Public Speaking — Situations

Artists and designers are frequently asked to speak about their process, projects, and vision. As a RISD student, you already encounter many opportunities to speak in public, from informal conversation in seminars to formal presentations. This handout surveys some of the different modes in which you might be asked to speak in different situations, and suggests some ways to think about and approach speaking in those modes. Remember that you may have a choice of modes for one speaking situation and that you may be able to mix modes.

Regardless of mode, you might start by asking yourself these key questions:

- What is my purpose in speaking? (to inform, to persuade, to enchant?)
- Who is my audience? (peers, experts, non-experts, critics, clients? Be specific—“general audience” is an easy, and unhelpful, answer.)
- What is the context of my speech? (intimate encounter, large auditorium, casual, formal?)

**Informative**

Informative speaking aims to transmit ideas, facts, or instructions to your audience clearly and effectively. Success is measured by the extent to which your audience understands the information you are trying to communicate.

Examples of informative speaking situations may include:

- Presenting in a critique
- Formal artist’s or designer’s talk
- Class research presentation
- TA demonstration
- Orientation or campus tours
- Introducing a speaker

The first and most important step in preparing to inform others is to clarify for yourself exactly the information you hope to communicate. Making explicit choices about what to include and what to exclude will help you stay focused and move on to constructing a clear and well-defined narrative. Especially when talking about one’s own creative work and processes, it can be tempting to try to describe every last idea, piece of research, and connection. Your talk can only be a piece of the whole, providing a logical path through a complicated landscape that the listener can follow and understand.

Other tips for informative speaking:

- Check, and know, your facts.
- Check in with your audience to ensure they understand you.
- Repeat your key points at the beginning and end of your talk.
- Speak in unambiguous language and explain unfamiliar terms.
- Avoid jargon. If you must use jargon, be sure to explain your meaning.

**Persuasive**

Persuasive speaking seeks to convince the audience of an argument or belief. Success is measured by whether the opinions of your audience cohere with yours after you speak and by the actions they take as a result of your speech. Persuasive speech may aim at creating an opinion in your audience as much as changing a pre-existing opinion.
Examples of persuasive speaking situations may include:

- Presenting in a critique
- Class research presentation
- Thesis presentation
- Networking/elevator/client pitch

Persuading others to believe what you want them to believe requires a clear, convincing, and robust argument. Models for creating a solid argument include formal logic systems, Hegelian dialectics, and Aristotelian rhetoric. These are worth looking at, but remember that they are meant to help you frame your argument, not prescribe exactly how it should flow. And don’t forget that force of personality and good evidence to back up your argument matter too.

Audience plays a larger role in persuasive speaking than in other modes. Ask yourself: What is the power dynamic between you and the audience? Are you speaking to peers, senior professionals, or to people less experienced or empowered than you in this situation? Perhaps it is a combination of two or more of these groups. While you may be able to appeal to the heart to convince a parent of the need for better-designed playgrounds, the city budget officer may be more moved by a logical economic argument. More generally, an argument that taps into personal values may be more effective when speaking with peers, while senior professionals may demand a more logical and informed argument.

Other tips for persuasive speaking:

- Model the emotional reaction you are trying to engender in your audience.
- Be sensitive and responsive to the reaction of your audience.
- Close your talk strongly, restating your key idea clearly.

Discursive

Speaking in a discursive mode means being in conversation with another person, or people, often in front of an audience of more passive listeners. In this mode, you have a duty not only to your audience, but also to your interlocutor. Success is measured by the engagement of your audience in your dialogue and the exchange with your interlocutor, who is jointly responsible for the success of the encounter.

Examples of discursive speaking situations may include:

- Critique discussion
- Seminar discussion
- Studio visits
- Leading a workshop
- Panel discussion
- Live interview
- Job fair
- Meetings
- Group project planning

In discursive speaking situations, you must balance your agenda to express your point(s) clearly and effectively with good two-way communication. The participation of others invokes a particular skill: listening. Although a good speaker is always “reading” the audience and making adjustments in the way they present, in discursive speaking a good speaker must really listen to their interlocutor to respond appropriately. Discursive speech is co-created and demands a high degree of rapport and improvisation between speakers. It is impossible to predict every possible reaction from your interlocutor, so you need to be ready to respond to the conversation as it develops. Listen actively to what is being said, respond to that point, and solicit further opinions. Welcome different points of view and cultivate a supportive atmosphere for discussion. If you are involved in discursive speech in a leadership role (e.g., facilitating a workshop), it is your responsibility to set and maintain a positive atmosphere, a “safe space,” by challenging comments that may threaten that environment.
Other tips for discursive speaking:

- Stay focused on the topic at hand.
- Remember you are speaking to your audience as well as your interlocutor.
- When receiving criticism, thank the speaker and accept the criticism.
- Explain your position and rationale, without being defensive.
- Maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect, and always take the high road.

**Informal**

In informal speaking situations, your remarks are not expected to have been carefully planned in advance. The social rules surrounding your talk are more relaxed and you may have some freedom to speak more freely. Informal speaking is different from casual speaking (e.g., chatting with friends in private), however, as there’s still an implication of a thoughtful and respectful approach. Success here may be measured in a range of ways (e.g., humor, empathy, and decision-making may take central roles) and this mode may overlap with other modes. An informational interview over lunch, for example, may be informal and an important opportunity to convey information or persuade someone of your capabilities.

Examples of informal speaking situations may include:

- Critique discussion
- Seminar discussion
- Studio visits
- Extracurricular/club meetings
- Post-class discussion
- Meetings with instructor / faculty
- Introducing professional colleagues
- Informational interview

When speaking informally, your body language may be more relaxed to suit the environment. Similarly, language can be more colloquial and you might be able to introduce more mutually understood jargon. You can anticipate a closer power dynamic between yourself and your listener(s), therefore a more familiar tone may be adopted. However, context is still crucial, so be careful to assess the specific relationship and err on the side of respect and etiquette.