

Original Oratory: Choosing a Speech Topic

Finding a good topic for a presentation is often the most difficult task for many speakers. The first rule for making a good choice is to find something that already **interests** you. When the topic interests you, your enthusiasm for the subject can spread to your listeners.

One approach to finding a topic is to do an interest inventory. Divide a sheet of paper into 10 columns: people, places, things, events, processes, concepts, natural phenomena, supernatural phenomena, problems, plans and policies. As you do this, ask yourself several questions that may lead to good suggestions. Typical questions often include the following:

- * What are my hobbies or special talents? What careers interest me?
- * What are some interesting things that I have done or interesting places I have visited?
- * What books or newspaper and magazine articles have I enjoyed reading recently?
- * What famous people do I admire?
- * About what have I always been curious?

Circle topics that you know more about and feel comfortable with. What would be interesting to a general audience?

After you complete the inventory, make a list of topics that appear in the inventory answers. Next, it is time to evaluate each possible topic. For each topic, ask the following questions:

- * How interested am I in this topic?
- * How interesting can I make the topic?
- * Can I make this interesting to my audience?
- * Can I locate enough information about the topic?
- * Is this topic appropriate to the speaking situation?

After considering the answers to these questions, it may be helpful to assign each topic a number rating from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Next, go back and review the topics rated four or five. One of these higher-rated topics may be the subject for which you are looking. Make your choice from the list of highest rated topics. Keep your notes from the inventory and rating for future use.

The next step in choosing a topic is to **focus** or **narrow the topic**. Many beginning speakers try to cover too much information in one speech. It is much better to take a smaller part of the topic and do a complete and thorough job. Find out what the time limit for the speech is going to be. Then narrow the topic so you can adequately cover it within the time limit.

Sample Informative Topics

- The status of a particular country and/or its leader
- The future of agriculture (family vs. corporate farms)
- Feasibility of forms of energy (nuclear, solar, wind, etc.)
- Privacy vs. censorship online
- What's involved in being an organ donor?
- Consumer education, investing/stock market.
- What are the facts about world poverty?
- UN Millennium Development Goals
- Who is a powerful contemporary writer?
- What the experts say about choosing a career
- Which diets really work?
- Elections: primaries, presidential, Electoral College
- New discoveries in New trends in advertising
- Are there any new concepts in mass transportation?
- What is sexist language?
- How are maps made?
- Digital rights management (music and movies).
- How is the rate of inflation determined?
- What's the future for real estate?
- Effects of TV or video game violence?
- What is the foreign exchange student program?
- The facts about diet pills
- The history of jazz (or select another type of music)
- How do unions work?
- Success of designated smoking area laws
- The history of cremation customs
- How does cloning work?
- What are the current child custody laws?
- The facts about teenage alcoholism
- New breakthroughs for the handicapped
- How scholarships are awarded
- What is the impact of the new immigration laws?
- What has been the impact of recycling centers?
- Why the change in marriage and divorce rates?
- What's the *New Age* movement?

Sample Persuasive Topics

Persuasive topics alert an audience to a problem; affirm the existence of a problem and offer a viable solution; or urge the adoption of a policy. Whatever the circumstance, persuasive communication advocates some type of action— whether it be to get people thinking, or to get off their chairs and do something.

- We should reduce our fat intake.
- We should reduce our body weight.
- Spend more leisure time doing [something].
- The value of volunteering
- Why organ donation is safe and necessary
- The Electoral College system should be changed.
- Every citizen should spend two years in mandatory community service.
- State drug laws should be changed.
- The income tax system should be changed
- Everyone should take a foreign language.
- Everyone should read a weekly news magazine regularly.
- We devote too much attention to college athletics.
- Don't (or do) invest in the stock market.
- The U.S. should have a tougher trade policy.
- All farmers should be given low-interest loans.
- A college education should be available to all citizens at no cost.
- Teachers should be paid more.
- Nuclear power plants should or should not be phased out.
- Developing alternative energy sources must become a national priority.
- School vouchers should (or shouldn't) be promoted.
- Affirmative action is the best way to overcome discrimination.
- What working mothers and fathers need from their employers
- Why a national health care system will (or won't) work.
- Students should (or shouldn't) be given the opportunity to pay off their tuition through public service.
- The use of animals in research should be fully regulated.
- It's time to put an end to violence on television.
- The U.S. should (or should not) invest in the stock market to save Social Security.

Next Step: Research!

Now, *look deeper* into the topic you've selected. **Do not start by sitting down at a computer!** Grab paper and something to write with. Start with what you know – jot down ideas for places to look; then brainstorm related subjects and **key words**. Check at home for materials you or family members may have gathered on the subject. See if those materials have bibliographies that may lead you to additional resources. Then, go to the library – ask the librarian for help (that's what they're paid to be there for!); check special online subscription resources the library may have exclusive access to. If you need to, write/e-mail for information from expert sources/academic people (such as professors).

Remember, sources come in various shapes and sizes:

- ❖ **Primary** – first-hand accounts: diaries, journals, stories - people who experienced subject
- ❖ **Secondary** – history books, encyclopedias- what other people wrote on the subject
- ❖ **Statistics** – use carefully and consider source credibility (USA Today = BAD!) and don't use too many or you may put audience to sleep
- ❖ **Biographical aids**
- ❖ **Periodicals** – a magazine or journal on almost every subject!