

UDC 811.11

## THE IMPORTANCE OF AN INTRODUCTION IN A PUBLIC SPEECH

V. ISHCHANKA, E. CHEBOTAREVA  
Polotsk State University, Belarus

*The article focuses on "attention-getters" which are used in introductions to capture the audience's interest and make them interested in the speech topic.*

**INTRODUCTION.** Public speaking is the process of designing and delivering a message to an audience [1, p.8]. We live in a world where we are overwhelmed with content, so communicating information in a way that is accessible to others is more important today than ever before.

One of the most common complaints novice public speakers have is that they simply do not know how to start a speech. The introduction for a speech is generally only 10 to 15 percent of the entire time the speaker will spend speaking. Unfortunately, that 10 to 15 percent of your speech can either make your audience interested in what you have to say or cause them to tune out before you have started [1, p. 255-256]. How you introduce yourself and how the audience react to your introduction determine at least 30% of the success of your presentation [2, p. 105].

**STRUCTURING A PRESENTATION.** A well-thought-out organization is extremely important for a presentation. When speakers are not organized they are not perceived as credible and their audiences view the speeches negatively [1, 291]. Moreover, the way we receive and absorb information in an oral presentation is very different from how we get it by reading a paper. When we read, we control how fast and in what order we want to absorb information. We can scan the whole paper quickly if we wish, and we can skip certain parts. While watching a presentation, we have no control over what or how or in what order the presenter will give us this information. We cannot go backwards to "reread" if we did not understand the first time [2, p. 8]. A clear structure helps the audience to follow the speaker's ideas in the correct order.

Traditionally, speeches have three parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

The introduction should grab the audience's attention and orient them to your subject. In the introduction, the main theme of the presentation should be stated, along with the main propositions that support the thesis. Often, the introduction includes an explicit statement of goals and objectives the speaker is trying to achieve. Finally, the introduction should set the stage for you, as the center of attention. If a previous speaker introduced you, thank and acknowledge this, otherwise introduce yourself. Let the audience know how long you will be speaking and whether you want questions during the talk so that the audience knows what is expected of them [3, p. 207].

The body of your presentation should contain three to five points that support the thesis of the talk. This is where you flesh out main points. You give examples and show why and how you have come to the conclusion you have; you give references that will help convince the audience of the truth of what you are saying; and you explain some of the more important points in greater detail [4, p. 22].

The conclusion should summarize the points of the presentation, reiterate the theme and provide closure for the audience. The summary includes a restatement of the thesis and/or objectives of the talk, the supporting points from the body of the presentation, and indicates the importance of these points [3, p. 208].

An important role in this structure is played by the introduction. Audiences form their impressions of a presenter within approximately 90 seconds, after which it is difficult to change their opinion [2, p. 105].

**HOW TO START A PRESENTATION.** An attention-getter is the device a speaker uses at the beginning of a speech to capture the audience's interest and make them interested in the speech topic. Usually speakers tend to use one of eleven attention-getting devices when starting a speech [1, p. 262].

To prove the relevance of these devices, some examples listed below are taken from the most popular TED presentations of all time. Now TED is the most professional platform for public speeches. In its own words it offers *Riveting talks by remarkable people, free to the world*. "Riveting" means that the presentations are so good that they will gain your attention and you will want to keep watching. By 2012 its presentations had reached one billion views online, and are now being viewed at the rate of 1.5 million times per day. The videos have been translated into up to 90 languages. It has become such an influential platform that famous actors and musicians make beeline to a TED stage when they have ideas to share [5, p. 10-11].

**Reference to Subject.** The first attention-getting technique is to tell your audience the subject of your speech. This device is probably the most direct, but it may also be the least interesting of the possible attention-getters [1, p. 262]. Here is an example:

## Linguistics, Literature, Philology

*"The human voice: It's the instrument we all play. It's the most powerful sound in the world, probably. It's the only one that can start a war or say "I love you." And yet many people have the experience that when they speak, people don't listen to them. What I'd like to suggest, there are a number of habits that we need to move away from" [6].*

While this is not the most entertaining or interesting attention-getter, it is very clear and direct [1, p. 263]. This method is usually used in conjunction with the other methods listed below.

**Reference to Audience.** The technique called a direct reference to the audience is used when the speaker has a clear understanding of the audience and points out that there is something about the audience that should make them interested in the speech content [1, p. 263]. Here is an example from a talk called "How to spot a liar":

*"Okay, now I don't want to alarm anybody in this room, but it's just come to my attention that the person to your right is a liar. Also, the person to your left is a liar. Also the person sitting in your very seats is a liar. We're all liars. What I'm going to do today is I'm going to show you what the research says about why we're all liars, how you can become a lie spotter and why you might want to go the extra mile and go from lie spotting to truth seeking, and ultimately to trust building" [7].*

In this example, the speaker points out that lies are something that everyone has experienced thereby emphasizing the importance of being able to spot a lie. The speaker directly involves the audience and motivates them to listen to the answer. This helps to get the audience's attention for the rest of the presentation.

**Quotation.** Another way to capture your listeners' attention is to use the words of another person that relate directly to your topic. Quotations are a great way to start a speech. Here is an example of using a quotation for a speech on deception:

*"Oliver Goldsmith, a sixteenth-century writer, poet, and physician, once noted that "the true use of speech is not so much to express our wants as to conceal them" [1, p. 263-264].*

**Reference to Current Events.** Referring to a current event that relates to your topic immediately makes the audience aware of how relevant the topic is in today's world. For example, consider this attention-getter for a persuasive speech on frivolous lawsuits:

*"On January 10, 2007, Scott Anthony Gomez Jr. and a fellow inmate escaped from a Pueblo, Colorado, jail. During their escape the duo attempted to rappel from the roof of the jail using a makeshift ladder of bed sheets. During Gomez's attempt to scale the building, he slipped, fell forty feet, and injured his back. After being quickly apprehended, Gomez filed a lawsuit against the jail for making it too easy for him to escape".*

In this case, the speaker is highlighting a news event that illustrates what a frivolous lawsuit is, setting up the speech topic of a need for change in how such lawsuits are handled [1, p. 264].

**Historical Reference.** You may also go further back in history to find a relevant reference to your topic [1, p. 264]. For example, if you are giving a speech on leadership, you could refer to the most popular examples of good leaders from history:

*"How do you explain when things don't go as we assume? Or better, how do you explain when others are able to achieve things that seem to defy all of the assumptions? For example: Why is Apple so innovative? Year after year, after year, they're more innovative than all their competition. And yet, they're just a computer company. They're just like everyone else. They have the same access to the same talent, the same agencies, the same consultants, the same media. Then why is it that they seem to have something different? Why is it that Martin Luther King led the Civil Rights Movement? He wasn't the only man who suffered in pre-civil rights America, and he certainly wasn't the only great orator of the day. Why him? And why is it that the Wright brothers were able to figure out controlled, powered man flight when there were certainly other teams who were better qualified, better funded – and they didn't achieve powered man flight, and the Wright brothers beat them to it. There's something else at play here" [8].*

In this example, the speaker is evoking the audience's memories of those great leaders and thus previewing the main idea of his presentation.

**Startling Statement.** The sixth device you can use to start a speech is to surprise your audience with startling information about your topic. Often, startling statements come in the form of statistics and strange facts. The goal of a good startling statistic is that it surprises the audience and gets them engaged in your topic [1, p. 266]. For example, the speaker is giving a speech about happiness. First, he asks his audience which of two options they would prefer. One option is winning the lottery. This is about 314 million dollars. And the other is becoming paraplegic. The audience obviously chooses the option of winning the lottery. After that, he gives them counterintuitive information about how these two things affect a person's happiness:

*"Interestingly, there are data on these two groups of people, data on how happy they are. And this is exactly what you expected, isn't it? But these aren't the data. I made these up! These are the data. You failed the pop quiz,*

and you're hardly five minutes into the lecture. Because the fact is that a year after losing the use of their legs and a year after winning the lotto, lottery winners and paraplegics are equally happy with their lives" [9].

**Question.** There are two types of questions commonly used as attention-getters: response questions and rhetorical questions. A response question is a question that the audience is expected to answer in some manner [1, p. 266]. For example, the speaker may ask the audience to raise their hands:

*"I have a confession to make. But first, I want you to make a little confession to me. In the past year, I want you to just raise your hand if you've experienced relatively little stress. Anyone? How about a moderate amount of stress? Who has experienced a lot of stress?"* [10]

A rhetorical question, on the other hand, is a question to which no actual reply is expected [1, p. 266]. For example, the speaker talks about happiness and he starts his speech with this questions:

*"What keeps us healthy and happy as we go through life? If you were going to invest now in your future best self, where would you put your time and your energy?"* [11]

In this case, the speaker expects the audience to think about this questions as the speech goes on [1, p. 266].

**Humor.** Humor is a great way of focusing an audience on what you are saying. However, humor is a double-edged sword. If you do not wield the sword carefully, you can turn your audience against you very quickly. One of the biggest mistakes a speaker can make is to use some form of humor that the audience either does not find funny or finds offensive. Humor can be incorporated into several of the attention-getting devices mentioned. You could use a humorous anecdote, quotation, or current event. As with other attention-getting devices, you need to make sure your humor is relevant to your topic [1, p. 267]. For example, the speaker from Nigeria starts her talk about cultural identity and how it is influenced by literature describing funny misunderstandings that she faced in her childhood.

*"I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books. I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to. My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was. And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story. What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children"* [12].

**Anecdote.** An anecdote is a brief account or story of an interesting or humorous event. A common mistake speakers make when telling an anecdote is to make the anecdote too long. The entire introduction should only be 10 to 15 percent of your speech, so your attention-getter must be very short. For example, here is an anecdote the speaker uses to begin his speech on how disconnected people are from the real world because of technology:

*"In July 2009, a high school girl named Alexa Longueira was walking along a main boulevard near her home on Staten Island, New York, typing in a message on her cell phone. Not paying attention to the world around her, she took a step and fell right into an open manhole".*

The speaker uses a real story that emphasizes the main message of the speech [1, p. 265].

**Personal Reference.** Some of the best speeches are ones that come from personal knowledge and experience. If you are an expert or have firsthand experience related to your topic, sharing this information with the audience is a great way to show that you are credible during your attention-getter. For example, if you had a gastric bypass surgery and you wanted to give an informative speech about the procedure, you could introduce your speech in this way:

*"In the fall of 2008, I decided that it was time that I took my life into my own hands. After suffering for years with the disease of obesity, I decided to take a leap of faith and get a gastric bypass in an attempt to finally beat the disease".*

If you use a personal example, do not get carried away with the focus on yourself and your own life. Your speech topic is the purpose of the attention-getter, not the other way around [1, p. 268].

**Reference to Occasion.** This device is only useful if the speech is being delivered for a specific occasion. Many toasts, for example, start with the following statement: "Today we are here to honor X". In this case, the "X" could be a retirement, a marriage, a graduation, or any number of other special occasions. Because of its specific nature, this attention-getter is the least likely to be used for speeches being delivered for college courses [1, p. 268].

---

**Linguistics, Literature, Philology**

These were the most popular attention-getters that most speakers use. It is fundamental to connect with the audience. If you do not connect with them, they will not give you the attention you deserve. This is particularly true if your presentation is scheduled just before lunch, after lunch, or at the end of the day, i.e., at times of the day when the audience's attention is very low. Finally, it is not only at the beginning of your presentation that you can use these techniques. They are also excellent ways of regaining attention later in the presentation [2, p. 115].

**CONCLUSION.** The introduction is the foundation of any successful speech. One of the most common mistakes among many speakers is the assumption that their audience is always interested in the presentation. However, this is completely wrong. If you do not give them reasons to listen to you in the beginning, lately it will be difficult to regain attention. This is why it is so important to employ different attention-getters in the introduction to your speech.

**REFERENCES**

1. Wrench, J.S. Stand up, speak out: the practice and ethics of public speaking 1.0 / J.S. Wrench, A. Goding, B.A. Attias, D.I. Johnson. – Irvington: Flat World Knowledge, 2013. – 574 p.
2. Wallwork, A. English for Presentations at International Conferences / A. Wallwork. – New York: Springer-Verlag, 2010. – 165 p.
3. Jurin, R.R. Environmental Communication. Second Edition: Skills and Principles for Natural Resource Managers, Scientists, and Engineers / R.R. Jurin, D. Roush, K.J. Danter. – Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2010. – 310 p.
4. Siddons, S. Presentation Skills / S. Siddons. – Trowbridge: The Cromwell Press, 2003. – 64 p.
5. Gallo, C. Talk Like TED: The 9 Public-Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds / C. Gallo. – New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014. – 288 p.
6. How to speak so that people want to listen [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/julian\\_treasure\\_how\\_to\\_speak\\_so\\_that\\_people\\_want\\_to\\_listen/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_how_to_speak_so_that_people_want_to_listen/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.
7. How to spot a liar [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/pamela\\_meyer\\_how\\_to\\_spot\\_a\\_liar/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/talks/pamela_meyer_how_to_spot_a_liar/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.
8. How great leaders inspire action [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.
9. The surprising science of happiness [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_gilbert\\_the\\_surprising\\_science\\_of\\_happiness/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_the_surprising_science_of_happiness/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.
10. How to make stress your friend [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly\\_mcgonigal\\_how\\_to\\_make\\_stress\\_your\\_friend/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.
11. What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_waldinger\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_good\\_life\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_longest\\_study\\_on\\_happiness/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all#t-1293](https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all#t-1293). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.
12. The danger of a single story [Electronic resource] – Mode of Access: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/up-next?referrer=playlist-the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/up-next?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all). – Date of access: 04.02.2019.