

> Chapter 3

# Understanding Your Audience

In Chapter 2, you learned about the three steps to great speechmaking:

- Speak Like Yourself Step 1:** Prepare a Speech that's Valuable to Your Audience
- Speak Like Yourself Step 2:** Practice Delivering It Powerfully
- Speak Like Yourself Step 3:** Connect with Your Listeners and Present with Pride

Now we're going to focus on that first step.

## > You're Not Just Talking, You're Talking to Someone

The biggest underlying assumption in this book is that the success of your speech will be determined in large part by whether you deliver value to your audience.

That's worth repeating: The success of your speech won't be determined by your smooth delivery, or your perfect word choice (though, don't get me wrong, those things are fun to pull off). It will be determined by your audience's view of whether or not **you were worth listening to**.

But before you can prepare a speech that will be of value to your audience, you have to:

- Know how a speech is actually prepared, and
- Understand what your *audience* would find valuable.

That's why, before we can talk about **how** to prepare an effective speech, we need to understand **who** you'll be preparing it for.

### What Do You Mean by “Value”?

I mean: Anything your audience is glad to have heard.

*News you can use* is valuable. Inspiration is valuable. Accurate and time-saving instructions are valuable. Information about what’s going to happen is valuable. Tips and tricks can be valuable. Heart-warming stories can be valuable. Watch-outs, even reprimands can be valuable if they’re done right.

A full list of what comprises value would be very, very long. So it’s *your* job to become the expert who understands what “value” means to your particular audience.

### › Getting to Know Your Audience

You remember this illustration, right? It’s the public speaking relationship we talked about in Chapter 2.



How do you create this relationship?

Start by asking some basic questions about your audience (you’ll also find these questions in the Instant Speech Worksheet in Appendix A):

1. Who are they (in relation to my speech)?
2. What do I want them to do, or do differently?
3. Why should they care? (What’s in it for them?)

Let's look briefly at each of these questions, and what they mean for crafting a speech:

### What's With All This "Relationship" Talk??

OK, I admit the R-word can get tiring. We could call it a *transaction*. An *interaction*. An *exchange*. A *connection*.

Or, because it's about relating to your audience and bringing content that meets their needs, you could call the public speaking relationship... a *relationship*!

### > Who Are They (in Relation to My Speech)?

Imagine that you're a small manufacturer of **custom gardening tools**, and you've been invited to give a talk about your products.

The first thing you need to know is: *Who will you be talking to?* Are they:

**Gardeners** who belong to a local gardening club?

**Crime Writers**, looking for new kinds of murder weapons to feature in their novels?

**Buyers** for Wal\*Mart's gardening department?

Each of these audiences would get a very different speech, so know which one you'll be addressing!

### > What Do I Want Them To Do, or Do Differently?

This is your "What's in it for me?" question—and again, the answer depends on who *they* are!

**Gardeners** could buy your tools, and help spread the word to other potential customers.



**Crime Writers** could use your brand in their books' grizzly murders, and maybe even help get your products placed in the movies that are made from their books.

**Buyers** from Wal\*Mart, can stock your tools, and sell them to a national market.

## › Why Should They Care (What's In It for Them)?

Another way to ask this question is, "What benefit can I offer my audience that will persuade them to give me what I want?"

Or, in more relationship-based terms, "How can I help my audience appreciate that doing X will be good for everyone?"

### Is There Such a Thing as "Win-Win" Situation?

Before the concept of "win-win" became almost as big a business cliché as the moribund "out of the box," these situation used to be called by other names: Compromise. Collaboration. Mutual interest.

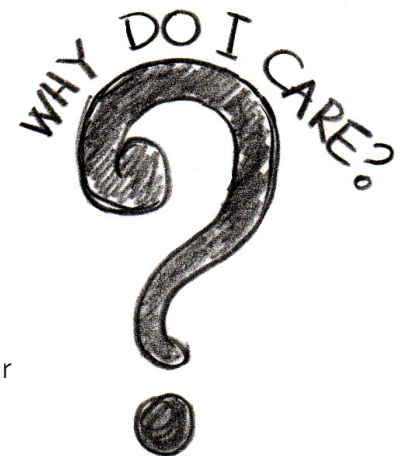
I'm not suggesting that you b.s. your audience about what is or isn't to their benefit. What I suggest is that you look for the ways in which whatever you're proposing genuinely *is* to everyone's benefit, and make that case.

So what would the audience for your speech on gardening tools find of benefit—and therefore, of interest?

**Gardeners** will buy your tools if using them leads to better gardens. Better gardens, in turn, might bring them more happiness, pride, and/or status among gardeners.

**Crime Writers** will be thrilled to have their characters kill people with your tools if you can suggest some new, page-turning plot ideas.

**Buyers** from Wal\*Mart are looking for profit, so point out that your large customer base will gladly pay premium prices for your tools, even though they're relatively cheap to produce.



See how this is done?

Asking questions about your audience will prompt you to think about how to meet *their* needs— and your own.

Once you know how to meet everyone's needs, it's a lot easier to craft a speech that will do the job.

## > What If It's More Complicated?

Of course, there *are* situations in which your audience's needs may not overlap with yours, or may be difficult to meet or impossible to discern. So before we jump into *writing a speech*, let's look at some of those more complex audience scenarios:

### When You're Bringing Bad News

It's not always possible to present content that will please your listeners. Sometimes you have no choice but to anger or upset your audience.

But, surprisingly, that doesn't mean that you and your audience have to be at odds.

Even if they strenuously object to, or disagree with, what you're saying, they'll still be more willing to listen to you if they feel that *you've taken them into account*.

If you show respect for their thoughts and feelings (*real* respect, not the pretend kind); if you've clearly given thought to how they'll react to what you're telling them; if you're willing to speak from a place of reality, not denial or false good cheer; then you still have a chance to connect with them, and perhaps even mitigate the pain of bad news.

#### Up in the Air... or Out to Lunch?

In the 2009 film *Up in the Air*, George Clooney played a man whose job was to convince people who were being fired that *this was a good thing for them*. Even though his goal was manipulative (to avoid scenes and law suits), he made people feel genuinely better because he listened respectfully to them, and reacted with real empathy.

In contrast, I recall a meeting, held in the lunchroom of my daughter's high school, between a representative from NYC's Department of Education and a group of parents. The parents were concerned and angry following an incident at the school, and were complaining that overcrowding made the school unsafe. To which the DOE's representative replied (and I quote), "You should be *grateful* that you're not at 150% of capacity like Fort Hamilton High." She also said that our school was overcrowded because of the DOE's larger plan, and that, "You have to break some eggs to make an omelette."

If you want to see a group of nice, working- and middle-class moms turn into a rabid mob, just suggest that you're willing to *break* our children. The DOE representative had clearly not anticipated her audience's reaction, and she left that cafeteria quick, fast, and in a hurry, before someone (probably her) got hurt.

### When You're Speaking to Several Equally Important Groups

Imagine that you're a consultant who's been hired to move a start-up company from their current office to a new one. You've been asked to come in and brief people on the move.

Your audience will consist of the IT *and* sales *and* creative departments. So who among them really matters to you?

*Everyone.* In order for this move to go smoothly, everyone's going to have to be onboard.

You can accomplish this goal by addressing each group's specific concerns in turn, rather than by trying to talk to them all at once. Tell them that:

- The #1 concern for IT—**getting their data center up and running**—will be your team's first priority following the move.
- As soon as the network is on line, the #1 priority for Sales—**getting access to their customer information**—will be taken care of next.
- And the #1 priority for Creative—**settling into their new work space**—will be left in the hands of the Creative team, so that they can set up in the exact way they want.

Segmenting your audience in this way is much more effective than resorting to broad generalities. (“We’re taking all your concerns into account.”) And since you’ll be speaking to each group in the room about what concerns them most, people will be more willing to wait quietly while you address the other groups.

### **When You’re Not Sure Who the Decision-Maker Is**

This happens sometimes when you’re interviewing for a job, or pitching new business.

How do you know who matters most to you if you find yourself in a room with multiple people whose roles are poorly defined (or who are introduced to you hastily, or in a mumble)?

It’s best to identify the decision-maker in advance. But if you’re not able to do that, *look for the person that others are deferring to*—their body language should be pretty obvious—and address what you’re saying to him or her.

This doesn’t mean that you can ignore or belittle anyone else; you should be warm, friendly, and interested in all. But tailor your talk to the person who’ll be deciding on your job application or business proposal, because he or she is your true audience.

#### **Uncovering the Power**

When the question is, “Who will be deciding on my job application (or proposal, or request for a raise, etc.)?” remember that *you* knows the answer. If you can find the person who has this information, ask them in a tactful way to tell you whatever they can.

There’s nothing wrong with asking, “Can you give me any insights into the decision-making process?” or “Do you know who’ll be making the final decision?” or “Can you help me understand how a decision will be made?”

Even if you don’t get information, you’ll have given it your best shot—and shown that you really care about the outcome.

## When There's Nothing You Want From Your Audience

The second audience analysis question is, "What do I want the people in my audience to do, or do differently?"

Some of my clients will say, "I don't want them to do *anything* differently," "I just want to make them aware of my organization's program," or "I just want to educate them about my products."

To which I say, "Really? You don't want them to *buy* your products? You don't want them to *donate* to your program?"

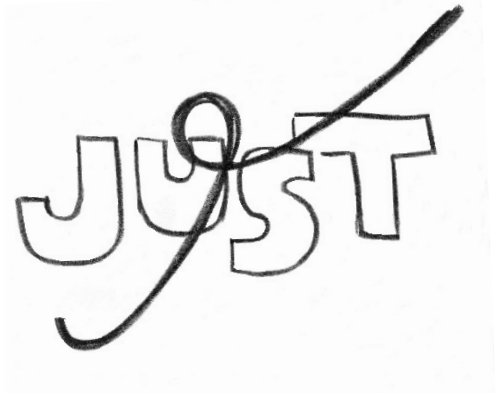
If you're shy, or conflict-averse, or have a live-and-let-live attitude, you may find it hard to admit that yes, you actually *want something*. But for me, it's an article of faith that every speaker wants *something*—even if it's "just" your audience's respect and approval.

So if you *just* want your audience to know what you think, consider the possibility that you actually want them to *adopt* your thinking!

### Look Out for Just

Plenty of women, as well as many men, minimize our own desires by using the word *just*, as in, "I just want them to know how hard I've been working." (Really? You mean, you don't want a *raise*?)

While *just* can appear in statements that are true ("I just got home five minutes ago"), if it's followed by a statement of what you or someone else *desires*, that statement should be considered suspect.



It's good to know what you want from your audience. Knowing what you want will make your speech more authentic, and will bring you closer to getting the desired result.

In Chapter 4, we'll look at the role your Key Message plays in making that happen.





### Take-Away

Public speaking success is based on your audience's perception that you've delivered value on their terms. To do this, you must know who you're talking to, and what they want.

You also need to know what you want from them. Armed with this knowledge, you can look for areas in which your audience's needs and your own needs overlap.

Even in difficult situations, you can succeed if you've thought about your audience. Ask yourself: "Who are they (in relation to my speech)?" "What do I want them to do, or do differently?" and "Why should they care (what's in it for them)?"