

Audience Analysis

Speaking may seem like an act conducted by an individual, but it actually cannot be done without others. The audience is just as important in the speech process as the speaker. This chapter focuses on how to analyze the audience as a speaker so you can craft messages that work with the specific groups to whom you speak. In this chapter, we will first talk about some basic audience analysis methods that can take place before a presentation. Next, we will explain how analyzing the audience does not stop with the start of your talk, but rather continues during the entire presentation. Finally, we will discuss different ways to gather audience information using some common interpersonal and social scientific methods.

Before the Speech

The amount of time you have with your audience before a speech can vary quite a bit. For instance, you might be delivering a quarterly update on sales figures to your supervisor, in which case you roughly know when you will be asked to speak with your team. On the other hand, you might be asked to develop a presentation on plans for a new engineering project to three different investment companies with only a few days' advance notice. In both of these scenarios, the phrase "before the speech" means something very different. In the first situation, you have a great deal of time to consider your audience, analyze them for relevant information, and ultimately make adjustments. In the latter, you have precious little time and even less information on your potential audiences. In both situations, there are methods for gathering information on your audience before you give your presentation. In this section, we will discuss direct observation and the collection of demographic data.

Direct Observation

One tool for audience analysis is your perception of the situation in the moment. Through direct observation you can collect a great deal of information on your audience. Let's look at a few things you might observe and how they could be incorporated quickly into your presentation.

First, if the speech is at a company's office or complex you can examine the walls for photos, slogans, and materials that are prominently displayed. Companies post information about upcoming events as well, and this data can be easily added to your speech in the form of an off-hand reference. Acknowledging the company and the importance of its information demonstrates that you pay attention to detail.

In addition to environmental cues, you can get a fairly accurate read on how many people will be in attendance for the presentation and who they might be. It is not difficult to take a quick mental count of people in the room as you move about before the meeting or presentation. You can also tell who the people are by examining name badges, paying attention to introductions, and watching where people sit and how they dress. All of these behaviors can provide you with important data you might be able to use in your talk.

Finally, through direct observation you can get a feel for the emotional disposition of the audience toward you and your talk. Look at facial cues, eye movement, whether people have notepads, or if they seem excited. This information can give you a heads-up on what to expect when you begin your speech. If the audience looks bored, tired, or disengaged, you may need to begin with great energy, or come up with something early in the speech to cause them to want to listen to what you have to say. On the other hand, if they seem interested, tap into that excitement from the beginning.

Demographics

Collect simple demographic data on your audience to help provide a picture of whom you will be speaking to. **Demographics** are categories of definable characteristics of groups of people, such as age, race, religion, socioeconomic status, education level, and sexual orientation. It is not hard to imagine how such data might be useful to a speaker.

Demographic data is commonly collected by a variety of institutions. Political candidates make use of this data to know which segment of the audience to target and which message to present to that audience. The same commercials do not air in Oregon as do in Ohio, for example, where different issues matter more to particular demographic groups that reside there. Demographics allow candidates to tailor one message for one group of potential voters, and another for a different section of the audience. Elected officials also use demographic data via polling to assess how the public feels about policies that have been passed or policies that are being presented in Congress.

Marketers also use demographics to evaluate particular strategies about sales. For example, a marketing team for a luxury car manufacturer could analyze Census Bureau demographic data and determine whom they would like to target. Since they are more

likely to target those living in high income zip codes, they will consult the Census Bureau information to find out where those zip codes are located. The Census Bureau report also provides information on religious practices, ethnic origins, and other such data. The one caveat to using Census Bureau data is that it is only collected every ten years, so be sure to get the most current and relevant information from them.

Demographic data is used in education by teachers as well as administrators. Administrators need to track performance by demographic groups and report it to their accrediting agencies. Students and professors frequently look around on the first day of class and note the number of females versus males, the age of students, and perhaps even ethnic or racial breakdowns of those present. This is in some ways an automatic reflex and illustrates how direct observation can also be used to gather demographic information about an audience.

In the United States, some demographic categories are protected by federal government laws. For example, protected categories include age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and disability. The law forbids treating people differently because they belong to a particular group within one of these categories. This illustrates the power of demographic categories and data, and the information and policies they shape in society. Knowing the reach and influence of demographics can be helpful to speakers who gather data about their audience ahead of time and make specific adjustments to their messages so they are more likely to resonate with that particular audience. Ultimately, demographic information can show differences in values, beliefs, and opinions among people—and it is there where the true power of this information resides.

People in different segments of demographic categories have different experiences, and these experiences shape their values and beliefs in different ways. For example, an 18-year-old freshman in college is going to see the world very differently from her great grandmother. They have different goals, expectations, voting and purchasing behaviors, and even different needs. Race also can serve as an indicator of different cultural experiences, beliefs, and expectations. This becomes especially insightful information when paired with geography because it becomes possible to see how strong ethnic or racial identities can be in specific communities.

Gender also imparts information on expectations, beliefs, values, and behaviors. Research has revealed that women and men communicate differently, especially in interpersonal and group communication settings—invaluable data for a speaker addressing a group predominantly consisting of one or the other sex.

Sexual orientation, religion, and disability/impairment also can mean differences between groups and individuals in those categories. But there are still other demographics that can matter. Education has been shown to alter a person's views and attitudes about political and social issues. Vocation also can play a factor, as can things such as where a person lives and with whom he or she associates. Socioeconomic status also can influence behaviors, in particular purchasing behaviors in the marketplace. All of this information can be invaluable to a speaker who has the time to make use of it in advance of a presentation.

Methods of Analysis during the Speech

The process and usefulness of audience analysis does not end as you begin your speech. In fact, perhaps the most helpful form of audience analysis occurs during the presentation as you observe and adapt to how the audience receives your message. In this section, we will discuss two elements involved in conducting audience analysis during the speech, including the continuing role of direct observation and polling the audience.

Direct Observation

As we mentioned when covering audience analysis before the speech, there is no more valuable tool than your own ability to observe the audience. During a speech, it is more likely that a speaker will react to nonverbal cues from an audience than anything else. Generally, nonverbal behaviors tell how the audience is truly reacting to the message. This is because nonverbals are very hard to control, and so audience members tend to let them go, especially when they are not the one in the so-called spotlight. These actions are spontaneous and more accurate indicators of how the audience members are receiving your message. If the speaker notices certain things about the audience, he or she then has an opportunity to take advantage of that information, often without the audience even knowing it.

You might notice that your audience is increasingly more engaged with you and your topic as the speech continues. Certain indicators of this may be head nods, smiles, raised eyebrows, clapping, or even cheering. This is, of course, a positive sign and means you are on the right track with what you are saying. This does not mean you should rest, however, because in their enthusiasm is an opportunity for more emotional connections between them, you, and your topic. You can increase the tone of your voice, use hand gestures more

emphatically to make a point, or even reference someone in the crowd or some action taking place. These observations will solidify your identification with the audience and enhance the success of your speech.

TABLE 7.1

Strategies for Gaining Audience Interest	Tendencies that Lose Audience Interest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make eye contact • Vary tone, pitch, and pace • Use gestures to make a point • Use pauses effectively • Refer to someone in the crowd • Involve your audience (e.g., polling) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor delivery skills • Not varying your tone, pitch, or pace throughout your speech • Reading your speech • Talking about things that are not relevant to your audience

Another powerful indicator of audience engagement is eye contact. First, as the speaker you should make as much eye contact with the audience as possible. The audience also should be making eye contact with you throughout your speech. This indicates respect and interest in you and/or your topic. If they are not making eye contact, then consider changing the energy of the delivery, or the cadence and rhythm of your voice to get their attention and bring them back to the content of your presentation (see Table 7.1).

Lack of eye contact, however, is just one way an audience can indicate a lack of interest in your speech. The audience may show a decreased level of interest in a variety of ways, including shifting in their seats, talking to neighbors, reading, sleeping, or even leaving the room. Another key indicator is if you notice members of the audience looking at their watches or cell phones. This can mean they are impatient and want the speech to end. All these behaviors should communicate to you that the time has come to put some energy into your delivery to help refocus the audience's attention and try to get them engaged with the speech (see Table 7.2).

As you can see, direct observation of audience behaviors is a powerful tool for audience analysis that speakers can take advantage of and use to help deliver a successful presentation. It is not, though, the only strategy for audience analysis in their toolkit.

TABLE 7.2

Signals of Audience Engagement	Signals of Audience Disengagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head nods • Smiles • Raised eyebrows • Clapping or cheering • Eye contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting in their seats • Talking to neighbors • Reading • Sleeping • Leaving the room • Looking at watches or cell phones

Polling the Audience

Direct observation is something any speaker can do in virtually any situation; however, other strategies, such as polling the audience, may not be feasible in certain circumstances. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how to employ this useful technique for gathering information about an audience during a speech. This type of polling is considered informal, because it does not follow the rules of the scientific process, but its results are very helpful to any speaker. There are also different moments when you might consider polling the audience.

The first such moment when you might poll the audience is during the introduction of your speech. In fact, this could be a creative attention getter. Not only do you get immediate feedback, but it is also a good way to get the audience engaged by asking them to respond and thus invest themselves in the outcome their answer produces. Even if the audience does not verbally or physically respond, they will likely mentally consider the question. Whether they answer or not, polling them has produced both data and attention. Generally, the best way to poll is by asking a question, or series of questions, and request the audience members to raise their hands

if they agree or disagree with your statement. This can help introduce a topic and give you information about what parts of your topic might be the most relevant to cover.

The other instance when polling the audience can come in handy is during the speech when you cover something complex or difficult. This approach allows you to determine if the audience understands the points you are making. If they are following along, then continue as planned, but if they are not, slow down and readjust your coverage of the material so the audience can understand it. It is acceptable, as the speaker, to query them if you have any concerns about their comprehension of the issue, and the information you gather from this analysis holds tremendous value.

There is one important caveat to polling the audience to gather information: you cannot control the outcome of your question. Things could go as planned, and that is always a good thing, but they also might not. The audience members could turn to each other to discuss your question, thus taking their attention away from you as the speaker. They also might not answer the way you expect, and this may rattle your nerves because you are not prepared for their answer. To this end, be sure your questions are purposeful and get at the information you want to gather. Do not ignore what you receive from the audience, but rather find the most effective way to use it in your presentation.

Other Ways of Gathering Audience Information

Although we have focused on a few audience analysis methods, there are several others which you can employ, depending upon the time you have to prepare your speech. Some of these methods include talking to a contact person, conducting a statistically valid survey of potential audience members before the presentation, and interviewing people who might attend your talk. As you can imagine, each of these is dependent on quite a few variables, but nevertheless can provide you with valid and vital information as you prepare to speak.

Contact Persons

In many instances in which you deliver remarks to people outside your organization, there is a contact person responsible for making arrangements regarding your presentation. This could be the person who manages the event at which you are speaking, the person who invited you to deliver a sales presentation, or simply a colleague at another company. If the speech is at a neutral site, such as a hotel conference room, then this contact person likely reserved the room where you will speak, arranged the seating style, and is in charge of the audio-visual equipment. This contact person should be able to give you some insights into the makeup of the audience and the environment in which you are speaking. If audience members are required to reserve seats in advance, you might even be able to get a list of potential attendees. If the list is not available, the contact person should be able to provide their background, their values, and possibly even their disposition toward the event at which you will be speaking. No matter what the situation, it can only help to have a healthy dialogue with your contact person regarding the event and the audience.

Scientific Surveys

Previously, we mentioned polling the audience, and we told you it was not scientifically rigorous. Of course, scientifically rigorous polling is not possible during a speech; however, if you have enough advance time you can accurately survey your potential audience. These surveys help to gather demographic data as well as people's feelings toward particular issues or topics. To do this you need to develop Likert scale questions that help people numerically gauge their feelings regarding a specific idea or object.

Likert scales provide a statement to which people circle a number indicating the strength with which they agree or disagree with the statement. Individuals must choose only one answer to each statement. Likert scales vary in terms of the ranges from which they ask people to make a selection, but generally they go from either 1–5 or 1–7, with the middle number representing a neutral opinion. This allows a researcher to see how strongly the population being measured feels regarding an issue. As you can tell, such information would be invaluable for a speaker in advance of a presentation.

Often, an audience's answers to these questions can be broken down by demographic category, thanks in large part to the inclusion of such questions on the survey. These breakdowns allow you to accurately see what segments an audience has an interest in. The larger the audience, the more segmented the data becomes. For instance, the Nielson rating system, which is used to measure television audiences, breaks down surveyed populations according to demographic categories and provides advertisers with information on which programs they should advertise.

Scientific surveys are not restricted to gathering demographic data or asking Likert scale questions; they also can contain open-ended questions that ask audience members to use their own words in response to a question. Open-ended questions allow audience members the opportunity to provide their reasons for feeling a certain way or their impressions of a specific idea or object. How they describe these things also tells you what is important and what might resonate with them. This type of information can be quite helpful,

so some surveys ask people both forced-choice and open-ended questions. Ultimately, the success of surveys depends on what information you are trying to gather. Scientifically surveyed data can be rich and provide speakers who plan well with much needed information as they prepare their speech.

Personal Interviews

Perhaps you do not have a contact person, or do not have the time to create, implement, and analyze a scientifically valid survey instrument. This does not mean there is nothing you can do to gather more data on your audience. One final strategy you may employ is to personally interview potential audience members to allow you to gauge their interest in your topic, and perhaps, their actual opinion on the matter. If you know the person whom you interview, you also might get information on other potential audience members that can be quite useful—especially in a sales situation.

Interviews also have the added bonus of allowing you to get to know someone who will be in attendance at your talk. Knowing someone in the audience can help reduce tension and anxiety when you actually deliver your remarks. It also allows you to catch up with that person at the event before you talk to see if there is any other information he or she can relay to you.

Interviews are an intensely personal matter for several reasons. First, you are asking people to give time from their day to speak with you, and this in and of itself is a big commitment. Second, you are asking them to use that time to share their personal attitudes, beliefs, and ideas with you so you should respect them for sharing that information, even if it might not be what you wanted or expected to hear. Finally, interviews occur in intimate settings, whether it is in-person, over the phone, or even via Skype, so nonverbal behaviors that convey information regarding a person's personality will be available. This information must not be abused.