

Audience Prior Knowledge about Your Topic

Brief: To understand your audience's knowledgeability about your topic, consider what your audience knows or will know about your topic before, during, and after your speech.

Learning Objective: Identify the three types of knowledgeability and understand how each applies to audience adaptation.

Key Terms:

- **Jargon:** Specialized terminology used to define specific words and phrases used in a particular profession, trade, or group.
- **Knowledgeability:** The state or condition of possessing knowledge.

Discovering Three Types of Knowledgeability

Discovering knowledgeability, the state or condition of possessing knowledge, involves careful assessment of the audience by the speaker prior to, during, and after the speech.

Knowledge can be defined as a familiarity with someone or something, which can include facts, information, descriptions, or skills acquired through experience or education. In reference to public speaking, knowledgeability is the condition or state of knowing by the members of the audience.

To prepare for your speech, consider three kinds of knowledgeability: prior knowledge, formative knowledge, and summative knowledge.

Prior Knowledge

Prior knowledge is the knowledge that the audience already has about your topic. If your idea or concept is obscure, you may assume that they know nothing and start with the basics. However, if your topic is more general, you may want to assess what your audience already knows so that you can adjust your content to their level of understanding.

In addition to assessing to what your audience might know about your topic, pay attention to the language related to your topic that they understand. It's possible to have some familiarity with a topic without knowing the specific language, also known as jargon that experts use in reference to it.

You don't want to talk down to or bore your audience, but at the same time you want to make sure that everyone understands your ideas. You want the audience to leave with an understanding that is greater than when they walked into the room or turned on their computer to listen to your speech.

Formative Knowledge

Formative knowledge is the knowledge that is forming in the mind of the audience during the speech—what the audience is learning (or not learning) during your speech. You may assess audience understanding with a simple question and answer session. Another technique is to use an audience response system at different points in the speech to ask the audience short, quick questions.

If their answers reveal their confusion or if you see puzzled looks on the faces of audience members, you know that you need to try again to explain what you were saying in different words or with better supporting examples.

Summative Knowledge

Summative knowledge is the knowledge that your audience leaves with after your speech. What is the level of understanding at the end of your speech? Do they know more or can they do something that they could not do before the speech? To assess whether you've been successful transferring summative knowledge, you may include a question and answer session at the end of your speech or ask your audience to complete a short questionnaire.

From Concept to Action

To review the concept of knowledgeability, think about something that you once had to learn that you previously knew little about. Maybe it related to a course in high school or college, such as a foreign language? Or maybe it was a software program you needed to learn for work? Remember what it was like when you first got started. Did you have any prior knowledge? What was it like while you were learning? Could you follow your instructor? Or did you get lost along the way? And, what was it like at the end of your formal learning? Did your instructor succeed in conveying the knowledge you needed? At each stage, what could they your instructor have done differently that would have helped you develop your knowledgeability?

OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Knowledgeability of the Audience on Your Topic." Lumen Learning.
https://lumen.instructure.com/courses/218897/pages/linkedtext54194?module_item_id=5007034. Accessed 15 April 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]