

Although you frequently may be asked—often to your surprise and dismay—to speak impromptu on almost any occasion, you have actually been preparing for these situations all of your life. You may not be as prepared as you would like, but you have a lifetime of experience from which to draw. The effective speaker selects appropriate supporting materials from memory, organizes them into an easy-to-follow pattern, and delivers them confidently. In other words, you learn how to think on your feet.

## Keep It Simple

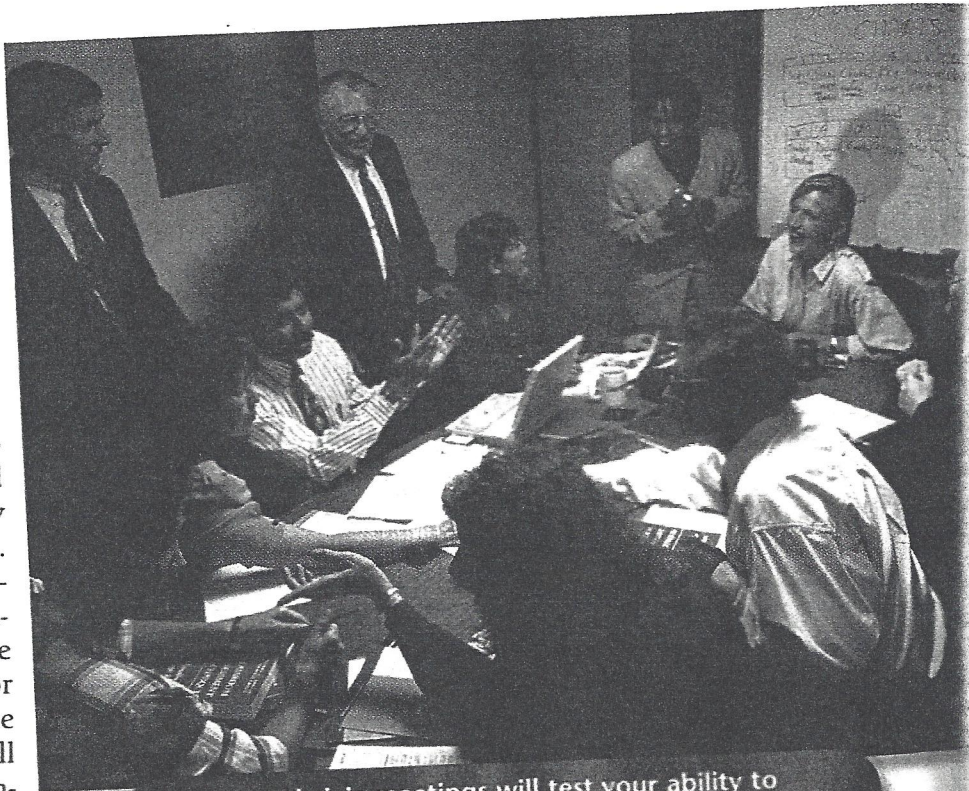
Since impromptu speeches are generally brief, simplicity is essential. You should establish a single point of view, choose one or two clear examples or illustrations, and conclude with a short summary and restatement of your main idea. If you have more than a few minutes for your impromptu presentation, you should subdivide the body of your speech into two or three issues and develop each one with supporting materials. Like all speeches, your impromptu presentation should have a definite beginning, middle, and end.

A typical organizational pattern for a brief impromptu speech might include the following:

1. Statement of the main point of your presentation. A short introduction to the main idea can be effective if you have the time (and an idea).
2. Support of the main idea with appropriate reasons, examples, illustrations, statistics, and testimony. Ordinarily, you should rely on

your first thoughts, because if you struggle to generate more information, you may forget your initial ideas.

3. Conclusion with a summary and a restatement of the main idea. Be brief—needless



Business and civic meetings will test your ability to properly organize your impromptu speeches.

repetition is boring and reduces your credibility as a speaker.

If you are called on in a business meeting and have nothing to say, the worst thing you can do is to apologize. Rather than admitting you're unprepared, take a deep breath, and say something like, "I will look into this issue and get back to you."

## Don't Panic

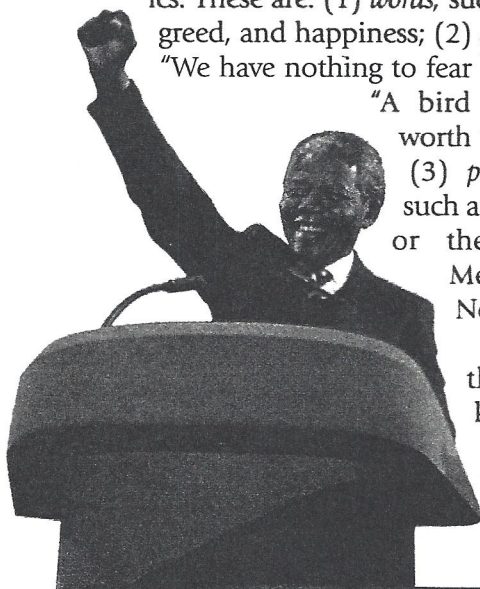
Similarly, the worst mistake you can make in an impromptu speech is to panic. Panic usually results in uneasy silence or unnecessary rambling. As a prospective impromptu speaker, you should minimize your concerns by reading widely and by being a good observer and listener. Remember, too, that your audience is aware that you're speaking off-the-cuff and will adjust its expectations accordingly. Most audience members will respond positively if they sense you're trying to incorporate your knowledge into a clear and meaningful presentation.

## Getting Ready to Compete

As with extemporaneous speaking, you can polish your impromptu skills through competition. The rules for impromptu speaking, though, vary greatly from contest to contest. The National Forensic League, for example, allows each student five minutes for preparation and then another five minutes to present the speech. At the college level, the American Forensic Association allows a total of seven minutes for both preparation and speaking; the speaker may choose how to divide those minutes.

Generally there are three types of impromptu topics. These are: (1) *words*, such as orange, love, greed, and happiness; (2) *quotations*, such as "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," or "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"; (3) *people/places/events*, such as Nelson Mandela or the Vietnam War Memorial or the New Millennium.

Remember, though, that the key is to practice. Only through



Nelson Mandela would be an ideal choice for a *people/places/events* impromptu presentation.

practice can you begin to feel comfortable with the pressure of such limited time to prepare. Also, through practice you will become more skilled at connecting what you know to the precise wording of the topic. Of course, increasing what you know by reading more and discussing more would be advisable as well.

To help you with your first contest impromptu speech, here is a student example on the topic "elephants." Study the comments that accompany the text on the following pages to learn one effective way that you can organize an impromptu speech.

## BE A CABBAGE

INSTANT IMPACT

A speaker at a luncheon gave a tremendous talk and received a standing ovation. The president of the club was so impressed that he said to the speaker, "Everyone here is so enthused. Won't you please say a few more words since we have ten minutes left of our regular time?"

The request challenged the speaker to draw on all of her impromptu skills. How would you have responded to this difficult situation? This speaker thought for a moment and said, "Once there was a little baby cabbage who said to his mother, 'Mommy, I'm worried about something. As I sit in this row of cabbages and grow and grow day after day, how will I know when to stop growing?' 'The rule to follow,' said the Momma cabbage, 'is to quit when you're a head.'"

Good advice for all of us.

# Break down



## A Country of Strangers

Before you speak, you must always consider the wants and needs of your audience. In our multicultural society, choosing the right words in impromptu speaking can be extremely difficult. This challenge is made painfully clear in the story of Barbara Wyche, a noted sociologist. She found that speaking well can intrude deeply into personal and family relationships. According to Wyche, as a young black, her black peers never accepted her. Because of her image as a smart child, she said, "nobody would ask me to dance. You see what I'm saying? They wouldn't even think I knew how to dance. I had an inferiority complex, because I really wanted people to like me, and I really loved people and I wanted to fit, and I couldn't fit."

Her father had three years of college and wanted his daughter to attend college as well. He "wanted me to talk, like, very fine, like, 'Thank you.'" And here she put on an *erudite*, quasi-British accent. "My mother let me know that if I came back talking and acting like some of the people that were teaching, I would not be her child," Wyche recalled. "That was again picking up those attitudes that we call 'white.'"

And so the racial imagery *insinuated* itself into the fiber of her family, setting up tensions over class, education, language, and identity that were played out against conflicts between her parents, whose marriage ended when she was ten. "I am a product of class warfare in my own family," Wyche said.

"I would come home from Johns Hopkins University," Wyche went on, "and, you know, you pick up this way of talking to each other. I was good at it . . . So I remember I went home one year, and I told my mother, I said, 'Mama,' I kept talking and talking and talking, and my mother said, 'I'm glad you learned how to talk at school' . . . and I was just talking, talking, talking, and my mama said, 'Speak English or don't talk at all.' I was using GRE and SAT vocabulary. I had made the transition, so my mother didn't know what I was talking about."

**Source:** Adapted from *A Country of Strangers* by David K. Shipler, Vintage Books, New York, 1997, pp. 309–10.

Answer the questions below and upload responses in Schoology.

### Questions

1. Do you believe that your friends and relatives judge you by your speech, including your choice of words? Why or why not?
2. How can more effective communication tear down the barriers that separate people?