

Understand the Differences Between Public Speaking and Conversation

Brief: While public speaking and conversation are two forms of communication that impart messages to audiences, they differ significantly in organizational structure, use of formalized language, method of delivery, and timing.

Learning Objective: Identify the key differences between public speaking and conversation.

Key Terms:

- **Public speaking:** The process of speaking to a group of people in a structured, deliberate manner intended to inform, influence, or entertain the listeners.
- **Conversation:** A form of interactive, spontaneous communication between two or more people who are following rules of etiquette.

What is Public Speaking and Conversation?

While both public speaking and conversation involve imparting messages to others, there are key differences between a formal public speech and a casual conversation.

Public speaking is defined as “the process of speaking to a group of people in a structured, deliberate manner intended to inform, influence, or entertain the listeners.” Public speaking is commonly understood in terms of formal, face-to-face communications delivered by single speakers to groups of listeners.



Two women engaged in a conversation at a coffee shop

Conversation, on the other hand, “is a form of interactive, spontaneous communication between two or more people who are following rules of etiquette.” Conversations are generally understood as less formal face-to-face communications where there are exchanges of ideas among multiple speakers. Conversation can occur in person or online, but does not generally include written communication, which tends to be asynchronous in nature. (Web communication among two or more people often does not occur at the same time. Some respondents reply much later, or not at all.)

Similarities Between Public Speaking and Conversation

Both public speaking and conversation involve speakers and audiences, as well as messages exchanged between the two parties. Listening is also an important component of both types of communication. Depending on your audience, you adjust your message based on both the context of your speech or conversation and the feedback you receive.

And of course, a good conversation and a good speech both keep the audience engaged. Incorporating elements of compelling and engaging storytelling helps ensure the success of both types of communication.

Differences Between Public Speaking and Conversation

There are four key differences that set public speaking apart from conversation: organizational structure, use of formalized language, method of delivery, and timing.

Organizational Structure

Speeches and public addresses are far more organized than everyday conversation. A public speaker organizes his or her thoughts in a speech by using three basic structural elements: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Conversations can wander and meander without ever coming to a point. Speeches, on the other hand, are deliberately structured and organized.

Use of Formalized Language

When you sit down and have a conversation with a close friend, you might find that your language and tone are far more casual than when you sit down and have a conversation with, say, your doctor.

Public speaking formalizes language that much more. When speeches are designed to fulfill a specific purpose—to inform, influence, or entertain—they require a certain formality of speaking compared to a casual conversation between friends. Slang, profanity, and poor grammar might be accepted between friends, but are definitely not appropriate for any kind of public address or speech.

Method of Delivery

You might “strike up a conversation” without preparation, but you’ll be in trouble if you decide to “strike up a speech.” Conversations are far more spontaneous than public speeches. Effective public speeches require preparation.

Don't let the idea of "extemporaneous" speaking fool you. Extemporaneous speeches merely involve speaking about a subject with no written notes. However, extemporaneous speeches do require lots of preparation and practice, so they are not truly spontaneous.

Timing

Public speaking is often organized into events and venues with a set time and location. Conversations, on the other hand, can spring up anywhere. Public speeches may also fall within certain time constraints, whereas conversations can be as brief or as long as those involved are willing to participate.

From Concept to Action

Recall a recent conversation you had with a group of people. Did the conversation revolve around a specific topic or theme? Did everyone listen quietly while one person talked or were there interruptions and cross-talking? Did the conversation wrap up neatly or did it just trail off? Imagine for moment that this conversation contained the material for a formal speech. How would you introduce the topic? How would you organize your ideas? How would you hold your audience's attention during your speech? How would you formally conclude your speech?

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"Girls Women Beautiful Café Coffee." Pixabay. <https://pixabay.com/photos/girls-women-girlfriend-beautiful-3764699>. Accessed 8 March 2019. [CC0]

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