

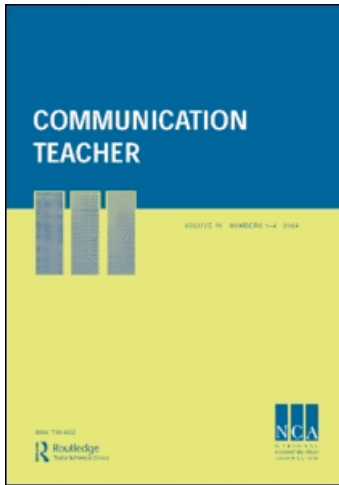
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# “I Now See How I Can Use These Skills”: An Applied Project for the Public Speaking Course

Tony Docan-Morgan

**Courses:** *Public Speaking, Advanced Public Speaking, Argument and Debate*

**Objective:** *Students will learn in-depth about a speech or presentation genre they see as relevant to their future, and be able to prepare and present such a speech or presentation*

## Rationale

Although students are often given the freedom to choose their own speech topics (e.g. Miller, 2004), they are rarely given the opportunity to choose specific speech or presentation<sup>1</sup> genres relevant to their own needs. This assignment requires students to reflect on how public speaking will play a role in their lives once the course is completed, research a specific genre of speaking, and prepare and present such a presentation. It also requires that students apply basic principles of public/presentation speaking (e.g. organization, audience analysis) learned earlier in the course or in a previous public speaking course. This assignment also exposes students to genres of speaking beyond traditional classroom speeches (e.g. informative, persuasive) (Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson, 1999), as each career field has unique demands and public speaking expectations. Students entering a business career, for example, may need to be well versed in giving training workshops, sales presentations, investment proposals, briefings, status reports, technical business presentations, and/or research presentations (e.g. Guffey, 2006). Students completing this assignment are also required to create and use an original speech evaluation rubric, which has been shown to involve students more in their own learning (Ainsworth & Christinson, 1998), improve the depth and quality of their work (Lundberg, 1997), and lead to more honest and accepted feedback (Hogrefe, 2006).

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## The Project

Students should be informed of this project early in the course. They should be told that they will research a speech genre (e.g. sermon, training seminar), write a detailed review of this form of speaking, and prepare and present such a presentation. The project can be broken down into three phases, each of which is discussed.

*Phase one: Brainstorm and select a genre.* The first phase of the Optional-genre Presentation Project requires students to brainstorm and research the types of public speaking they think they will do in the future, or that draw their interest. The instructor can introduce this project to students by leading a discussion of the benefits of gaining public speaking skills, including personal life, college education, and career benefits (Sellnow, 2005). Students should then be asked to write a journal entry or reflection paper addressing the following questions: When might you engage in public speaking in the future (e.g. for career and personal reasons)? What kinds of speaking do you wish to learn about, be able to do, and master? What are your interests and needs as a public speaker? Students may also be prompted to conduct initial research on genres of speaking that they find useful or interesting. They should also be given a list of presentation genres from which to consider, including training workshops, lectures, sermons, sales presentations, investment proposals, briefings, status reports, protests, political debates, political campaign speeches, technical business presentations, research presentations, courtroom presentations (e.g. cross examination, rebuttal, and closing arguments), humorous or entertaining performances (e.g. standup comedy), oral press releases, and special occasion speeches (e.g. farewells, eulogies, and commencement addresses). Students have the option of getting speech genre ideas from traditional public speaking textbooks (e.g. Sellnow, 2005) and professionals that work in the students' current or future lines of work (e.g. interviewing a lawyer). Students might also consider consulting popular or mainstream sources that discuss a variety of speech genres when doing an initial search. For example, sources such as *Presentations for dummies* (Kushner, 2004a) and *Public speaking for dummies* (Kushner, 2004b) offer guidelines for speaking to city council and school boards, making sales presentations, engaging in debates, and delivering motivational speeches.

Students should be informed that they cannot simply give an "informative speech" or "persuasive speech." Instead, they must give a speech or presentation that would traditionally be given outside of the classroom, with a clear audience and purpose in mind. The genre students choose should not overlap with other genres already assigned for the course (e.g. self-introduction, eulogy). Students should be told that when presenting this speech in class, they must assume that they are speaking to an audience other than the class, and tailor the message to that audience. After students have reflected on and conducted initial research about the genre they wish to research and present, they should have it approved by the class instructor.

*Phase two: Research your genre and become an expert in it.* When the second phase of this project is assigned, students should be told, "Your objective is to become an expert in the type of speaking you have chosen." Students should research the

presentation genre they have selected and write a paper detailing what constitutes an effective presentation within the genre they have selected, as well as begin to think about their specific topic and audience. In the past, students have been required to write and submit a five to eight-page paper; however, this can be altered depending on the nature of the course objectives. Students should be asked to address the following points within their papers:

- A. *Basics*: Identify the genre of speech you have chosen for this project (e.g. training workshop, status report). In detail, explain the following with regard this genre: What is it? Who engages in this type of speaking? Why does one engage in this type of speaking? Where does this type of speaking occur? When does one engage in this type of speaking?
- B. *Rationale*: Discuss why you wish to give a presentation of this sort. Elaborate on how you see this type of speaking to be a part of your future and/or important for you to be able to do.
- C. *Analysis of genre*: In detail, explain what constitutes an effective presentation of this type. In other words, what are the necessary components for a highly effective speech *of this kind*? You must (1) conduct library research, (2) interview at least one person who engages in this type of speaking, and (3) watch at least one sample (attend in person or find a recorded version). Spend a minimum of three pages on this section, and cite a *minimum* of five credible sources including your library materials, interviewee, and the sample you watched. You can use a maximum of one credible Internet source.
- D. *Audience*: Discuss the specific audience you will be (pretending) to speak to in class. Did you analyze your audience directly or indirectly? Please discuss. What exactly are you going to do to tailor your message to meet your audience's needs?
- E. *Topic, content, and organization*: Discuss the specific topic you will be speaking about. For example, if you will give a sermon, what will be your topic (e.g. love, compassion, or giving)? What, about your topic, is important for your audience to understand, and how do you know? What are some important content and organizational choices you will make?
- F. *Evaluation rubric*: Create an evaluation rubric (similar to the ones used in this class) that would be appropriate for *providing feedback* and *evaluating* the performance of a speaker within this speaking context. Your rubric should look somewhat similar to the ones used in this class thus far (e.g. assignment title, lined columns and rows, and plenty of space for written comments). The rubric needs to be out of \_\_\_ total points. You, as the expert in your area, need to decide how these points should be distributed. It also needs to provide a system of evaluation (check minus, check, check plus; A, B, C, D, F; unsatisfactory, satisfactory, and excellent). You must make this decision. When creating the rubric, it must contain evaluation criteria based on all of the components necessary for an effective presentation within your context (e.g. if you are giving a eulogy, the rubric needs to focus on elements specific to a eulogy as well as principles of public speaking). When developing these categories, you must

consider: (1) what the literature and your interviewee claim necessary for this type of speaking (your answer to section C above should help); (2) previous public speaking rubrics you have seen; and (3) all course readings. The rubric should also include standard evaluation categories, including delivery (and all of its components), organization, language, evidence of audience analysis, and supporting material. However, your rubric *must go well beyond* these standard categories and apply to the genre of speaking you choose. Your rubric needs to be well thought-out, as well as a *useful tool* for *providing feedback* and *evaluating* the genre of speaking you have chosen. Expect that you will be required to revise your rubric at least one time based on my feedback. Your final revision of this rubric will be used for grading and feedback purposes.

Students should be given sources that may help them in the creation of their rubrics (e.g. Arter, 2000; Glass, 2005; Quinlan, 2006).

After students hand in their papers, the instructor should provide students with feedback, including additional print sources that may be helpful for students, and provide recommendations of others whom might be of assistance to interview (e.g. faculty members or colleagues that have an expertise in a particular genre of speaking). Students should also be given feedback on their plans for the classroom presentation and rubric.

*Phase three: Prepare and present your presentation.* After students have completed their papers and have been given feedback, they should begin preparing their presentation that will be given in class. Students should be reminded to simulate their speaking situation. In particular, they should find a way to simulate the environment in which their presentation would occur in “real life.” For example, if a student is speaking to an audience of six managers and one CEO, he or she should arrange the room appropriately. Students might need to ask for volunteers and give them specific roles. They should also be reminded to come dressed for the occasion and to pre-plan as much as possible.

Immediately before their presentations, students should also be reminded to inform the class about their genre, intended audience, and any expectations they have of the class (e.g. that the class is to play the role of the media and ask questions at the end). Finally, students should submit a package containing the following contents: Final version of the evaluation rubric, original evaluation rubrics with instructor comments, presentation outline and/or speaking notes, and their previously prepared research paper including instructor comments. The instructor should use each student’s individual evaluation rubric to grade student speeches. The instructor should be familiar with the criteria on each evaluation rubric as he or she will have read the students’ research papers earlier in the semester detailing the analysis of the genre, and have revised previous versions of each student’s evaluation rubric (see phase 2 above).

## Debriefing

Once all presentations have been given, the instructor should lead a debriefing session, which may include an overall evaluation of student performances and discussion of the different genres of speaking. The instructor should also consider raising pertinent discussion questions, including the following: What did you learn from this assignment? How has your understanding of, knowledge about, and skill in public/presentation speaking changed since beginning this project? What are the similarities and differences of the genres of speaking we saw in class? Such a discussion may also be used to segue into upcoming course material. In past debriefing discussions, students have reported gaining knowledge and skill in public speaking in general and in the specific genre of speaking they investigated and engaged.

## Appraisal

Student responses to this assignment have been quite favorable. In journal entries, class discussions, and course evaluations, many students remark that this assignment made them learn about and experience a type of speaking useful for their personal and/or professional lives. Students also report that it made them step outside of their comfort zone of giving “generic” speeches (e.g. informative, persuasive) and made them apply the public speaking skills they learned previously. Many students report discovering new career options after completing this project and/or watching others’ presentations. Alongside these benefits, the Optional-genre Presentation Project poses a few challenges.

Perhaps the most challenging requirement of this project is getting students to create an appropriate evaluation rubric for their particular genre of speaking. In addition to explaining that their evaluation rubric must go well beyond the basic standards for generic classroom speeches and that categories need to apply to the genre of speaking they choose, students should be shown examples of rubrics that apply to specific genres (e.g. press conference). The instructor can create his or her own sample rubrics, use previous students’ examples, or email the author of this article for examples. Further, the instructor should be prepared to work through multiple iterations of students’ rubrics. Although some students may struggle with creating a rubric, most students report that it required them to be knowledgeable about their genre of speaking and made them realize the complexity of creating standards for speech evaluation. Another challenging aspect of this assignment concerns creating clear deadlines and time management. In particular, the instructor must make deadlines clear to students for each of the phases and provide enough time for classroom presentations (e.g. 6–9 minutes) and feedback. Further, to save time providing feedback on rubrics and papers, and enrich students’ experience with this assignment, the instructor may wish to have students meet with their interviewee at least one more time to receive feedback on their rubrics, paper, and speaking outlines.

## Variations

This project can be altered in a number of ways. For example, one particularly useful suggestion is to assign students with similar genres to small groups (e.g. one group of education-related genres, one group of courtroom-related genres, or one group of ceremonial genres). In these groups, whether during class, outside of class, or online, students can discuss their understanding of what makes an effective presentation within their larger genre of speaking, provide feedback on one another's rubrics, discuss what they learned from interviews with experts, and practice their presentations with one another. Students with similar genres can also be assigned to provide one another with oral and/or written feedback on drafts of their papers, rubrics, and speeches. Students in the past have reported gaining a more thorough understanding of their speaking genre from their group interactions.

Although most students in the past have given their presentations in the classroom, students can be given the option of or required to give their presentations in an environment more appropriate for their specific genres (e.g. large lecture hall for a political rally, outside for a protest, or a local restaurant for a toast). Even more applied, although potentially difficult to coordinate, the instructor may wish to require students to give their presentations to the actual intended audience (e.g. a student interested in teaching 8th graders would present his or her lesson to a class of 8th graders). The students would likely need to have their presentations videotaped so the instructor could then review and evaluate students' performances. The Optional-genre Presentation Project can also be assigned for independent studies and honors assignments.

## Note

1. The terms *speech* and *presentation* are used interchangeably in this article. Similar to Engleberg (2007), I prefer "the term *presentation* given that the term *speech* often connotes a *public speech*, that is, a presentation to a large public audience. The term *presentation* encompasses other more common forms of speaking such as business briefing, oral reports, ceremonial presentations, or other types of speeches that do not often take place in the public arena" (p. 1).

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