

Understand the Impact of Context

Brief: Context encompasses many factors that are important for you to consider as you craft your speech, including the surroundings, circumstances, environment, background, or settings that determine, specify, or clarify the meaning of your speech.

Learning Objective: Understand the various types of context and how they might impact your speech.

Key Terms:

- **Context:** The surroundings, circumstances, environment, background, or settings that determine, specify, or clarify the meaning of an event or other occurrence.
- **Environmental context:** The physical space in which a speech occurs.
- **Psychological context:** The current state of an audience member's values, beliefs, attitudes, and needs that impact how they decode and derive meaning from a speech.
- **Situational context:** The actual reason a speech is delivered.

What is Context?

Context encompasses many factors that are important for you to consider as you craft your speech. Context can be defined as the surroundings, circumstances, environment, background, or settings that determine, specify, or clarify the meaning of an event or other occurrence.

Consider for a moment when you hear just the tail end of a conversation in passing. It doesn't always make much sense. What you're missing, in this instance, is the context of that conversation. Just as you need a sense of context to understand the conversation you just missed, you need to consider the elements of context that surround and affect the ability of your audience to derive meaning from your speech.

Situational Context

Situational context refers to the actual reason why you're speaking or presenting. If you're campaigning for office, you may deliver what's called a "stump speech," a speech you repeat over and over on the campaign trail that gets at the main talking points and promises of your campaign. If a close friend or family member dies, you may be asked to deliver a eulogy at the funeral. Or, on a lighter note, if your best friend gets married, you may be asked to give a toast.

The manner in which you deliver your speech, from the words you say to how you say them, relies on the situational context.

Environmental Context



Environmental context refers to the physical space in which you're speaking. Whether you're in a classroom presenting the findings from a lab report or in a stadium that seats thousands, environmental context can influence both your message and delivery.

The audience will connect with you in different ways depending on the physical environment. How you adapt to the physical environment to build individual connections with your audience members will vary depending on the size of the space and how the space is configured.

Psychological Context

Psychology is commonly defined as the science of behavior and mental processes. The current state of an audience member's values, beliefs, attitudes, and needs combine to create their psychological context, which will have a profound impact on how they will decode and derive meaning from your speech.

To fulfill your goals as a public speaker, you'll need to consider what the likely disposition of the audience is toward your speech's topic and purpose. If you're attempting to persuade the audience to accept a particular idea or take an action, for example, it's important to understand the dominant values, beliefs, attitudes, and needs of your audience in relation to your proposal.

Gathering that information through demographic and psychographic research is an important step in tailoring your speech to your audience. By gaining an understanding of the psychological context of your audience, you can better understand the experiences and events you share with them, which can point you to include examples that highlight those meaningful connections in your speech.

In some cases you may have to look beyond your own attitudes, values, and beliefs in order to better understand those of your audience. What sources will the audience consider authoritative that might differ from those that you yourself consider authoritative? Understanding both similarities and difference will allow you to adapt your speech content more effectively.

From Concept to Action

Think of a time when you were in a situation where you were forced to listen to a speaker against your will. Perhaps it was a class you had to take for a requirement. Or a lecture that a parent or supervisor delivered in an attempt to correct what they deemed "bad behavior." How did being required to listen when you didn't want to impact your psychological context? How

was your attitude and overall state of mind affected? Did your psychological context affect your performance as a listener? What can you take away from this memory that can help you understand how your audience's psychological context might affect their ability to listen to your speech?

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