

# Informative Speeches

Now that we have covered the basics of research, organization, and how to make reasoned claims, we turn our attention to the first of three types of speeches you might find yourself delivering one day. We often equate speeches with political candidates making appeals to an audience, or perhaps a sermon on morality from a preacher, but not all speeches are designed to persuade a person. In fact, one of the most common types of speeches is an informative speech. Informative speeches are presentations in which speakers explain a topic to an audience without trying to convince them of anything. These speeches of explanation occur in a variety of formats, but the one you may be most familiar with is a classroom lecture by a teacher or instructor. These presentations are designed not to convince you to believe or do something, but rather to explain something to you so you understand it. These are informative speeches.

Explanatory, or informative, speeches typically cover one of four broad topics, and are often organized in one of several different ways to help the audience understand the subject in question. In this chapter, we will first discuss the four different types of informative speeches. Next, we will explain five of the most common ways to organize informative speeches. Finally, we will discuss the goals of an informative speech and provide some strategies for best delivering information to an audience.

## Types of Informative Speeches

There are four different topics you might explain to an audience, and these topics help differentiate between the four types of informative speeches. In this section, we will explain each of these four types of informative speeches. We will begin with speeches about objects, which is perhaps the most common type of informative speech. Then we will discuss speeches about processes, which include things like recipes and installation directions. Third, we will cover speeches about events, like vacations or historical occurrences. Finally, we will detail informative speeches about concepts, such as religious beliefs or laws.

### Speeches about Objects

The first form of informative speeches we will discuss is those about objects. A speech about an object always concerns tangible items such as a piece of sports equipment, a memento, a souvenir, a building, or even a country. These speeches are found often in the classroom and internal business meetings where new products are being developed. The term “object” can also refer to people. When you stand and introduce yourself at the start of a new class or at a company or church function, you are the topic being explained, and as something tangible, you are classified as an object for the purpose of identifying the type of informative speech you are delivering.

Informative speeches about objects, when the object is a person, are not limited to speeches of self-introduction. In fact, they can include speeches about any other person, living or deceased, fictional or factual. For example, you might deliver a speech about Harriett Tubman, a prominent figure with the Underground Railroad during the mid-nineteenth century. You might also deliver a speech about the fictional character Sheldon Cooper, who appears on the television show *The Big Bang Theory*. All of these are people, and as such, they are considered objects.

Speeches about objects could also pertain to particular places. Suppose you visited the Statue of Liberty in New York City and wanted to inform your audience about the characteristics of this historic landmark. You could explain to your audience how to get there, when the site is open, and highlight a few “must-see” places neighboring Ellis Island. Or, you might be tasked with explaining a larger space to an audience. For example, if your company is planning to introduce a product to a new market, you might be asked to explain the characteristics of that market to the senior staff. These could include demographic characteristics, economic prosperity, and geographical issues relevant to that new market. In either instance, you are delivering a speech about an object.

### Speeches about Processes

Informative speeches are not always about objects. In fact, many times they are more of a “how-to” type of speech. The next form of informative speech is about processes. These speeches are generally easier to construct and deliver than other speeches, as they pertain to a sequence of events presented in chronological fashion. However, processes vary in terms of complexity.

A very simple process could be how to bake a cake or change the tire on a car. In the latter example, you would explain each stage of changing a tire, beginning with setting the parking brake, then moving on to blocking the wheels, loosening the lug nuts, jacking up the car, removing the flat tire and replacing the spare tire, tightening the lug nuts, lowering the jack, checking the lug nuts again, before finally unblocking the wheels and releasing the brake. Each step depends upon the completion of the preceding one, or the process will not be completed correctly.

Informative speeches about processes can be more complicated as well. Consider a doctor explaining the treatment plan for patients suffering from cancer. This can include radiation schedules, chemotherapy plans, surgeries, and rehabilitation requirements. The process can be very complicated and confusing to patients, so doctors need to effectively explain how the recovery process will unfold.

In business, marketing plans are also often complex initiatives with various components, and in order to move forward with those initiatives, they need to be carefully explained in a step-by-step process to the staff responsible for their implementation.

## Speeches about Events

The third type of informative speech includes those about an event. Speeches about events can unfold in a variety of ways, but they focus on something that has happened, is happening, or might happen in the future. The central focus of informative speeches is to explain the characteristics of the event, and so it might take shape chronologically or topically.

You are probably familiar with informative speeches about events presented in chronological order from your time in history classes. History is the progression of events that already happened. For example, when history teachers and professors lecture about the World War II Battle of Pearl Harbor, they probably explain it in the chronological order in which the events happened. This makes sense and helps the audience of students understand how the battle unfolded. Even so, sometimes events are best presented in a topical format.

Consider the possibility of working for a company that is about to host a conference. During a conference many different things happen at the same time, and a large staff is responsible for administering the event. In this instance, someone will need to address the staff and explain what will simultaneously happen in different locations during the conference. For example, a wedding planner might talk about what needs to happen as the wedding ceremony unfolds and what needs to be done at the same time to set up for the reception that will take place immediately afterward in a separate location. This is not a chronologically sequenced presentation, but rather one that is delivered around topics or locations.

## Speeches about Concepts

The last type of informative speech is about concepts. Concept speeches are the most abstract of all the informative speech types, as they are about ideas and not concrete constructs. The speaker's task when delivering information about concepts is to take something abstract and ground it in reality through the use of real-life examples, illustrations, and vivid depictions. Concept speeches can be about religion, economics, politics, relationships, or any theory or idea that is not tangible.

Informative speeches about concepts can be about seemingly simple theories like evolution or more complex philosophies like existentialism. It is important to remember that all products and tangible items we encounter once started out as an idea with no concrete dimensions, so try to think about these types of informative speeches as pertaining to the inception of an idea. If you have an idea for a new product, you first need to explain the concept of the product before getting approval to create it.

Of course, speeches explaining concepts also appear in non-business enterprises. For example, preachers in churches explain religious principles to their congregation by illustrating principles in action. Lawyers argue about the law, which is abstract, by applying it to particular real-life cases. All productions in the entertainment fields and advertising begin with conceptual frames and drawings. Speeches about concepts would explain these initial ideas before they ever become tangible, as once the topic is tangible it becomes a speech about an object.

Each of the four types of informative speeches can be about the same topic; they simply approach it in different ways. For example, if you want to speak about Buddhism, you could speak about Buddha as a person and describe his life, thus delivering a speech about an object. You also could focus on how to become a practitioner of Buddhism, thus delivering an informative speech about a process. The speech also could focus on a specific Buddhist ritual, thus coming at the topic from the angle of an event. Finally, it could be about the central beliefs of Buddhism which is a speech about a concept. What matters is that your specific purpose statement clearly articulates which type of informative speech you plan to deliver. Once you determine which type of speech you are giving, you can then organize the body in a way that makes the most sense to the audience.

## Organizational Patterns

When explaining complex information to people who are unfamiliar with it, proper organization of your speech is essential. In the development of the speech, you must determine the most effective way to present complicated information to the audience. Sometimes it's as simple as laying out a sequence of steps, but often it is more complex. In this section, we will discuss five different ways to organize an informative speech. Treat these organizational patterns as tools in your speech toolkit that you can turn to at any time when they make the most sense. In short, let the information dictate the pattern; don't choose the pattern and then make your information fit it.

### Chronological

The first organizational pattern we will present is chronological, which sequences events in the order in which they occur in time. This pattern illustrates to the audience not just what occurs at each step, but also how the central focus of the speech is changed by each move forward. Take, for example, a speech about a medical treatment program. This is a fairly complicated subject; however, if the speaker explains what is involved at each treatment step, why it must go in that order, and how the patient will respond and feel after each step, then the topic becomes easier for an unfamiliar audience to follow.

You may believe that chronological patterns are restricted to informative process speeches, but in fact they are more versatile than that. For instance, they also could be used to organize speeches about objects, such as an airplane. A speech about airplanes could discuss their historical development and major moments of change in their appearance and use. Chronological organization is easily understood by an audience and can be used with many different speech topics, not just processes.

## Cause-Effect

A specific form of the chronological organizational pattern involves causes and effects. The cause-effect pattern discusses one or more causes that result in a specific event. It is important when discussing this organizational strategy that you remember just about everything has more than one cause, and so you must be careful when arguing that something caused something else. Now that the reminder is out of the way, let's talk about how to structure speeches like this.

Cause-effect speeches begin by explaining one or more things you claim cause a resulting event. For instance, a speech about a business plan for a company could have several different causes for the specific effect of monetary growth or loss. The causes could be a creative marketing plan for a new product, an expanded sales force, and more investment in product training. Each of these causes could then be linked to the specific effect of raising revenue for the company. Such an approach illustrates the complexity of multiple causes for one desired effect in a way an audience can follow. The cause-effect pattern is generally easy for the speaker to organize and easier for an unfamiliar audience to understand. The key element to a good cause-effect speech lies in making the connections between the causes and the effects explicit and obvious for the audience.

## Problem-Solution

A third way to organize your speech involves focusing your explanation around a problem and its solution. As with the cause-effect pattern, it is important to make the link between the two explicit for the audience, and also to focus on the past. We say focus on the past because with an informative speech such as this you are not proposing a specific solution to an existing problem, but rather explaining how a past problem was solved. Doing this is what makes the speech informative and explanative, rather than a persuasive speech in which you try to convince an audience to enact a solution to an existing problem.

Teachers often employ problem-solution organization in their lectures and discussions with students. For example, when discussing the Civil Rights Movement, they might set up their lecture by establishing all of the problems faced by African Americans in society during the 1960s. The teacher could then talk specifically about the nonviolent resistance of Martin Luther King Jr., and how it influenced the passage of legislation protecting the rights of the African American community. Such a speech is not persuasive, but rather explains several problems and a way they were solved.

## Spatial

Sometimes we cannot effectively explain something to an audience in a clear chronological sequence, so the next pattern of organization is one that does not rely on time sequencing. Instead, spatial organization explains material to an audience by emphasizing how things are physically related to one another in a defined area or space. Here location, not time, creates the structure of points. Like time, however, spatial organization must follow a logical pattern in which the subject of each subsequent point is located near or adjacent to the location of the previous one.

Suppose a student wanted to deliver a speech about his or her native city of New Orleans, and after examining the city's geography, decided to organize the speech by regions of the city. The speech could have these spatial areas as its main points: the French Quarter, the Central Business District, the Downriver District, and the Uptown area. In each main point of the speech, the prominent characteristics of each area would be explained. It would be important, however, to order the regions in a way that mirrors the way they are connected on a map.

## Topical

The final organizational pattern we will discuss is topical, or categorical. In this pattern, you look at the particulars of the topic and find a theme for the topic in a certain category. This pattern often takes shape when you want to focus on a specific aspect of a topic, so that aspect becomes the organizing theme for the speech. Topical organization is also employed when the other organizational patterns do not seem to fit what you want to do.

If you wanted to explain different modes of dealing with interpersonal conflict to an audience, you would most likely do so topically. In this speech, you would cover the five ways to handle conflict: withdraw, accommodate, force, compromise, and collaborate. Each one of these strategies represents a topic, or category, related to managing interpersonal conflict and is also logically linked. If presented in this way, an audience would easily be able to follow the explanation of this complicated material.

Topical organization, however, is not restricted to speeches about concepts. You also might want to focus a speech about a person this way as well, as opposed to doing it chronologically. For instance, you could speak about comedian Bill Cosby topically by organizing the speech's main points around the categories of his family life, his comedic career, and his social activist activities. This is not chronological, but topical, and still allows the audience to follow along with your speech points.

When it comes to choosing an organizational pattern, you should always remember not to be too rigid. There will be topics that will require you to combine some of these five patterns. Take the Bill Cosby example for a moment. The main points are ordered topically; however, the discussion of each of those main points might make the most sense if presented chronologically. This allows you to have an overarching organizational pattern for main points, and also the flexibility to organize the subpoints of those main points differently so they make better sense.

## Goals and Strategies for Informative Speeches

Each of the four types of informative speeches attempts to achieve a specific set of goals with an audience. Each also can employ particular strategies to achieve those goals, including determining the best organizational pattern for your speech purposes and integrating other tools into the presentation. In this final section, we provide a few strategies to help you maximize your ability to achieve the goals of each type of informative speech.

### Tips for Informative Speeches about Objects

Many times it is difficult to precisely describe an object, and the less familiar your audience is with the object, the more description you will need to provide. This is why it is important to find out how much your audience already knows about your speech topic in advance. Doing so allows you to determine whether you need to bring a model of the object as a visual aid for your speech so the audience can actually see what it is you are talking about.

In the health field, doctors often find models useful when speaking to patients because medical conditions and procedures can be very complicated for those not trained in biology and anatomy to fully grasp. Let's use a dental procedure as an example. In any dentist's office, you will likely find a model of a mouth, or at least a poster with a picture of the mouth on it. When dentists try to explain to patients what is happening with their teeth, where cavities are, or where and how they need to brush better, they often need to pull out the model to show the patient. This allows the patient to appreciate and understand the complicated information the dentist provided them.

### Tips for Informative Speeches about Processes

As we previously noted, process speeches consistently use a chronological sequence. These speeches are generally easy to understand, if logically presented, and are easy for the speaker to keep on track as one thing follows another. When one thing logically follows another, it becomes important to detail for the audience when and how one stage progresses to another. For example, if you are developing a speech about the process of applying for a job, your speech will have several stages that build upon one another. First, there is the research process of finding a job for which you wish to apply, after which you must prepare an application letter. With the letter, you must also prepare and submit a resume. In this presentation, you need to make sure the audience understands how each step relates and connects to the next.

By explaining the connections between main points, you do more than list things or provide directions to the audience. In essence, you are explaining the complexities of the process. Informative speeches about processes are more than recipes and lists of stages. They are explanations of each step, and the dos and don'ts that come with each stage of the process. Take the time to explain the process and each of its steps to ensure that the audience understands it all.

### Tips for Informative Speeches about Events

In many ways, events are more complicated than processes or even objects because they contain numerous elements upon which a speech can focus. So, the primary tip in developing a clear and effective explanation of an event is to choose your focus and explain that focus to the audience early in the speech. This lets them know you are not covering everything about the event, but rather a specific aspect of it.

It is important that you also lay out the details of the event to the audience. Identify important people involved in the event that will appear in your speech. When covering what happened during the event, be sure to let your audience know how those occurrences will be covered. If you plan to cover the event spatially rather than chronologically or even topically, make sure your audience knows. Focus only on what you can adequately cover in the time you are allowed and be sure your audience knows how you plan to discuss the event so they do not get confused.

## Tips for Informative Speeches about Concepts

Concepts are abstract, so they hold particular challenges for speakers. Concept speeches need to take abstract concepts and relate them to the audience as clearly as possible. One of the most effective ways of doing this is through concrete and hypothetical examples. This is the same tool teachers use to explain new ideas to students. The apple falling on Newton's head, for example, is a tried and true way of explaining the abstract concept of gravity.

Before employing examples, however, make sure you clearly explain the concept. There will be times when your speech contains abstractions, but make sure those abstractions are followed with concrete examples that illustrate the concept at work. Whenever possible, draw these examples from things that will resonate with the particular audience to whom you are speaking.

