

Elements of Speechwriting: Argument, Evidence, and Significance

Argument

There is no reason to give a speech unless one has an argument to make. A speech should never be confused with story-telling or poetry reading. There are worthwhile activities, but they are not speeches. We typically deliver a speech because we believe that the audience wishes to be informed about our point of view.

There are formal definitions of an argument, but it is better to regard an argument as nothing more than an explanation of why one believes something to be true.

Arguments are therefore not unfamiliar to us, but we rarely develop them in normal conversation. Typically we make assertions, which are merely the conclusions to what might have been an argument. Most of our daily conversation with others revolves around such assessments: “Nice day, isn’t it?” “You look great today!” “The readings for this course are boring!” Fortunately, however, our daily conversations do not demand rigorous evidence or logic to warrant argument. Assertions are fine when we are talking with our friends, but an assertion is only the conclusion to an unstated or undeveloped argument—our friends usually do not ask why we think it is a nice day, but assume that we have our reasons for believing that the day is truly nice.

There are also some assertions which are not based upon an implicit argument. There are assertions of taste or preference. When a person says “Lima beans are disgusting” (an eminently defensible assertion), asking the person for the reasons for this preference is an exercise in futility, although it can lead to a comic exchange. Tastes and preferences are not usually amenable to rigorous analysis (how, for example, could one “prove” that someone attesting hatred for lima beans actually adores them?), and a speaker should avoid making such assertions. A speaker should develop only arguments that require more than the opinion of one person for verification.

A speech (or any analytical exercise) requires that all assertions be developed as arguments. The audience has assembled principally because it believes that the speaker will assert the truth of an important proposition that is controversial, ambiguous, or unknown to the members of the audience. It may be the case that the audience knows the speaker or the speaker’s reputation, and can anticipate the argument. Many times, the audience will know little about the speaker but may have a strong interest in the subject matter. But in all cases, the audience will rightfully expect three things from a speaker: Explanation, Evidence, and Significance.

Explanation. The argument is nothing more than a substantiated declaration of belief. In a speech, one should be able to summarize the argument in a single declarative sentence. Few people will be able to follow a more complex argument, and the danger of confusing the audience far outweighs the advantage of presenting a more sophisticated or complex argument.

Identifying one’s belief, however, is extraordinarily difficult. We often do not know what we believe and we often think that we lack the necessary information to substantiate our beliefs.



MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE
THE SPEAKING, ARGUING, AND WRITING PROGRAM

However compelling these reasons seem, they are generally not true, and it is crucially important that a speaker not succumb to these reservations and fears. These reservations and fears arise because we think that an audience will interpret a declaration of belief as something universal, eternal, and unchangeable. Indeed, most audiences want to hear such declarations, and some speakers actually want to make such declarations.

A more careful speaker, however, will temper his or her declaration of belief in this way, without ever explicitly saying these words to an audience: "This is what I believe at this point in time. I believe this to be true because I have studied the question and have taken all reasonable steps to make sure that my explanation is well-founded. There may be information which I have missed which might dramatically change my belief. If some member of the audience provides me with that information, we can talk about it and mutually assess how it affects my belief." This attitude will have two effects" first, it will relax the speaker by easing the presumption of perfection we all carry around with us; second, if obviously held, it will convey a sense of openness to the audience that will make the speech a cooperative activity.

Most of the work necessary to build an argument never actually appears in a speech. The preparatory work should be likened to the frame of a house: the most important part to build well, but the part that will ultimately never be directly seen by anyone.

Constructing the Argument

One should concentrate first on a single question: "What is the most important interpretation of the evidence I wish the audience to grasp in this speech?" The answer to this question forms the content of one's argument.

The next step in the process is for the speaker to ask himself or herself the question: "Why do I believe this interpretation of the evidence to be true?" The speaker should then list, in order of importance, all the reasons why he or she finds the interpretation persuasive.

These two steps are all that is necessary to construct an argument. It is a simple process but one which demands a considerable amount of self-awareness. Our beliefs tend to be too familiar to ourselves; we have a very difficult time making our thought processes explicit. Writing down the reasons for believing a particular interpretation is an excellent way to make our ideas more explicit. Discussing one's interpretation of the evidence with others is also a good way to construct an argument.

Refining the Argument

Once one has developed a general and preliminary explanation of the evidence, then one has an obligation to go through all the available evidence. In the process of developing an argument, we often distort, ignore, or slight evidence to make it support the argument. Often, this distortion is unintended—our memories of the evidence can become less specific. The speaker obviously needs to keep an open mind in this review of the evidence—a difficult task. One should always conduct this review with the specific intention of refuting the argument. Whenever one finds that there is no evidence for a particular belief, then one should question seriously whether that belief is valid. If

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE
THE SPEAKING, ARGUING, AND WRITING PROGRAM

sufficient or compelling evidence is not available for a part of the explanation, then that part should be excised from the argument. If the argument lacks plausibility without that particular part, then the argument is flawed.

If the argument turns out to be unsupportable given the available evidence, then the speaker has two choices. The first is to discard the argument and try to find a new argument. If a new argument cannot be constructed, then the speech should not be given. Often, however, a speaker has a second choice: to change the argument so that the evidence is consistent with the explanation. The process of refining the explanation is genuinely exciting and it demands the full analytical abilities of the speaker.

Calibrating the Argument

The final step in the process of constructing an explanation is to review the evidence and the argument in light of the knowledge and experience of the expected audience. This step is crucially important and is one that is often overlooked by many speakers. One should always match one's ideas and the presentation of one's ideas to the intellectual and emotional maturity of the audience. A speaker should always assume a slightly higher level of sophistication is probable: talking down to one's audience alienates the audience to a profound degree. If some members of the audience miss specific points, they will likely blame themselves rather than the speaker as long as the general tenor of the speech is accessible to them.

Evidence. A speaker should know his or her subject matter as thoroughly as possible. Depending on the sophistication of the audience, the speaker will relate information that is either widely known (in which case, the information needs little elaboration) or known to only a small number of people (perhaps to only the speaker). In this latter case, the evidence needs to be substantiated: how was it obtained? Who obtained it? What are the credentials of the discoverers of the information? Has the information been verified by others? Can it be verified by other?

One should be extraordinarily careful never to confuse evidence or information with raw "facts." Facts tend to be evidence about which some people agree; those who disagree with the evidence deny that it constitutes a "fact." Indeed, one might be well-advised never to use the word "fact" in a speech. The term sets up the evidence as something about which there can be no disagreement and therefore excludes the audience from that part of the speech. Evidence is crucial, but evidence cannot explain itself. The statement, "The facts speak for themselves," is perhaps the most misleading phrase in the English language, and is itself a confession that the speaker has failed to make an argument. Evidence must be organized and interpreted if it is to be understood. Moreover, if someone persuasively disagrees with a speaker's "fact," the speaker runs the risk of having his or her credibility undermined.

Asserting evidence, however, should always convey the speaker's confidence in it. There is little reason to assert evidence about which one is uncertain: if the speaker is uncertain, why should the audience find the evidence persuasive? One should be careful to use only evidence that the audience believes can be verified through its own efforts or which has been vetted by knowable and reputable sources. Referring to sources which are closed to the review of others only works

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE
THE SPEAKING, ARGUING, AND WRITING PROGRAM

when the audience has already committed itself to a particular point of view (such as a statement by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency to most members of Congress).

Making sure that evidence meets these criteria for substantiation is important because the criteria create a shared basis for what might be true or not true for both the speaker and the audience. Thus, evidence “proves” only that the speaker and the audience have certain understandings in common. The evidence must be made accessible to the audience and it must be credible to the audience. If the audience finds that the manner in which the evidence presented is consistent with its own understanding of the evidence, then it is likely that the audience will determine that the speaker is knowledgeable and therefore someone whose opinion can be trusted.

Evidence usually comes in three forms:

The speaker’s personal experience. Information provided by personal experience performs two roles in a speech. First, it humanizes the speech by referring to something which many in the audience may have experienced as well. This immediacy is consistent with an overall objective of any speech—the desire to connect speaker with audience. Second, personal experience can only be illustrative, but its implications can be made very clear if the number of individuals or issues involved is limited. The problem with personal experience as evidence, however, is that it is usually not generalizable. One is talking about a single case, and it is never clear what a single case proves (usually nothing).

Empirical evidence. There are generally accepted forms of evidence which often require little explanation, but the degree of necessary explanation depends upon the criticality of the evidence. If, for example, one needs to assert something about the size of the American economy in order to make a point about its relation to other economies in the world, evidence from a U.S. treasury document would need little elaboration or justification. However, if one is making an argument that the U.S. Government manipulates economic information in order to achieve certain social or political objectives, then a reference to that same Treasury document would require greater scrutiny.

Similarly, when information has been developed through well established procedures (such as in the natural sciences), there is usually little question about its validity. Names, dates, numbers and other “hard” types of evidence are particularly effective when used judiciously. Nonetheless, one should be exceedingly cautious about how empirical evidence has been obtained and verified. The incidence of outright fraud in empirical evidence is rare, but not unknown. More likely is the manipulation of empirical evidence by institutions or groups that have a vested interest in particular conclusions from the evidence. We rightly regard as highly suspicious evidence about the health effects of second-hand smoke from the Tobacco Institute.

Authoritative opinion. Much of what a speaker might discuss cannot be found in his or her own personal experience or measured empirically. If others have written or spoken of their professional experience, one can refer to that evidence. Similarly, if a scholar has devoted his or her life to the study of a particular issue and has published materials, one can use those published materials as a source of evidence. For example, the concrete

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE
THE SPEAKING, ARGUING, AND WRITING PROGRAM

evidence (names, dates, places, etc.) from Henry Kissinger on the matter of the U.S. opening to China in 1973 would be highly credible, even though the speaker may not know Henry Kissinger or has never been to China. However, Kissinger's opinions on the usefulness or necessity of the opening to China would be highly suspect (but not automatically dismissible) since he had a vested interest in the success of the move. One should be careful about the use of authoritative opinion. One should remember that opinions are nothing more than that. One should make sure that the opinions cited are indeed "authoritative."

Significance. The third and final element of a speech is for a speaker to explain why the argument is important. Typically, part of this element occurs explicitly at the beginning of the speech: a good "hook" at the beginning is usually to catch the audience's attention. In addition, every speech should begin with the conclusion: the audience will be better able to follow the speech if it knows where it is going. But the most important place to develop the significance of the argument is in the conclusion.

A good conclusion conveys the implications of an argument. If the argument is true, then it must mean something for most every member of the audience. When Winston Churchill delivered his for his speech as Prime Minister to Parliament in May of 1940, he asked and answered a question at the end to explain to his audience the significance of his argument:

You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs - Victory in spite of all terrors - Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival.

These types of meanings should be, and can only be, fully developed in the conclusion. A conclusion is not a summary of the speech; rather, a good conclusion will print out for the audience how what they learned was important and what they must now do. It is at the end of the speech that one finds the most dramatic sentences: "Ich bin ein Berliner," or "Free at Last." These conclusions not only encapsulate the argument of the speech, they bring a powerful emotional expression to the argument.

The end of a speech should be identified for the audience. The words "finally" or "in conclusion" are taken quite literally by an audience and, when uttered, will signal to the audience that a speaker should never say these words except at the very end of the speech; using them to finish off a subpoint will create frustration and restlessness among the members of the audience. A premature use of such phrases will also diminish the audience's attention to a considerable degree.

Throughout the speech, the audience should have no doubt that the speaker fervently believes the argument. Audiences expect a high degree of intensity and commitment from a speaker. One should avoid giving the impression, however, that the speaker is expressing a position that will not permit disagreement, qualification, or dissent. Such an impression would signal the audience that there is little or no reason to think about what the speaker is saying—either the audience will agree or it will not agree, and in either case there is nothing more to say. The most effective impression a speaker can leave is: "This is what I believe. Here are my reasons for believing it. I want the audience to test my beliefs, and I trust the audience to test them well."