

Finding a Purpose

A **general purpose** refers to the broad goal in creating and delivering a speech.

Modern public speaking scholars typically use a classification system of three general purposes: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain.

To Inform

The first general purpose that some people have for giving speeches is to **inform**. Simply put, this is about helping audience members acquire information that they do not already possess. Audience members can then use this information to understand something (e.g., speech on a new technology, speech on a new virus) or to perform a new task or improve their skills (e.g., how to swing a golf club, how to assemble a layer cake). The most important characteristic of informative topics is that the goal is to gain knowledge. Notice that the goal is not to encourage people to use that knowledge in any specific way. When a speaker starts encouraging people to use knowledge in a specific way, he or she is no longer informing but is persuading. Knowledge sharing is an important part of every society, so learning how to deliver informative speeches is a valuable skill.



Common Types of Informative Topics

- Objects, which can include how objects are designed, how they function, and what they mean. For example, a student of one of our coauthors gave a speech on the design of corsets, using a mannequin to demonstrate how corsets were placed on women and the amount of force necessary to lace one up.
- People. People-based speeches tend to be biography-oriented. Such topics could include recounting an individual's achievements and explaining why he or she is important in history.
- Explaining the significance of specific events, either historical or contemporary. For example, you could deliver a speech on a specific battle of World War II or a specific presidential administration.
- Concepts, or "abstract and difficult ideas or theories. Whether you want to discuss theories related to business, sociology, psychology, religion, politics, art, or any other major area of study, this type of speech can be very useful in helping people to understand complex ideas.
- Processes. The process speech can be divided into two unique types: how-it-functions and how-to-do.

Persuasion: Behavior versus Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs

Persuasion can address behaviors—observable actions on the part of listeners—and it can also address intangible thought processes in the form of attitudes, values, and beliefs.

- Behavior-oriented persuasive speeches such as: washing one's hands frequently and using hand sanitizer, adapting one's driving habits to improve gas mileage, using open-source software, or drinking one soft drink or soda over another. In all these cases, the goal is to make a change in the basic behavior of audience members.

- Change in attitudes, values, or beliefs. An **attitude** is defined as an individual's general predisposition toward something as being good or bad, right or wrong, negative or positive. If you believe that dress codes on college campuses are a good idea, you want to give a speech persuading others to adopt a positive attitude toward campus dress codes.
- A speaker can also attempt to persuade listeners to change some value they hold. **Value** refers to an individual's perception of the usefulness, importance, or worth of something. We can value a college education, we can value technology, and we can value freedom. Values, as a general concept, are fairly ambiguous and tend to be very lofty ideas. Ultimately, what we value in life actually motivates us to engage in a range of behaviors. For example, if you value protecting the environment, you may recycle more of your trash than someone who does not hold this value. If you value family history and heritage, you may be more motivated to spend time with your older relatives and ask them about their early lives than someone who does not hold this value.
- Change their personal beliefs. **Beliefs** are propositions or positions that an individual holds as true or false without positive knowledge or proof. Typically, beliefs are divided into two basic categories: core and dispositional. **Core beliefs** are beliefs that people have actively engaged in and created over the course of their lives (e.g., belief in a higher power, belief in extraterrestrial life forms). **Dispositional beliefs**, on the other hand, are beliefs that people have not actively engaged in; they are judgments based on related subjects, which people make when they encounter a proposition. Imagine, for example, that you were asked the question, "Can gorillas speak English?" While you may never have met a gorilla or even seen one in person, you can make instant judgments about your understanding of gorillas and fairly certainly say whether you believe that gorillas can speak English.

Key Take Aways

- Informative speeches can focus on objects, people, events, concepts, processes, or issues. It is important to remember that your purpose in an informative speech is to share information with an audience, not to persuade them to do or believe something.
- There are two basic types of persuasion: pure and manipulative. Speakers who attempt to persuade others for pure reasons do so because they actually believe in what they are persuading an audience to do or think. Speakers who persuade others for manipulative reasons do so often by distorting the support for their arguments because they have an ulterior motive in persuading an audience to do or think something. If an audience finds out that you've been attempting to manipulate them, they will lose trust in you.