

Persuasive Speeches

In any speech situation it's important to analyze your audience, naturally. This is never more important, though, than it is in a persuasive speaking situation.

There are a couple questions that you need to ask yourself after you've selected a persuasive speech topic:

1. Does my audience agree or disagree with the position which I am advocating?

If they already tend to agree with you, you've got things a little bit easier, of course. The only problem here might be that your topic and position may not be controversial or novel enough to hold the audience's interest. It might be a fine topic, though, and it will be your goal to convince your audience that the position which they support is the correct position.

If your audience disagrees with your perspective, you've probably got a little more work to do. We'll get back to that...

2. How much does my audience care about my topic and how much thought are they willing to put into my speech?

If the audience doesn't really care a whole lot about your topic, it's a double-edged sword. On one hand (or edge), they are going to be easier to persuade. On the other hand, you may not have picked a good topic if it isn't an important issue to your audience. Again, if you believe in the topic, go with it.

If the audience really cares a lot about your topic, you're not going to be able to win them over with flimsy persuasive tactics and logical fallacies. They are going to need to hear solid arguments and evidence in support of your perspective to be persuaded.

The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle identified three tactics which persuasive speakers had available to persuade an audience, which he called Ethos, Pathos, and Logos.

Ethos: Aristotle said that if an audience wasn't particularly interested in and willing to think about the topic at hand that a speaker could be persuasive simply by demonstrating to the audience that they were someone who was both credible and trustworthy. The idea was that this type of audience wouldn't be sufficiently motivated to think deeply about the topic, and that they would be inclined to blindly accept whatever the speaker had to say. After all, the speaker is credible and trustworthy, right?

For some strategies on establishing Ethos, check out the article on writing introductions.

Pathos: Aristotle said that if, again, an audience wasn't particularly interested in and willing think about the topic at hand that a speaker could be persuasive by using various emotional appeals to win over an audience. A few example of Pathos appeals:

- a. Appeal to Fear – The speaker arouses fear in the audience by describing something bad that could happen, then tells the audience that the can be relieved of that fear by simply doing what the speaker desires.
- b. Appeal to Social Support – The speaker tells the audience that their perspective is a popular one. The audience is supposed to think that because the position is so popular, it must have some merit.
- c. Appeal to Scarcity – The speaker shows the audience how they can get some more of a scarce commodity (usually time or money) by doing what the speaker desires.
- d. Appeal to Authority – The speaker tells the audience that people “in the know” support the speaker’s perspective.

There are many more Pathos appeals.

Logos: Finally, Aristotle said that if an audience really cared about an issue and were motivated to think deeply about it, that the only way they were going to be persuaded was through the use of sound logical argument.

In it's most basic form, a logical argument is a claim supported by evidence. In most cases, when you see a lawyer speaking in a courtroom, they are making a logos appeal to the audience (the jury). The “claim” which the lawyer is making is the innocence or guilt of the person on trial. The “evidence”, of course, is the support that the lawyer offers to back up their claim.

Your persuasive speech should follow the same process. Your “claim” is the position you support, your “evidence” is the various facts, stories, statistics, expert testimony, and other backing that demonstrates that your position is the position which the audience should also support.