Adapting to Your Audience and Situation

Orators have to learn the differences of human souls.

Plato

Preview

Why This Chapter Matters
The more you know about your audience and your speaking situation, the more effective your speech will be. A good audience analysis can reveal how your listeners might feel about your topic and what their needs and wants are. When you have this information, you can tailor your language, examples, and stories to better reach them.

What’s in This Chapter
Understanding Audience Demographics
Understanding Audience Dynamics
Gathering Audience Information
Meeting the Challenges of Audience Diversity
Adjusting to the Communication Situation

It’s the beginning of the fall term, and the president of Students for Environmental Action (SEA) has a busy day ahead. At eight o’clock in the morning, she will speak to the first-year students assembled in the field house. She hopes to get them excited about SEA’s plans for the year and recruit new members. That evening she will address the County Development Board to explain SEA’s projects. She wants to reassure the board that the group’s work will help, not hurt, business in the area.

The general topic of this student’s speeches will not change, but the two audiences and situations will require different approaches. She must keep her audiences at the center of her thinking as she plans and develops her message. Moreover, the settings for these speeches can make a big difference in how she presents them.
You may question the ethics of adapting a speech to fit a particular audience. But you can adapt to your audience without changing the essence of your message or surrendering your convictions. You can ethically adapt your message to fit a given audience in terms of the language you use, the examples you provide, and the authorities you cite.

In this chapter, we open by discussing the demographic makeup of your audience, including their age, education level, group affiliations, gender, and sociocultural background. We then consider the motivations, attitudes, and values of listeners; how to gather information about them; and some of the major challenges of audience diversity. Finally, we focus on features of the communication situation that may call for on-the-spot adaptations.

Understanding Audience Demographics

An effective audience analysis starts with information about audience demographics: age, gender, education, group affiliations, and sociocultural background. Politicians and advertisers rely heavily on such information because it is easy to obtain and can provide valuable insights. Demographic data can suggest how to focus your topic, select the most appropriate supporting materials, and determine what types of appeals might work best with your audience. In the classroom, such information also can help you estimate interest in your topic and how much your listeners may already know about it.

So where and how do you get this information? In your public speaking class, you can start by looking around. How old are your classmates? What types of diversity are represented? Listen carefully to the first round of speeches. What ideas arouse the most interest? What social and political viewpoints are expressed?

Outside the classroom, the person who invites you to speak may be able to provide such information or you may find it on the Internet. The InterConnections box at the end of this chapter lists a few web sites that may be helpful.

When interpreting demographic data from the Internet, consider these limitations:

- Most survey information on demographics and attitudes is based on self-reports. In such surveys, people tend to give socially appropriate responses to questions. They sometimes report what they think they ought to say, not what is actually true.
- Information from “polls” that local media outlets or Internet sites conduct is not scientifically gathered. Supplement such poll results with information from other sources.
- Generic sources produce generic data. Don’t assume that what is true in general about a population will automatically be true about your listeners.
Age

Age has been used to predict audience reactions since the time of Aristotle, who suggested that young listeners are pleasure loving, optimistic, impulsive, trusting, idealistic, and easily persuaded. Older people, he observed, are more set in their ways, skeptical, cynical, and concerned with maintaining their comfort. Those in the prime of life present a balance between youth and age, being confident yet cautious, judging cases by the facts, and taking things in moderation.1

Contemporary research supports many of Aristotle’s ideas. Most research also suggests that younger people are more flexible and open to new ideas and that older people tend to be more conservative and less receptive to change.

Age can be an important factor in choosing your speech topics. If your audience consists mainly of young college students, they might be interested in a speech on campus social activities. To an older audience, this topic could seem trivial or uninteresting. Age is also important in terms of the language you use and the people, places, things, or events you refer to in your speeches. For example, an older audience probably read *The Grapes of Wrath* and listened to “Strawberry Fields,” but they might ask, “What is ‘Smashing Pumpkins?’”

Gender

In the 1950s, *Life* magazine interviewed five male psychiatrists who suggested that women’s ambitions were the “root of mental illness in wives, emotional upset in husbands, and homosexuality in boys.”2 Needless to say, we have come a long way from that era!

In our time, ideas about gender differences continue to change rapidly. The changes are especially marked in the areas of “gender-appropriate” roles and interests, where the lines are becoming blurred. Some of the greatest changes in gender roles have come in the area of education. In 1950, only 24 percent of all college degrees went to women; in 2001, women earned 57 percent of all degrees awarded.3

Given such changes, we suggest caution in making adjustments based on the gender makeup of the audience. Be certain that any assumptions you make are based on the most current data available, because the differences are often a matter of “now you see them, now you don’t.” Finally, be especially careful to avoid sexism and gender stereotyping. These two topics are covered in detail later in this chapter.

Educational Level

The more educated your audience is, the more you can assume they know about general topics and current affairs, and the broader their range of interests may be. Research suggests that better-educated audiences are more interested in social, environmental, consumer, and political issues. They are curious, and they enjoy learning about new ideas, new things, and new places. If your speech presents a fresh perspective on a problem, they should be avid listeners.
Better-educated audiences also tend to be open-minded. They are more accepting of social and technological changes and more supportive of women’s rights and alternative lifestyles than are less educated listeners.4

Educational differences affect the strategies you use in a speech—for example:

- If there are several positions on an issue, assume that a better-educated audience will be aware of them.
- Acknowledge alternative viewpoints, and explain why you chose your position.
- Support your ideas with sound evidence and examples that can stand up under close scrutiny.
- Be well prepared. If you are not, educated listeners will question your credibility.

**Group Affiliations**

The groups that people belong to reflect their interests, attitudes, and values. Knowing what groups your listeners belong to can help you prepare a speech that fits their interests and needs. This understanding can make your speech more relevant and can help promote identification between your audience and your ideas.

**Occupational Groups.** Knowing your listeners’ occupational affiliations or career aspirations can provide insight into how much your listeners know about a topic, what type of vocabulary to use, and which aspects of a topic might appeal to them. For example, speeches on tax-saving techniques given to two different audiences, professional writers and certified public accountants, should not have the same focus or use the same language.

**Political Groups.** Members of organized political groups tend to be interested in problems of public life. People with strong political ties usually make their feelings known. Your classmates may be members of the Young Democrats, the Young Republicans, the Green Party, or Campus Libertarians. Your college may conduct mock elections or take straw votes on political issues, reporting the results in the campus newspaper. Be on the alert for such information.

**Religious Groups.** Religious affiliations are often a strong indicator of values. For example, Baptists tend to be more conservative than Episcopalians, who in turn are often more conservative than Unitarians. In addition, a denomination may advocate specific beliefs that many of its members accept as a part of their religious heritage. In today’s multicultural classrooms, you may encounter members from many diverse religious backgrounds.

Keep in mind that audiences are usually sensitive about topics related to their religious convictions. As a speaker, be aware of this sensitivity and attuned to the religious makeup of your audience. Appealing to “Christian”
values before an audience that includes members of other religious groups may offend them and diminish the effectiveness of your message.

**Social Groups.** Typically we are born into a religious group, raised in a certain political environment, and end up in an occupation as much by chance as by design. But we choose our social groups on the basis of our interests. Membership in social groups can be as important to people as any other kind of affiliation.

Knowing which social groups are represented in your audience and what they stand for is important. A speech favoring pollution control measures might take a different focus, depending on whether it is presented to the Chamber of Commerce or the Audubon Society. With the Chamber of Commerce, you might stress the importance of a clean environment in inducing businesses to relocate in your community. With the Audubon Society, you might emphasize the effects of pollution on wildlife. People tend to make their important group memberships known to others around them. Be alert to such information from your classmates, and consider it as you plan your speeches.

**Sociocultural Background**

Your sociocultural background can include everything from the section of the country where you live to your racial or ethnic identity. People from different sociocultural backgrounds may have different attitude systems. For example, consider the different perspectives that urban and rural audiences may have on gun control. Urban audiences may associate guns with crime and violence in the streets. Rural audiences may associate guns with hunting and recreation.

With diverse audiences, relate your appeals and examples to experiences, feelings, values, and motivations that people hold in common. Also picture smaller audiences within the larger group. You may even want to direct specific remarks to these smaller groups: “Those of you majoring in the liberal arts will find computer skills just as important in your work as they are for business majors.”

**Speaker’s Notes 4.1**

**Demographic Factors to Consider When Planning Your Speech**

- Should I adjust my message because of the age of my audience?
- Might gender considerations affect how my message is received?
- How might the educational level of my listeners affect my speech preparation?
- Should my message be adapted to occupations or career aspirations?
- Should I adapt my message to the political preferences of my listeners?
- Might religious considerations be important in the preparation of my speech?
Understanding Audience Dynamics

As useful as demographic information may be, it is just a starting point. A thorough audience analysis also includes audience dynamics—the motivations, attitudes, beliefs, and values that affect how listeners receive a message. The more you understand these dynamics, the better you can adapt your message to your audience.

Motivation

Motivation is the psychological force that moves people to action and directs their behavior toward certain goals. It helps explain why people behave as they do. Therefore, the use of motivational appeals is important to both persuasive and informative speeches because these appeals are the most effective way to arouse and sustain interest in a speech. People will listen, learn, and remember a message only if it relates to their needs, wants, or wishes.

People are motivated by what they don’t have that they need or want. If you have recently moved to a new town, your need to make friends may attract you to places where you can meet others. And even when their needs are satisfied, people still respond to their wants. Suppose you have just eaten a filling meal and are not hungry, but if someone enters the room with a tray of freshly baked brownies, the sight and aroma can make you want one.

Psychologists have been studying human motivation since the early twentieth century. They have proposed a variety of ways of looking at needs and explaining how they work. What is most important is that appealing to needs and motivations works very well in speeches. The human needs we discuss here may help you reach your audience. Consider them as you plan your speeches. Ask yourself, “Which appeals will work best with this audience on this topic?”

Comfort. The need for comfort involves such things as having enough to eat and drink, keeping warm when it’s cold and cool when it’s hot, and being free from pain. One student speaker caught the attention of his classmates by appealing to this need as he opened his speech on the benefits of yoga:

No pain, no gain! Right? No, wrong! If workout routines leave you heading for the medicine cabinet, look for another way to get your body and heart in shape. An exercise program that combines yoga and power walking improves both your body tone and your cardiovascular system.

Safety. All of us need to feel free from threats to our well-being. Crime on campus, environmental pollution, natural disasters, and illnesses are major sources of concern. In a class that met right before lunchtime, Hannah Johnston opened her speech in the following way:

What would you say if I asked if you’ve ever eaten spinal cord? You’d probably think I was crazy, wouldn’t you? But what if I asked you, “Have you
ever eaten a fast food hamburger?” What’s really crazy is that those two questions may be interchangeable.

The complete text of this speech is available at the end of Chapter 5. Appeals to safety needs often arouse fear in the audience. The use of fear appeals can be tricky. If they are too obvious, the audience may feel they are being manipulated. If your message arouses fear, you must show listeners how the danger can be averted or overcome.

**Control.** Our need for control is closely related to our need for safety. None of us likes to feel buffeted by forces beyond our control. We like to feel we have something to say about our destiny. Speeches that show listeners how they can improve their grades by better managing their time or learning to read a text more effectively typically have strong appeal.

Demonstrating how listeners can cope with problems can help restore a sense of control. In his speech on the New Madrid earthquake area, Stephen Huff first described the potential effects of a disaster and then provided listeners, who lived in that area, with a list of earthquake preparedness suggestions.

**Tradition.** Most people value things that give them a sense of roots. There are some things we don’t want to change. For example, for many people, Thanksgiving dinner means turkey and dressing, sweet potatoes, cranberries, and pumpkin pie. People often look to their history to anchor their beliefs and use myths to sustain them in times of trouble.

Showing your listeners that you share their traditions and values can help create identification in speeches. In a speech explaining the similarities and differences between holidays in the United States and Mexico, Stephanie Herrera shared the following:

Christmas in Mexico is not really a gift-giving holiday like it is in the United States. It’s more of a religious observance. People walk through the neighborhood in what we call a posada. This means “where they stop.” The stops along the way are houses where the group sings carols and are given gifts of food—like cookies and candies. The posada is a parade to honor niño dios, which means “baby God” in English. It ends up at a house with a huge nativity scene.

**Belonging.** Friends and family help define who we are, warm us with affection, and make the world a less lonely place. The importance of this need is demonstrated by the intense feelings of homesickness many people develop when they move away from the support of family and friends.

Our need to belong also explains our desire to join with others in groups and to take pride in our group membership. We like being with those who share similar interests. Friendship is probably the most prevalent motivational appeal in contemporary American advertising. How many ads have you seen that suggest that if you don’t use the “right” deodorant or drive the “right” car, you risk losing friends?
Nurturance. It makes people feel good to be able to care for, protect, or simply do something for those who are less fortunate. Appeals to this need can be especially strong when speakers discuss children who have problems. Beth Tidmore used this appeal when she described the benefits disabled children get from the Special Olympics:

They experience courage, and victory, and, yes, they also experience defeat. They get to interact with others with disabilities and with people without disabilities. And their mental disability is not a problem. It’s not weird. Their biggest achievements aren’t recognized with a medal. Their biggest achievements take place over time in the growth they make through being a part of the Special Olympics.

Fairness. The need for fairness envisions a moral balance in the world. We like to feel that we deserve what happens to us, both good and bad. For college audiences, especially those who are idealistic, fairness can be a strong source of motivation. Speeches that express outrage over human rights abuses, racism in the workplace, or the past and present treatment of Native Americans draw heavily on this need.

Valesa Johnson called on her listeners’ need for fairness in her speech on the legal profession:

Barbara Jordan fought a long, hard battle to ensure that we all abided by the constitutional creed, “All men are created equal,” and “Justice for all.” Someone has to continue to beat the path of justice for all men. That includes black men, white men, yellow men, brown men, and wo-men. Someone has got to continue to fight the good fight!

Understanding. We are naturally curious about the world and the people around us. We want to know, “What is this?” “How does it work?” “Why is this happening?” When we satisfy curiosity, we increase our understanding of the world and the people around us. Our curiosity also includes an interest in things that are unusual, especially if they create doubts about the future. Sometimes understanding can help us cope better with problems. Understanding can equal empowerment. At other times, understanding may simply satisfy our curiosity.

Speech topics that are unusual, such as foreign customs or exotic locales, can maintain a high level of audience attention. Topics that explain medical advances or useful technical innovations also can help satisfy this need.

Achievement. The need for success or achievement is one of the most thoroughly studied human motives. Although winning may not be everything, most of us feel that losing does not have much to recommend it. You tap this need for achievement when you present speeches that show listeners how they can improve themselves and increase their chances for success.

Ceremonial speeches that hold up a model of success for listeners to follow can be quite inspiring. They can challenge audiences to set high goals, work
hard to reach these goals, and enjoy the fruits of their success. Ashlie McMillan presented an inspiring tribute to her cousin Tina, who is a diastrophic dwarf. Tina earned two degrees from Texas Christian University and is fiercely independent and determined to live a satisfying life. At the time of the speech, Tina was enrolled in law school and was planning her wedding. The message was summed up in Ashlie’s concluding remarks:

The next time an obstacle stands in your way, remember Tina, my small cousin who has achieved such large things. You too may seem too short to grasp your stars, but you never know how far you might reach if you stand upon a dream.

**Independence.** Although we need other people, we also need independence. The desire to feel that “I can do it myself” is part of our culture. America is the land of opportunity, but to take advantage of this, we need to assert our independence.

This need is especially strong in young adults who are in the process of finding themselves. The quest for independence allows young people to develop into fully functioning adults, to make decisions on their own, and to take responsibility for their own lives. Consequently, college audiences may be especially responsive to the need for freedom from arbitrary constraints on their ideas, actions, or lifestyles.

**Enjoyment.** Taking time off for enjoyment is part of a healthy lifestyle. This appeal may be especially attractive to college students who find themselves inundated with assignments, tests, speeches to give, and papers to write, not to mention full-or part-time work. Speeches that introduce listeners to new activities or places can fill this need. We recently heard an interesting speech entitled “Four Places to Visit in Memphis” that introduced the audience to some of the city’s lesser-known attractions such as A. Schwabs on Beale Street, a 1920s-type variety store much beloved by Elvis Presley.

Incorporating any of these motivational appeals into your speeches can help arouse attention, sustain interest in your message, and influence or persuade listeners. Figure 4.1 summarizes these motivational appeals.

**Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values**

When we use the word *attitudes*, we typically refer to our feelings about something—whether we like or dislike, approve or disapprove of people, places, events, or ideas. Actually, an attitude is more than just a feeling. It also includes our *beliefs*—what we know or think we know about something and the ways we are predisposed to behave toward it. Our important social attitudes are anchored by our *values*, the moral precepts we live by that suggest how we should behave or what we see as an ideal state of being.

To be an effective speaker you must consider your listeners’ attitudes, beliefs, and values as you plan and prepare your speeches.
Attitudes. Most attitudes involve judgments of whether something is good or bad. Your audience’s attitude toward your topic can affect the way it receives your message. For example, an audience with a negative attitude toward amnesty for illegal immigrants may summarily dismiss any message proposing citizenship for this group without even listening to what you have to say. A reluctant audience poses special problems for persuasive speakers. Meeting this challenge is covered in Chapter 15. Attitudes can be changed, but it is often not easy to do so.

Beliefs. Beliefs are acquired through experience and education. Some beliefs may be learned through direct contact with others—for example, “Asian American students are more studious than their peers.” Other beliefs may be acquired indirectly from family, friends, and authority figures as we grow up, for example, “The Republican Party favors the wealthy.”

Some beliefs are based on verifiable facts, such as, “The price of personal computers has dropped dramatically over the past five years.” Other beliefs are based on opinions that may or may not be verifiable, such as, “Japanese-made cars are better than Korean-made cars.” Information about your listeners’ beliefs can suggest what additional information you need to provide or what misinformation you may need to correct.
Values. Values may include such ideals as honesty, equality, peace, freedom, and salvation. Our personal, social, religious, and political values guide much of our thinking and behavior. They are the foundation for our most important beliefs and attitudes, providing us with standards for evaluation.

Values are at the core of our identity. As principles that govern our behavior and our way of seeing the world, they are highly resistant to change. Information that clashes with a listener’s values is likely to be rejected without much thought. Speakers don’t normally try to change values. Rather, they try to show how values relate to a topic in order to justify certain interpretations and recommendations. References to shared values, however, can increase identification between a speaker and the audience and strengthen the persuasive impact of a speech.

Insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and values of your audience can help you plan your messages. It can aim you in the proper direction so that you select the most effective appeals, decide what authorities to cite, and determine what examples and stories might work best in your speeches. Specific information on adapting persuasive messages to these audience variables may be found in Chapter 15.

Gathering Audience Information

As we noted earlier, you can get much valuable information for audience analysis just by using your eyes and ears. If more in-depth knowledge about your audience is critical to your presentation, you can administer an audience analysis questionnaire. This procedure can generate specific information about your listeners’ interest in your topic, their knowledge about it, their attitude toward it, and the way they might evaluate sources of information you could cite in your speech.

Figure 4.2 shows a sample audience survey questionnaire on the subject of capital punishment. Use the following guidelines for preparing your questionnaire:

- Plan your questions carefully to get the most useful information.
- Use simple sentences with a single idea.
- Use clear, concrete, unambiguous language.
- Keep questions short and to the point.
- Avoid words such as all, always, none, and never.
- Keep your personal biases out of the questions.
- Keep the questionnaire brief.
- Provide room for comments.

Finally, keep in mind that survey results provide only a sketch of where your audience stands on a topic. Compare what you learn from a questionnaire with what you hear as you listen to others talking about the issue in question.
### Sample Attitude Questionnaire

For each question, please circle the number that most clearly represents your position.

1. How interested are you in the topic of capital punishment?
   - Very Interested: 7
   - Unconcerned: 6
   - Not Interested: 5

2. How important do you think the issue of capital punishment is?
   - Very Important: 7
   - No Opinion: 6
   - Very Unimportant: 5

3. How much do you know about capital punishment?
   - Very Little: 7
   - Average Amount: 6
   - Very Much: 5

4. How would you describe your attitude toward capital punishment?
   - Total Opposition: 7
   - Total Support: 6
   - On the Fence: 5

5. Please place a check beside the sources of information on capital punishment that you would find the most acceptable.
   - Attorney general’s office
   - FBI
   - Local police department
   - Criminal justice department of the university
   - American Civil Liberties Union
   - Local religious leaders
   - Conference of Christians and Jews
   - NAACP
   - Other (please specify) ____________________________

Comments:
Meeting the Challenges of Audience Diversity

Learning to communicate with others from different backgrounds and cultures can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your public speaking class. To make the most of this opportunity, however, there are certain pitfalls you must avoid. You need to understand the power of stereotypes and learn how to build common ground between yourself and your listeners.

Stereotypes

All of us use our experiences to make sense of new information and guide our interactions with others. To use our experiences efficiently, we react in terms of categories. For example, having heard stories about rattlesnake bites, we may be leery of all snakes.

Problems with categorizing experiences may arise when we start categorizing people. The categories can harden into stereotypes, or rigid beliefs and expectations about a group that reflect our biases toward the group. For example, we may stereotype the elderly as frail and needy or athletes as unintelligent and insensitive.

When stereotypes dominate our thinking, we react more to the categories than to the actual people they represent. When we meet people who do not fit our stereotypes, we may simply discount them as exceptions to the rule.

People typically base their stereotypes on easily visible characteristics, such as gender, race, or age. Stereotypes also may relate to ethnic identity, religion, occupation, or place of residence. Regardless of how they are rooted, stereotypes can have a powerful influence on our thinking and behavior. Beyond their obvious unfairness, stereotypes can also lead into the problematic “-isms”—ethnocentrism, sexism, and racism—that can impede effective communication with a diverse audience.

Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the belief that our way of life is the “right” and superior way. Actually, ethnocentrism is not always bad. In its milder form, it expresses itself in patriotism and national pride and helps people unite and work toward common goals. But when ethnocentrism goes beyond pride in one’s own group and shows up as the denigration and rejection of others, it becomes a barrier to communication.

The first step in controlling ethnocentrism is to recognize any tendencies you may have to overestimate your own and underestimate other cultures. For example, most Americans believe that over half of the world’s population speaks English, when actually only about 20 percent do. To overcome ethnocentrism, we must learn to look for and respect the humanity in all people and recognize that this shared humanity transcends race and culture. As part of this respect, avoid using language that puts others down on the basis of their national origins.

Sexism. Sexism occurs when we allow gender stereotypes to control our interactions with members of the opposite sex. Gender stereotyping involves
making broad generalizations about men or women based on outmoded assumptions—for example, “Men don’t know how to take care of children” or “Women don’t understand finances.”

Gender stereotyping is especially problematic when it implies that the differences between men and women justify discrimination. Be careful not to portray gender roles in ways suggesting superiority or inferiority. For instance, when you use examples or stories to illustrate a point, don’t make all your authority figures male.

Gender stereotyping also reveals itself in the use of sexist language: making gender references in situations where gender is unknown or irrelevant. It may include the generic use of masculine nouns or pronouns, such as referring to “man’s advances in science” or using he when the intended reference is to both men and women. Avoid this problem by saying “she or he” or by using the plural they.

Racism. Although blatant racism and discrimination are no longer socially acceptable in most circles, a more subtle form of symbolic racism can still infect our thinking. For example, we may say, “We believe in hard work and earning our way,” when we really mean, “Why don’t you get off welfare?”

It may be helpful to view the impact of symbolic racism from the perspective of someone on the receiving end. Television commentator Bryant Gumbel described how it feels:

Racism isn’t only being called a nigger and spit on. It’s being flipped the bird when you’re driving, or walking into a store and being asked to check your bag, or being ignored at the checkout counter, or entering a fine restaurant and being stared at.6

As you take race into consideration in your audience analysis, examine your thinking for biases and stereotypes. Be sensitive about the language you use. When you are referring to a different racial or ethnic group, use the terms that members of that group prefer. Stay away from examples that cast members of a group into stereotypical roles that imply inferiority. And of course, avoid racist humor.

One language problem that relates to all three of these negative “-isms” is marking, adding an irrelevant reference to gender, ethnicity, race, or sexual preference when none is needed. For example, if you referred to “Thompson, the Hispanic engineer,” you might draw attention to her ethnic background when it is irrelevant. Some audience members may interpret your remarks as suggesting that “Thompson is a pretty good engineer for a Hispanic,” whether you intend such implications or not.

Finding Common Ground

An ongoing study sponsored by the National Conference for Community and Justice indicates that nine out of ten Americans from all groups are willing to work with one another to solve the most pressing problems in their communities. Most Americans want to protect their own and others’ children from gangs and violence, improve schools, and ease racial, religious, and ethnic tensions.
Shalom Schwartz and his associates at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem conducted a study of values in twenty different countries. They identified ten universal values: power, achievement, tradition, enjoyment, self-direction, security, unity, benevolence, conformity, and stimulation. You may have noticed that there is considerable overlap between these universal values and the motivational appeals that we discussed earlier in this chapter. You can use them in your speeches to help establish common ground with a diverse audience.

You may have some questions concerning the ethics of adapting your message to a specific audience. Many of us have encountered speakers who waffled—taking one position with one audience and a different position with another. Such maneuvering is clearly unethical. However, you can adapt to your audience without changing the essence of your message. Ask yourself: “How can I tailor my message so that I can reach my audience without compromising my convictions?” The Ethics Alert! contains some advice to help you make an ethical adaptation.

The Ethics of Audience Adaptation
- Change your strategies, not your convictions.
- Appeal to shared needs and values to bridge cultural differences.
- Resist stereotypes that lead you to derogate or misjudge others.
- Suppress any impulse toward ethnocentrism.
- Do not use slang terms to refer to racial, ethnic, religious, or gender groups.
- Avoid sexist, racist, ethnic, or religious humor.

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Adjusting to the Communication Situation

Finally, we come to the setting for your speech. Consider the time, place, occasion, size of the audience, and overall context in which the speech will be presented to make final adjustments in your speech.

Time

The time of day, day of the week, and amount of time allotted for speaking can all be significant factors. Consider the following strategies:
- If you are speaking early in the morning, be more forceful to awaken listeners.
- Speeches presented after meals need lively examples and humor.
- Evening audiences have typically worked all day and left the comforts of home to hear you. Justify their attendance with good ideas well presented.
If your speech is scheduled on Monday, when people have not yet adjusted to the weekend being over, or on Friday, when they are thinking of the weekend ahead, you need to offer especially interesting material to hold their attention.

Also remember that a short speech does not mean shorter preparation time. Plan carefully so that you observe time limits.

**Place**

When speaking outside, you may have to cope with unpredictable distractions. When speaking inside, consider the size and layout of the room and whether a lectern or electronic equipment will be available.

Even in the classroom, speakers must learn to cope with distractions, such as noises that filter in from outside. You need to take such problems in stride and not let them distract you. If the noise is temporary, pause and wait until it stops; then repeat your last words and go on with your message. If the noise is constant, you will have to speak louder to be heard. You may even have to pause to close a window or door.

**Occasion**

As you plan your message, you need to take into account why people have gathered to hear you speak. When an audience is required to attend a presentation, such as a mandatory employee meeting, you may have to work hard to arouse interest and sustain attention. An audience that voluntarily attends a presentation is usually more motivated to listen.

Specific occasions call for certain types of speeches. If a speaker does not offer the kind of message listeners expect, they may be annoyed. For example, if they are expecting an informative presentation on investment strategies and instead get a sales pitch for a particular mutual fund, they may feel exploited.

**Audience Size**

The size of your audience can affect how you speak. A small audience can provide useful feedback and offer opportunities for interaction. It invites a more casual presentation. Larger audiences present a distinct set of challenges. To adapt to the large audience situation:

- Change your visual focus from time to time. Choose listeners in various sections of the audience, and make eye contact with them. Establishing eye contact with listeners in all sections of the room helps more people feel included.
- Speak more deliberately and distinctly. Use more emphatic gestures so that everyone can see them.
- Make any presentation aids large enough for those in the back of the audience to see without strain.
Context

Anything that happens near the time of your presentation becomes part of the context of your speech. Both recent speeches and recent events can influence how the audience responds to you.

Recent Speeches. Any speeches presented immediately before yours create an atmosphere in which you work. This atmosphere has a preliminary tuning effect on listeners, preparing them to respond in certain ways to you and your message. At political rallies, patriotic music and introductions prepare the audience for the appearance of the featured speaker. At concerts, warm-up groups put listeners in the mood for the star.

Preliminary tuning may also affect classroom presentations. Earlier speeches may affect the mood of the audience. If the speech right before yours aroused strong emotions, you can ease the tension in the introduction to your speech. Do this by acknowledging listeners’ feelings and using them as a springboard into your own speech. For example, you might say:

Obviously, many of us feel very strongly about the legalization of same-sex marriage. What I’m going to talk about is also very important—but it is something I think we can all agree on: the challenge of finding a way to stop children from killing other children in our community.

Another technique might be to begin with a story that involves listeners and refocuses their attention. At times, gentle humor can help relieve tension. Be aware, however, that people who are upset may be in no mood for laughter. Base your decision on whether to use humor on your reading of the situation: the mood of listeners, the subject under discussion, and your own ability to use the technique effectively.

In addition to dealing with the mood created by earlier speeches, you may also adapt to their content. Suppose you have spent the past week preparing a speech on the need to extend endangered species legislation. Then the speaker before you makes a convincing presentation on the problems of extending endangered species legislation. You can turn this context to your advantage. Point out that the previous speech established the importance of the topic but gave only one viewpoint: “Now you will hear the other side of the story.”

Recent Events. When listeners enter the room for your speech, they bring with them information about recent events. They will use this knowledge to evaluate what you say. If you are not up on the latest news on your topic, your credibility can suffer.

A student in one of our classes once presented an interesting and well-documented speech comparing public housing in Germany with that in the United States. Unfortunately, she was unaware of a local scandal involving public housing. For three days before her presentation, the story had made the front page of the local newspaper and had been the lead story in area newscasts. Everyone expected her to mention it. Her failure to discuss this important local problem weakened her credibility.
At times, the context of events to which you must adjust your speech may be totally unexpected. If that happens, you must make on-the-spot adjustments so that things work in your favor.

During a graduation ceremony at Loyola Marymount University, the school’s president fell off the platform immediately before the commencement address. Although the only thing injured was his dignity, the fall certainly distracted the audience. The speaker, Peter Ueberroth, organizer of the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games, recaptured their attention and brought down the house by awarding the president a 4.5 in gymnastics!\(^8\)

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**InterConnections.LearnMore**

**Attitudes**

http://www.mdcc.edu/users/jmcnair/Joe5pages/-Attitude.htm

*A basic discussion of how attitudes are formed and how they function. Developed and maintained by Professor Joseph D. McNair, School of Education, Miami-Dade Community College.*

**Values**

http://www.zetterberg.org/Papers/ppr1997b.htm

*“The Study of Values,” an article that covers a variety of approaches to the study of human values, by Professor Hans L. Zetterberg, sociologist and director of the Social Research Consulting Group in Stockholm, Sweden.*
AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

Gallup Organization

http://www.gallup.com
One of the oldest and best known of the polling organizations. Gallup's web site contains an archive of past polls. You can sign up for a weekly briefing by email.

National Opinion Research Center

http://www.norc.uchicago.edu
NORC is a nonprofit organization affiliated with the University of Chicago that conducts survey research to help policymakers, researchers, educators, and others address crucial public issues. Summary reports of major studies are available online.

† Experiment with the Strategies in This Chapter

Consider the following descriptions of possible audiences for your next speech. After each description, list at least one strategy you might use to adapt your speech to the audience. Explain why you think each strategy might work.

Your audience consists of undergraduate students between ages 18 and 23 who attend your school:


Your audience consists of local community members between ages 40 and 65. All of them have completed at least two years of college:


Your audience includes local community members and students from ages 20 to 70. Half of them voted a straight Democratic ticket in the last presidential election; the other half voted straight Republican:
Chapter 4  Adapting to Your Audience and Situation

Notes


