

Speaking to Persuade

You might hear that “persuasion is moving people from where they are to where you want them.” And the academic legend ends with a student speaker standing up to say: “Class dismissed!” If everyone got up and left, arguably . . . the speaker should get a good grade?

The border between speaking to inform and speaking to persuade can be murky. Overall, if a speaker seeks to change listeners’ thinking (beliefs or attitudes) or their behavior, then the speaker is engaging in persuasive discourse.

To prepare an effective persuasive speech, the speaker practices the art of rhetoric, defined in ancient times by Aristotle as “the faculty [or ability] of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (*The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, Book I, Chapter 2). How does one best go about this observing?

Consider the claim you wish to argue.

- A. Are you proposing a claim of fact, i.e., asserting that something is or is not the case? If yes, standard issues you should think about include:
 - 1. How can we know the truth or accuracy of the claim?
 - 2. Does the information at hand measure up to the criteria?
- B. Are you proposing a claim of value, i.e., asserting that something is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified? If yes, standard issues you should think about include:
 - 1. What are the standards or criteria for judgment?
 - 2. How does the given subject measure up to the standards?
- C. Are you proposing a claim of policy, i.e., recommending a particular course of action that you want the listeners to approve or to carry out? If yes, standard issues you should think about include:
 - 1. Is there a need for change?
 - 2. Is the proposal practical? (workable? feasible?)
 - 3. Do the benefits of the proposal outweigh the disadvantages?
 - 4. Is the proposal the best option among alternatives?

Consider the proofs you might bring to support the claim.

- A. Logical proofs, sometimes called *logos*, are the reasoning and evidence that support your claim.
 - 1. Common types of reasoning include:
 - a. Reasoning by example or “induction” (e.g., multiple instances of “fact-checking” supporting a claim that a candidate lies)
 - b. Reasoning from generalization or “deduction” (e.g., X% of the time, if a candidate does not show well in the Iowa caucuses, the candidate will not make it to the national election; candidate Y is not spending any time in Iowa; therefore . . .)

- c. Reasoning from signs (e.g., When investors retreat to bonds, it's a sign of lessening confidence in the economy that can lead to recession; the US has seen a retreat to bonds in recent days; therefore . . .)
 - d. Reasoning from parallel cases (e.g., My study abroad experience in Kyoto made a huge difference in my Japanese language proficiency; you could achieve similar gains by studying in Kyoto next summer.)
 - e. Reasoning from cause (e.g., Lack of cultural competence can lead to an uncomfortable workplace climate; recent survey results show that our organization has shortfalls in cultural competence; therefore . . .)
2. Reasoning needs to be supported by evidence, so you will want to think about what library, internet, or other research will provide evidence in support of your reasoning and claim. In some cases, a personal example or an illustration can also be supporting evidence.
- B. Emotional, or motivational proofs, sometimes called *pathos*, also might be used to support your claim.
1. A personal example or illustration, narrative, poetry, photographs can be motivational, creating a sense of empathy or other emotional response.
 2. If Maslow's hierarchy of needs is something you have studied in a psychology or similar course, could you use that tool in thinking about motivational appeal that might be effective with your audience.
 3. Use caution with fear appeals; while making people afraid may seem like a powerful move, the research on the effectiveness of scaring people as a means of persuasion vs. the harm such appeals can cause has raised serious questions about this approach. There are important ethical considerations to consider with respect to fear appeals in persuasion.
- C. Your own credibility is also an important persuasive proof, sometimes called ethical proof or *ethos*.
1. Conveying, through your reasoning and your speech organization, that you know what you are talking about adds to your persuasive effectiveness.
 2. You may have your own narrative to bring to a particular claim (which simultaneously serves as logical evidence and motivational appeal); you may indicate your own commitment to action (either in the past, or as an intention going forward) to add to your credibility as a persuasive speaker.
 3. Your credibility is also enhanced if, through your speech, you demonstrate that you have the best interests of the audience in mind.

A resource for the foregoing summary is Kathleen German, Bruce Gronbeck, Douglas Ehninger, and Alan Monroe, *Principles of Public Speaking*, 18th edition (Routledge, 2017).

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