Humor– you need to be careful with humor, but it can ease the tension for both speaker and audience. A speaker with a great sense of humor can tell an anecdote with ease and create a genuine and immediate rapport with the audience. However, humor is VERY individual, and you don't want to turn an audience against you by having a humorous moment bomb.

Transitions & Previews/Reviews

All effective speeches need transitional elements which connect one piece of the puzzle to the next. An excellent introduction which is followed by a pause, then the thesis, then jumping right into the first point, is going to be seen as choppy and distracting to an audience. Thus, transitions help smooth out the speech and bring all of the parts into a whole.

Two transitions which help an audience tremendously are previews and reviews. Previews provide a link between the thesis and the body of the speech, whereas reviews connect the thesis to the conclusion. Both of them state the major points of the speech. For example, using number 4 above, a preview might be, "the answer to this crisis in capital punishment can be found by looking at the ever-rising costs of courts, how appeals are getting out of hand, and ways to limit the appeals process and eliminate capital punishment in the future." The review should be similar (restating the main points), but worded a bit differently so the audience does not find it redundant.

You need these two transitions because they connect major parts of the speech and they tell the audience what you've done. Why? Attention spans are often very short. Anyone can "drift off" at a moment of inattention. In addition, any noise or distraction could cause someone to miss a primary point. Repeating it aids retention and maintains interest.

Other transitions, such as between points or sub-points, help the audience follow your direction and smooth out any rough spots in the presentation. Thus, use transitions freely and throughout the presentation. Quick transitions, called signposts, can help the audience by signaling a change in the speech or emphasizing a point. "Incredibly," "At this point," "A contradiction? Absolutely." These are all examples of signposts— one or two words which can make the difference between someone paying attention and someone losing total interest.

Conclusions

The conclusion is a key moment in the presentation. It is often the very last thing people will remember about your speech. If effective, it could call someone to action or convince him or her of your point of view.
Take your time with the conclusion. Let the speech soak into the audience. Avoid clichés. Avoid saying thank you. While it might appear polite, it actually breaks the moment you create with the audience.

Types of conclusions

Story– you might consider finishing an earlier story (a surprise ending perhaps?) or start a very brief story that encompasses the point of your speech. Be sure that the story captures the mood you want to end with.

Quotation– some speakers like to leave the audience with thoughts or words from someone else. The success of this type of conclusion depends entirely on the quality of the quotation and its appropriateness to the audience.

Call to action– if the speech is persuasive, you can call on the audience to do something. You present a call to action with urgency but not force; you cannot literally make someone do something if they don't want to. Your vocal urgency and inflection can help move someone to, for example, write a congressional leader or sign a petition. Leaving a handout or other information can be an effective tool to remind people of your message and leave them the option of acting after the speech.

Am I organized or what?

Yes you are! Your basic outline includes main points, sub-points, evidence, major transitions, thesis statement, introduction, and conclusion. Now you need to transfer this outline to note cards. It is recommended that you limit the number of words you put on your cards (otherwise you will be tempted to read it when you deliver your speech). Use key words (what we call prompts) to remind you of what you are talking about. You may want to write signposts or other transitions on the note cards as well. Be sure to put your sources on the note cards so you can state them during the presentation. You are now ready for delivery!

*Special thanks to Jody Roy, Ph.D. for providing these materials to SAVE.*