



YOUR FIRST SPEECH

Helpful Hints to Receive a Waiver for the PT410 Oral Communication Practicum Requirement

You have just been informed that every incoming M.Div. student is required to give a short devotional speech. You are probably thinking, "What am I supposed to do?" Fortunately, giving a speech sounds a lot harder than it is. The purpose of this brief pamphlet is to provide you with the information you need to do a good job on this assignment. The pamphlet is divided into two main sections: (1) Guidelines and Evaluation; and (2) Some Helpful Hints.¹

GUIDELINES AND EVALUATION

The speech will be evaluated according to the following guidelines:

1. The devotional speech may be from any portion of Scripture.
2. The speech will be between three (3) and five (5) minutes in length.
3. The speech will begin with a reading of the Scripture.
4. The speech will include a clear, interesting introduction and a clear, compelling conclusion.
5. The body of the speech will be clearly organized according to logical main points.
6. The speech will contain clear, accurate information that is made relevant and interesting to the speaker's audience of choice. (You will state your intended audience prior to the speech.)
7. The speech will contain several examples of supporting material.
8. The speech will contain several connectives/transitions between points.
9. The delivery of the speech will show signs of verbal and nonverbal competence and practice.
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SOME HELPFUL HINTS

This section will cover the following: how to select a passage of Scripture, how to focus your speech, how to make your speech more interesting, how to organize your speech, how to prepare and practice your speech, how to behave during the presentation, and how to cope with stage fright.

How do I select a passage?

For this devotional speech, it is often best to choose a passage that you know well and in which you are interested. Make sure that the portion of Scripture you choose is not too long since you will only have 3-5 minutes to explain and apply it. Whatever passage you choose,

¹Adapted from Carl Burghardt, *How to Give Your First Speech* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995).

make sure you understand precisely what the assignment requires. In this case, as it is a 3-5 minute speech, the main ideas will need to be focused, clear, and relevant.

How do I focus my speech?

You will need to gather material to include in your devotion. After you have settled on a particular passage, be certain the focus of your speech is narrow enough to conform to the time limit. One of the most common mistakes students make on their first speech is to try to cover too much material. Not only does this cause the speech to go over the time limit, but it also results in content that is too general or superficial. So you should select a limited amount of focused material that is illustrated and applied to the hearer.

How can I make my speech interesting?

You should strive to make your devotion as creative and interesting as possible. But how do you select material that will please the audience? We know from experience that certain general traits tend to make a compelling speech. While your talk need not include all of these traits, it would be helpful if it incorporated some of them: (1) Speak for the “ear” and not for the “eye.” That is, make sure you are building bridges to your hearers’ experiences and not just providing a running commentary. (2) Make sure you answer the “so what” question and not just explain the text for its original setting. (3) Use vivid, descriptive language that appeals to your audience's senses.

How should I organize my speech?

For this assignment, make sure you have a central idea or theme that the verse(s) is about. Then center your main points around that main theme. Some passages lend themselves to follow the flow of the text. Other passages will require you to “reconstruct” the main points from throughout the pericope. Either way, make sure that your main points have FORM: are Faithful to the text, are Obvious from text, Relate to the hearers’ condition, and is Moving toward a climax.

Regardless of the subject, your speech will have three main parts—an *introduction*, a *body*, and a *conclusion*. What should a good introduction do? First, it needs to engage the attention and interest of the audience. Second, the introduction should also orient your audience toward the subject matter of your speech. This leads to stating clearly the specific purpose of your speech. Lastly, immediately after announcing your specific purpose, you should provide your audience with a “road map” for the rest of your speech by previewing or forecasting the major points. Once you have completed these steps, it is time to move on to the body of your speech.

The body should follow a distinct organizational format such as chronological or topical. In your first speech, usually all you need to worry about is keeping your major ideas related to each other and clearly focused. The main points should directly illustrate or explain the overall topic, yet each point should develop different aspects of it. Remember to limit the number of main points. If your speech has too many points, your audience will struggle to recognize the most important ideas. Once you have selected those points, make sure each one focuses on a single aspect of the topic.

In the conclusion, you will need to accomplish two tasks: (1) Let your audience know you are about to finish your speech, and (2) review the main points. If possible, try to end on a dramatic or thought-provoking note. Such an ending ties up the presentation and allows the speaker to finish on a strong note.

How should I prepare my speech for delivery?

Once you have selected an appropriate passage and organized the content into a clear structure, it is time to prepare your speech for delivery. A common impulse of many students is to write out their speech like an essay and read it word for word to their listeners. The other extreme is to prepare very little for the speech-to wing it by trusting to your wits and the inspiration of the moment. Neither approach, however, is appropriate for this speech. Reading your speech from a manuscript runs the risk of poor eye contact with the audience and a stiff, unenthusiastic delivery. On the other hand, ad-libbing the speech is a recipe for disaster. The outcome is usually a disorganized talk that is embarrassingly short.

Try combining the careful preparation and structure of a manuscript presentation with the spontaneity and enthusiasm of an unrehearsed talk. Your aim is to plan out your major points and supporting material without trying to memorize the precise language you will use on the day of the speech. This requires you to know the content of your speech quite well. In fact, you should become so familiar with the substance of your talk that you need only some brief notes or an outline to remind you of the points you intend to cover. Prepare your notes by writing or printing key terms and phrases on index cards or on a sheet of paper.

How should I practice my speech?

Delivering a speech calls for significant practice to get it right. Because most of the speeches and sermons you will give require excellent eye contact and sincere, spontaneous delivery, you should make a concerted effort to use it well in this assignment. The first time you rehearse your speech, you will probably struggle. Words may not come to you easily, and you might forget some things you planned to say. Don't become discouraged. Every time you practice, it will get easier.

Rehearse the speech in a loud voice. This is more inconvenient than silently looking over your notes, but the physical process of speaking the words out loud will aid you in mastering the content of your talk. Once you have a fairly good grasp on the speech, practice in the presence of other people and ask for their reactions.

As you practice, time your presentation with a stopwatch or clock, as we will be enforcing the 5-minute maximum time limit for this speech. Also, keep in mind that because of nerves, most people talk faster during their first speech than when they practice it. Don't be surprised, however, if the timing of your speech varies somewhat as you practice. It would be a bad sign if your speech took exactly the same amount of time during each rehearsal, because that would indicate that you were reading the address from manuscript or had memorized it verbatim.

How should I behave during my speech?

When it is your turn to speak, move to the front of the room and face the audience. In this case, you will be standing behind a lectern. Assume a relaxed but upright posture. Before beginning your speech, carefully arrange your notes. Then take a moment to look over your audience and to smile.

You should do your best to avoid nervous mannerisms such as shifting your weight from one foot to the other, rocking back and forth, grabbing the lectern, or jingling coins in your pockets. No matter how nervous you feel, try to appear calm and relaxed. We do not expect a flawless performance. During your talk, try to look at your audience as often as you can.

Beginning speech students typically make three kinds of mistakes with their voice: they speak too softly, they speak too quickly, and they do not pronounce their words distinctly.

Therefore, the most important elements of voice that you should practice for your first speech are loudness, rate, and articulation. If you do well on these, most other aspects of vocal delivery will fall into place.

What about stage fright?

Although we don't feel nervous conversing with our friends in private, many of us are anxious about giving a formal speech to a group of strangers in an unfamiliar situation. Most students experience stage fright before giving their first speeches. This is entirely normal. Realize that a certain amount of stage fright is actually a good thing. Many actors, musicians, and athletes believe that nervous energy enhances their level of performance. The more experience you gain as a speaker, the easier it will be for you to use your nervousness to give an energetic, enthusiastic, animated speech.

Even then, however, you may still feel unpleasant physical symptoms on the day of your speech. Sweaty hands, dry mouth, blushing, dizziness, and upset stomach are some typical symptoms of speech anxiety. Fortunately, most of these symptoms will subside once you are into your speech. Follow a few commonsense tips to alleviate some of these challenges. Get plenty of rest the night before the speech. Avoid dehydration by drinking water throughout the day of your presentation. If possible, try to eat a solid meal a few hours before class. If you have butterflies in your stomach before delivering your speech, sit quietly in your chair and take several slow, deep breaths. This will relax you and reduce your discomfort by getting more oxygen to your brain. The best advice for stemming stage fright has already been discussed—practice, practice, practice. Rehearsing your speech the proper way is the single most effective way to build confidence and to combat stage fright.

CONCLUSION

This pamphlet has attempted to provide the basic information you need to have a good experience with your first speech. All of the topics discussed here are developed in much more detail elsewhere. For now, keep this assignment in perspective. Remember that your instructors do not expect perfection. You are not a professional speaker, and this is the first speech of the class. Do your best on the assignment, but don't be afraid to have fun with it. One purpose of this speech is to learn more about you, so let your personality shine through. Plan what you want to say, organize the material clearly, and practice thoroughly. You may be surprised by how much you enjoy giving your first speech.