**Types of Supporting Materials**

The types of supporting materials that you will use for your presentation depend partly on the topic you’ve chosen and the audience that you will address. We have already discussed how important it is to try to reach as many listeners in your audience as you possibly can. Choosing several types of supports is one way to ensure that your speech is well rounded and will appeal to many different listeners. Let’s use the topic of buying a hybrid vehicle as an example. Some members of your audience will want to hear facts and statistics as they listen to your presentation. They may be mostly interested in hearing about rebates and gas mileage. Or perhaps they’ll want more information on how the vehicle actually functions or how the components within a hybrid, such as engine and motor, differ from a standard vehicle. But some audience members will also want to hear personal examples and anecdotes, as they find the human connection in the presentation more interesting and relatable. They want to know what personal reasons car buyers have for switching to hybrid vehicles. Do some individuals switch to hybrids due to environmental and ecological concerns? By providing both of these types of supporting material within one presentation, the speaker is able to reach more listeners within the group.

Here are some of the basic types of supports that you may want to include in a speech.

**Examples**

An example is an item of information that is typical of a class or group and acts to represent the larger group. You use examples as a means to explain yourself every day. When you tell a friend that you are overwhelmed and then mention a particularly time-consuming assignment that must be completed in two days, you’ve given your friend an example -one specific item from a list of many items that are causing you stress at that moment. You will often find that providing an example is equally helpful in a presentation.

If you tell your audience that you researched and found thousands of individuals who reported near-death experiences, I can assure you that your audience has no desire to hear all of these reports. But if you choose one or two incidents from this research to use as examples, it will provide them with specifics that help them better understand the phenomenon from an individual point of view. Examples, then, are used by the speaker to clarify information and to provide a narrower focus from the research.

**Hypothetical Examples**

A speaker might also choose to use a hypothetical example during a presentation. A hypothetical example allows the speaker to use an example that describes an imaginary item, event, or incident, rather than an actual one. Hypothetical examples could be used to describe a situation in which most listeners would never find themselves. For example, if you asked your audience to imagine that they have survived a plane crash and find themselves the sole survivor on a deserted island, your audience can picture this situation even though they probably have never found themselves in this predicament. Hypothetical examples can also be used to expand your audience’s imagination. You could choose to open a presentation with a humorous example of the possible responses a human might have when first encountering a being from another planet. No one that I know of has actually found themselves in this particular situation; your example is simply a “what if ” scenario designed to make your point and to arouse interest. As you can see, examples, both actual and hypothetical, are effective in making your ideas and points clear to your audience. By giving your audience a detailed example, you help them to hone in on the smaller, more specific event or situation. This can be helpful in focusing your audience and keeping their interest.

**Testimony**

Another type of support that can be useful in your presentations is testimony. Testimony, whether written or verbal, allows you to use experts, or ordinary people with specialized knowledge, to prove or support your points. We most often think of testimony from experts. Quoting a medical doctor or a scientist to support your findings on cancer survival rates is certainly valid. Audience members expect experts to be knowledgeable and trustworthy, so expert testimony can be a strong and persuasive addition to the material you present to your listeners.

While testimony from an expert can be beneficial to a speaker’s purpose, peer testimony can be equally valid. You might initially assume that only someone with a degree, an important title, or years of experience will impress and potentially persuade your audience, but there are times when your listeners will find the experiences and insights of ordinary individuals just as relevant. A presentation on cancer survival rates certainly requires the input of experts; your audience will want to hear percentages, medical analysis, and research findings. But the inclusion of the real-life stories of cancer survivors gives your audience an insider view of the disease and highlights the human element of your discussion. It should be clear to you that testimony -whether it is expert, peer, or a combination of the two -can be an effective form of support for your speech.

**Statistics**

Statistics are simply the numbers that you might use to support your ideas in a presentation. Percentages, estimates, totals, and other numerical evidence can be an effective support, depending on your topic. Several studies show that statistics are the most effective form of evidence for a speech delivered to a college-educated audience, so using statistical data might be especially important if your intent is to persuade. If your purpose is to inform your audience of the rising number of pollutants in our streams, rivers, and lakes, and the risk these pollutants pose to humans and animals, most audience members would expect to hear some statistical data within your speech. Perhaps you’d inform them of the increasing number of fish, turtles, and other aquatic life found dead or dying in these water sources. Providing the numbers from years past and current totals would also be effective as a comparison -especially if you can show that the numbers are rising. Numbers quantify your information and provide your audience with concrete data that can illustrate how serious a problem or condition has become. Statistics are a strong support if you choose valid data from a reliable source and you take the time to emphasize the credibility of your sources and your overall research.

How you present the statistical data in your presentation is important as well (Allen and Preis 125-31; Baesler and Burgoon 584-92). The following tips will make your use of statistics easier for your audience to understand and remember.

Relying on statistics alone lessens your chances of reaching all of your listeners. While statistical data can validate many of your ideas, your listeners want to hear more than numbers. Including some human-interest stories and relevant testimony makes your speech more interesting and highlights the human factor that many audience members need in order to be persuaded. If you rely solely on statistical data to support your main points, you will most likely fail to reach an entire subgroup of the audience.

Incorporating your statistics into charts, graphs, and tables makes it easier for your audience to visualize the numbers that you quote. Remember the old adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words. ” Colorful, well-designed charts and graphs can give your audience an immediate understanding of the data that you include in your presentation. In essence, graphs, charts, and tables provide your audience with a snapshot of your data.

**Stories/Illustrations**

As mentioned above, statistics often need to be combined with other types of supporting material to reach those audience members who crave the human connection within a topic. Telling a story is a surprisingly easy way to connect to an audience; listeners love to hear a good story. Many of us can recall how much we enjoyed having stories read to us or told to us as children, so a speaker who can successfully incorporate stories and illustrations into her/his presentation usually finds a receptive audience. Sharing a funny story about your first disastrous attempt to cook easily leads into a speech titled “Fajitas Without the Hassle. ” The story serves to introduce you to the audience and sets the tone for your presentation. One could imagine that the speech that follows this story would include simple steps and cooking tips that anyone could master.

Certainly, humorous stories can arouse interest and work as a quick and effective attention-getter, but not all stories serve the same purpose or arouse the same feelings. Telling the story of a dying boy’s last wish could help you explain the work of the Make-A-Wish Foundation or your reasons for volunteering in the pediatric ward of your local hospital. The story helps your audience understand your reasons for volunteering or the need for more volunteers. Because this story is poignant and heartfelt, it is also likely to touch emotions and persuade your audience to listen -and perhaps volunteer too. While statistics revealing the number of children hospitalized because of fatal illnesses is valid information in such a speech, the human connection the audience gains from the story will probably make a greater impact.

**Definitions**

The final support that we’d like to discuss is the use of definitions. Definitions are necessary in many presentations -especially those that introduce new information to listeners or those that explain a complicated process or concept. One of the biggest mistakes that new speakers make is to assume that audience members already have an adequate understanding of the concept or process being discussed in their presentations. Providing the definition of necessary terms makes the new information accessible to your listeners.

There are several online resources available to you for this purpose. You might visit Dictionary. com or Merriam-Webster.com. You can also look up the definition of most words through search engines, such as Ask.com or Bing.com. Adequate audience analysis perhaps through the use of a questionnaire or an informal survey should help you pinpoint your audience’s prior knowledge of your subject. If you suspect that your listeners have little prior knowledge, one of your basic goals must be to include clear supporting information and to define the terms you use throughout your speech. Failure to do so will result in listeners who have lost interest in your subject or who have become frustrated with you as a speaker.

An excessive use of jargon can also hinder your audience’s understanding of your presentation. Workers in most organizations use a specialized lingo or abbreviated language understood almost exclusively by the employees of that workplace. This language code is a form of shorthand that makes communication within the organization succinct, to the point, and often private. Military men and women use abbreviations and acronyms that most of us cannot possibly understand. Doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel utilize a coded language that few outside the hospital or office walls could decipher. Workplace jargon meets the needs of its members, but it is important to keep in mind that the jargon is relatively obscure to those outside of the workplace. If you must use jargon in your speech, you’ll want to limit the frequency of its use to ensure that you can readily explain it to your listeners.

As you can see, the supporting material that you choose will vary, depending on the personal preferences of the speaker, the goal of the presentation, the topic, and the analysis of the audience. As is true in most situations, the more variety that you can include within your speech, the more your audience is likely to find your presentation interesting, relevant, and appealing. Researching to find the most effective supporting material is crucial.