

Understand the Differences Between Public Speaking and Essays

Brief: Students often mistakenly treat public speeches like essays that will eventually be read out loud; understanding the differences between public speaking and essays is essential to your public speaking success.

Learning Objective: Understand why and how public speaking and essays are different.

Key Terms:

- **Academic essay:** A form of essay that tests a student's ability to present their thoughts in an organized way and requires all substantial facts, quotations, and other supporting material be referenced in a bibliography or works cited page at the end of the text.

How do Public Speaking and Essays Compare?

Students often treat speeches like essays that will eventually be read out loud. However, that approach will not result in the creation of an effective speech. For an audience member, the experience of listening to a speaker talk about a topic is not the same as the experience of reading similar information about that topic on a page. To create an effective speech, public speakers need to recognize and understand the factors that contribute to making those experiences so different.

Similarities Between Public Speaking and Essays

A traditional academic essay consists of formal structure that includes an introduction, a body with alternating concrete details and commentary, and a conclusion. Speeches are also built on a formal structure with an introduction, body, and conclusion.

Most academic essays, even opinion pieces, require research and documentation. Most public speeches, even first-person narrative speeches, are expected to include research and documentation as well.

Academic essays rely on the ethics of the writer to lend credibility to the essay's content. Writers establish this credibility through comprehensive research that is properly cited to avoid plagiarism. Public speakers establish credibility in much the same way.



101 Essays That Will Change The Way You Think by Brianna Wiest

Differences Between Public Speaking and Essays

Introduction

A live audience is required to sit still and listen for extended periods of time. As a public speaker, one of your primary challenges is to hold the audience's attention. Your speech introduction needs to grab your audience's attention, in addition to describing the topic, stating your thesis or purpose, and giving an overview of the speech and its main points.

Body

A restless audience may not have patience for the predictable, orderly progression of concrete details and commentary that is typical in the body of an academic essay. Thinking of “main points” rather than a “body” can help you to remember to keep it simple for a public speech. You'll need to communicate only a few important points—three or four—in a way that includes enough variety and interest to maintain your audience's undivided attention.

Transitions

A transition is a change or shift from one topic to another. It may be surprising to see that transitions are one of the four key components of a speech. Academic writers tend to think of transitions as important stylistic elements rather than essential building blocks. However, transitions are crucial for public speakers because speakers need to compensate for a lack of visual formatting.

On a written page, formatting provides a helpful road map: the reader sees topic headings, paragraph breaks, and other visual cues that signal transitions naturally. You can replicate these cues and signal transitions using visual aids and body language, but it will take more conscious effort than simply hitting “enter” to create a paragraph break. As a public speaker, you will need to emphasize transition points through a combination of visual aids, body language, vocal delivery, and transitional words and phrases.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should summarize your main points and restate a strong thesis. Remember that many people struggle with auditory learning, and consequently have trouble focusing on spoken words.

Your listeners may not put everything together on their own, so you should make it easier for them by summarizing your argument and reviewing central ideas in the conclusion. Remember, the last things they hear will be the first things they remember.

From Concept to Action

Review an academic essay that you've already written. (If you can't find an essay of your own, find a sample essay online.) Read it through to yourself out loud. What is the experience of listening to your essay? Does it grab your attention in the introduction and hold it throughout the body and conclusion? Based on what you've learned, what would you need to change about your essay to make it an effective public speech?

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"People Paper Hand Book Reading Woman White." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/photos/people-paper-hand-book-reading-3273662>. Accessed 9 March 2019. [CC0]

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