

Guidance for speakers: Public speaking's basic aims

These guidelines are designed to be of use in preparing for any public speech, but especially those in competitions of any format. We advise speakers in the ESU International Public Speaking Competition to read the judging guidelines and mark scheme at the end of this book in addition to this section.

The term public speaking covers many activities. It is an essential part of the jobs of teachers, politicians, broadcasters, lecturers, salesmen, lawyers and religious figures; it is done by community leaders and campaigners. At some point all of us will have to give a speech in public, whether at a public ceremony, special family or community occasion, or in a class, business presentation or job interview.

Each of these activities has a different purpose, but we can still identify three aims of public speaking:

- to inform
- to persuade
- to inspire

That means that some forms of speaking in public aren't public speaking – acting, for example, or cabaret entertainment – but these activities may also share aspects with public speaking, such as the need to be delivered clearly and maintain audience interest.

People who inform, persuade and inspire

How do these purposes fit into our real-world instances of public speaking? Teachers, lecturers and most broadcasters certainly set out to inform us, giving us valuable information on a range of topics. Lawyers are tasked to persuade – that is, to gain the assent of a court, judge or jury of the truth or falsity of a claim. Campaigners intend to inspire their audiences – that is, rouse them into action – whether to protect the environment, demand a change of government, or go on strike.

But to some extent all roles seek to inform, persuade and inspire. A politician wants to inform you of her policies, which you may not be familiar with; to persuade you that they are good policies; and inspire you to vote for them. A salesman wants to inform you about his product, persuade you that it is a good product, and inspire you to buy it. It may not immediately be obvious but all the types of public speech we have mentioned encompass all three different purposes. A teacher, for example, when setting out to inform you, also has to persuade you that you should believe what she is saying, and pay

attention to it. You believe what a teacher says, in the absence of other ways to check its accuracy, because the teacher herself has credibility, a result of her authority. Politicians, religious and community leaders, and lawyers all rely in part on their credibility to ensure that they achieve their other aims.

Credibility

Credibility is what is fundamental to all types of public speaking – it is the willingness of the audience to listen to you, to believe what you are saying, and to approve of you saying it. Having credibility doesn't necessarily imply that the audience is also informed, persuaded or inspired, but it is an essential foundation for any of those things.

Most speakers gain credibility from who they are and what they do. So we listen to a politician's policies more carefully and are more open to being persuaded by him because we know that he will be standing for election and may soon govern us. At a very practical level, we listen to his views and those of broadcasters because they are transmitted on the radio and television, just as we listen to lawyers in court because they are the ones suitably qualified to be allowed to address the court. We listen to teachers and lecturers and religious figures, even if we are meeting them for the first time, because of their title or perhaps what they wear – the outward signs of authority.

The ESU International Public Speaking Competition aims to test the general skills that are used by public speakers. It aims to test your ability to inform, persuade or inspire, but in order to demonstrate that you must first establish credibility. This is the hardest part of competitive public speaking, as opposed to the 'real world' speeches made by the figures we have examined; as a competitor you have no automatic credibility from who you are, the role you perform or the job you do. All the audience's willingness to listen to you, believe you and approve of you must come solely from your speech, apart from, and sometimes despite, its context in a competition.

About this part of the handbook

In the next few sections we will look at how we prepare a speech – choosing our topic, researching our subject, organising our content and practising our delivery – with the emphasis all the time on how to use each of these elements to build our credibility. Finally we will look at how to deal with questions, tips to build your confidence, and the judging guidelines and mark scheme.