

English-Speaking Union

Public Speaking Competition

Guidelines for Speakers

Topic selection

Your first problem is which topic to choose. Broadly they divide into two types:

- Those topics you know a lot about
- Those topics you would like to know more about.

While it might seem a good idea to immediately choose a topic out of the first category, you might also consider speaking on a topic you would like to know more about; your approach to it may be fresher, and the path you follow through your research and preparation will alert you to ways you can make it interesting to the audience.

You should then prepare a **statement of intent** for your speech.

Try to complete the following sentence: “At the end of my speech I want to have persuaded my audience that ... ” For example, “At the end of my speech I want to have persuaded my audience that taking a year off to visit Africa before going to university is of great benefit to them”.

Watch out too, that your statement of intent only talks about one general idea.

Check that your statement of intent passes the following four tests:

- It is possible to discuss the topic in the necessary time (avoiding going over or under the limit).
- The topic is relevant to your audience and will hold their attention.
- The topic is not too trivial.
- The topic is not too technical.

You now have a topic, and a statement of intent.

From this point you should write down (in one sentence only) the areas that you will discuss, we will call this the **theme**:

“The major benefits of a gap year are getting to see some of the world, taking a break from studying, developing initiative and self-reliance, and helping other people.”

Note: You will not deliver the statement of intent and the theme will not be part of the speech you deliver, but they will help you focus on the message you are giving.

Structuring your speech

One of the areas in which speakers new to the competition often lose marks is that of structure. Structure enables your audience to judge many things.

In particular it allows them to assess general reasons why your particular plan of action should be considered.

This is one reason why structure is so important – the essence of a good speech is to build an argument. By being structured you also give your audience an aid to remembering your speech and its key points – after all you only have one chance.

By now you will have a topic, a statement of intent and a theme. You should also have completed some research on your topic, so that you are able to list some evidence in support of your idea.

You should now try to fit this information into a **framework**, or speech outline. This is the skeleton which you will use as the basis of your presentation. It contains:

- An **introduction**, which seizes the attention of your audience, and tells them what the point of your speech is.
- Some **main points**, which are the pieces of evidence or the sub-topics which you are going to use to support your case.
- A **conclusion**, which ties the speech together for your audience, and reminds them of what it is you wanted to achieve by speaking to them.

The outline will allow you to give your speech without writing it out. Notice how it follows the **rule of three** – ‘Tell them what you’ll tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them’.



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Introductions and conclusions are some of the most difficult parts of your speech. You could practise different introductions and conclusions in front of different people: parents, teachers and friends. This way you can assess which is the most effective, and which the least effective.

Also, be sure to rehearse your introduction and conclusion so that they are almost or completely memorised (each should be no more than 10% of your speech, so this should not be difficult). That way they will be the most effective, your delivery will not stumble, and you will be able to maintain effective eye contact throughout that crucial first 30 seconds.

Introductions

People make snap decisions about whether or not they want to listen to you, whether or not they like you, and whether or not you have anything interesting to say within the first thirty to forty seconds of hearing you speak. This fact alone should mean that you invest time and energy in making sure that your introduction is flawless. This applies as much to Chairpersons and Questioners as it does to Speakers.

Given that your introduction is so important, you should think about the best way of making it effective. Naturally your introduction will start with words of greeting to your audience. However you must then get the audience interested in your speech.

- **Relate the topic to the audience:** Consider what the priorities and interests of your audience are. Then work out why your topic fits in with these themes or how it relates to those ideas.
- **Show the importance of your topic:** Show the audience the importance of the speech - how many thousands of people it affects, how much money is involved, how many people are hurt or saved.
- **Surprise the audience:** You could start your speech with a quotation and/or a question.
- **Give the audience a story:** Listeners respond very favourably to narratives - they can be a very effective way to relate your topic to your audience. In particular if some popular story (nursery rhyme, or fairytales) embodies a principle you wish to discuss, then this will also prove effective. If you have personal experience, use it.

Conclusions

Whereas introductions serve the purpose of gaining your audience's attention, conclusions are the last chance you will have to get across your main idea.

- You might choose to **end with a quotation**. This is a form of appeal to authority. By indicating to your

audience that someone else has thought about your topic you can lend credibility and weight to your own speech.

- **Refer to your introduction:** This can serve to draw the speech to an effective close because it demonstrates the unity of your ideas. It is often a good idea to plan your introduction last in order to achieve this.

Persuasion in theory and practice

Audiences will be more persuaded of your message if you show:

- **Character:** Audiences believe that you are telling them this information for the right reasons, not because you want to sell them something, or because you have a hidden agenda.
- **Competence:** Audiences believe that you are competent to tell them what they want to hear. You are not discussing a subject in a pretentious way, nor are you talking about a subject which you would be unqualified to speak on.

These two factors contribute to a speaker's credibility, and broadly speaking an audience's reaction to your speech will fall into four categories. They are persuaded because:

- You are a speaker with high credibility
- Your evidence is compelling
- Your reasoning is compelling
- Your speech appeals to the audience's emotional responses.

You should be aware that people start making judgements the moment that they first see you. As such you need to be 'in competition mode', as soon as you arrive at the competition.

Do not pick a topic in which it would be difficult for you to develop credibility. Credibility is something given to you by your audience, so think carefully about the appropriateness of your topic.

Make sure that you spend time doing research. Rumour, hearsay, "My mum said ..." and other forms of anecdotal evidence are not very persuasive. In addition make sure that the evidence you choose to use is from a credible source.

Make sure you think about your reasoning – avoid statements with logical flaws.

Think very carefully about the emotional impact of your speech. Do not make it into a sob story, but avoid the absence of any feeling whatsoever.

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Delivery

Good delivery is absolutely vital. Unfortunately if your audience is distracted by odd mannerisms or slips of grammar or style, then they will be less likely to hear your message. Do not stand in front of the Chairperson while delivering your speech.

Verbal

If you can, arrive early for your competition and stand at the front of the room and get friends to stand where the judges will be (normally right at the back) to tell you whether they can hear you or not.

- **Rate:** Are you speaking too quickly? A good thing to ask yourself is “Am I speaking too slowly?” If you think the answer is “Yes” then you are probably speaking at the right rate.
- **Pauses:** Do you use pauses to add impact to your speech or do you simply race through it?
- **Variety:** Do you vary your voice? Does the pitch of your voice rise during questions? Does the volume of your voice decrease when you are describing a quiet moment?
- **Pronunciation/Articulation:** Do you find any words in your speech difficult to pronounce? If so, ask a friend or teacher for help. Get them all right.
- **Language:** Is your language appropriate? Avoid slang terms that may not be understood by your audience. Note: The English-Speaking Union Public Speaking competition is nationwide. As such we actively encourage speakers not to imitate some idea of ‘received pronunciation’. However you must be able to communicate to everyone, not just your own locality.

Non-verbal

- **Gestures:** Do you use gesture effectively? Do you over gesture?
- **Appearance:** Are you appropriately dressed? Although the ESU competition is certainly not a fashion parade, your appearance is part of the impression you make on the audience.
- **Movement:** Do you move around too much when you speak? Is there a point in your speech where you should move in order to emphasis some aspect of what you are saying?
- **Eye contact:** Do you maintain good eye-contact? Using notes to speak from, rather than memorising your speech will help this considerably.

Studies have shown that effective delivery weighs equally with content in terms of the impact of your message. If your audience can only see you swaying whilst you talk, or are constantly worried that you are not looking at them, then they will be unable to hear the message you are trying to tell them.

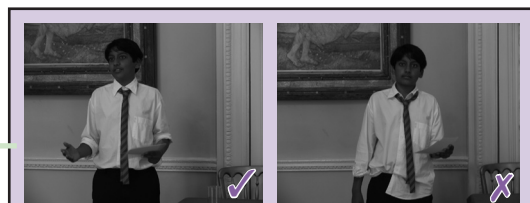
Skills Summary

At the end of this section you should be aware of the following:

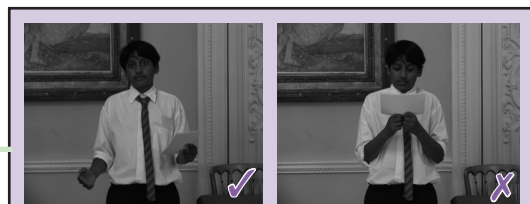
- How to choose a topic for your speech, state your intent, and write out the central idea behind your speech.
- How to write out the skeleton of your speech, and understand what goes into your introduction, main points and conclusion. You should also see that it is unnecessary to write out your speech in detail, since your structure will remind you of what you want to say.
- How to make an impact with your opening and closing remarks. You should be aware of different ways of making an effective introduction or conclusion, and should recognise the importance of delivering them as well as possible.
- How to ensure you can present persuasive evidence in a well-reasoned manner based on competent research.
- How to vary your verbal and non-verbal presentation to improve your public speaking skills.



Find the right balance – not too little gesture, and not too much.



It doesn't take too much effort to avoid looking a mess!



Palm-cards can be a great help in keeping eye-contact, but even then remember to look up.