



CHAPTER 2

Ethics and Public Speaking

Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to:

1. Explain why a strong sense of ethical responsibility is vital for public speakers.
2. Discuss the five guidelines for ethical speechmaking presented in the chapter.
3. Define the differences among global plagiarism, patchwork plagiarism, and incremental plagiarism, and explain why each type of plagiarism is unethical.
4. Identify the three basic guidelines for ethical listening discussed in the chapter.

Chapter Outline

- I. Questions of ethics are central to the art of public speaking.
 - A. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with issues of right and wrong in human affairs.
 - B. Ethical issues arise when we ask whether a course of action is moral or immoral, fair or unfair, just or unjust, honest or dishonest.
 - C. Questions of ethics come into play whenever a public speaker faces an audience.

- II. Just as there are guidelines for ethical behavior in other areas of life, so are there guidelines for ethical behavior in public speaking.
 - A. Public speakers should make sure their goals are ethically sound.
 - B. Public speakers should be fully prepared for each speech.
 - C. Public speakers should be honest in what they say.
 - D. Public speakers should avoid name-calling and other forms of abusive language.
 - E. Public speakers should put ethical principles into practice.

- III. Plagiarism is one of the most serious ethical lapses a public speaker can commit.
 - A. Plagiarism, presenting another person's language or ideas as one's own, is a serious offense.
 - B. There are three types of plagiarism.
 1. Global plagiarism is taking an entire speech from a single source and passing it off as one's own.
 2. Patchwork plagiarism occurs when a speaker patches a speech together by copying verbatim from two or three sources.
 3. Incremental plagiarism occurs when a speaker fails to give credit for specific parts—increments—of the speech that are borrowed from other people.
 - C. Just as one needs to credit the authors of print books and articles, so one needs to credit the authors of documents found online.

- IV. Listeners, as well as speakers, have ethical obligations.
 - A. Listeners should be courteous and attentive during the speech.
 - B. Listeners should avoid prejudging the speaker.
 - C. Listeners should maintain the free and open expression of ideas.

Exercises for Critical Thinking *(from text page 45)*

1. Look back at the story of Felicia Robinson on pages 30–31 of the textbook. Evaluate her dilemma in light of the guidelines for ethical speechmaking presented in this chapter. Explain what you believe would be the most ethical course of action in her case.

Discussion: This exercise is designed to have students apply the guidelines for ethical public speaking discussed in the chapter. The best way to conduct the exercise is to discuss each guideline individually and then apply it to the case of Felicia Robinson. The case study approach used in this exercise is the preferred method of teaching ethics today, and it works exceedingly well in conveying the nature of ethical judgment and its application to public speakers. If students prepare this exercise before coming to class, it should generate a fruitful discussion.

2. The issue of insulting and abusive speech—especially slurs directed against people on the basis of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation—is extremely controversial. Do you believe society should punish such speech with criminal penalties? To what degree are colleges and universities justified in trying to discipline students who engage in such speech? Do you feel it is proper to place any boundaries on free expression in order to prohibit insulting and abusive speech? Why or why not? Be prepared to explain your ideas in class.

Discussion: Few issues have generated more heat on college campuses—and in American society at large—in recent years than abusive language and how to deal with it. Most controversial is the question of whether schools can justifiably impose restrictions on “hate speech” against racial or religious minorities, women, gays, lesbians, and people with physical disabilities. Defensible arguments can be made on both sides of the question. The purpose of this exercise is not to have students reach the “right” answer, but to spark intelligent discussion. For an excellent overview of these issues, see Thomas L. Tedford and Dale A. Herbeck, *Freedom of Speech in the United States*, 7th ed. (State College, PA: Strata, 2013).

3. All of the following situations could arise in your speech class. Identify the ethical issues in each and explain what, as a responsible speaker or listener, your course of action would be.
 - a. You are speaking on the topic of prison reform. In your research, you run across two public opinion polls. One of them, an independent survey by the Gallup Organization, shows that a majority of people in your state oppose your position. The other poll, suspect in its methods and conducted by a partisan organization, says a majority of people in your state support your position. Which poll do you cite in your speech? If you cite the second poll, do you point out its shortcomings?

Discussion: Like the other two scenarios in this exercise, this one is designed to relate ethical questions directly to situations students will face in their classroom speeches. In this scenario, of course, the most ethical decision would be to use the Gallup poll rather than the partisan poll, even though the latter supports the speaker's position. It would be especially unethical to use the partisan poll without indicating its weaknesses to the audience. This would clearly violate the speaker's obligation to be honest in presenting facts and figures.

- b. When listening to an informative speech by one of your classmates, you realize that much of it is plagiarized from a Web site you visited a couple weeks earlier. What do you do? Do you say something when your instructor asks for comments about the speech? Do you mention your concern to the instructor after class? Do you talk with the speaker? Do you remain silent?

Discussion: This case raises interesting questions about plagiarism and the ethical obligations of listeners. If faced with this situation in real life, most students would doubtless remain silent—not because they approved of the speaker's behavior, but because they would not want to “tell on” the speaker. Some might argue that even though plagiarism is wrong, students are under no ethical obligation to report someone who commits plagiarism in a speech. Because this is a complex issue, few classes are likely to reach agreement on it. They can, however, reach agreement on the fact that plagiarism is ethically wrong and that students who commit it should face stiff penalties if they are detected.

- c. While researching your persuasive speech, you find a quotation from an article by a highly respected expert that will nail down one of your most important points. But as you read the rest of the article, you realize that the author does not in fact support the policy you are advocating. Do you still include the quotation in your speech?

Discussion: This scenario gets at a fairly subtle point about ethics and public speaking. Yet it is a point worth discussing, for it shows that being an ethical speaker is not just a matter of “big” obligations such as having ethically sound goals and avoiding plagiarism. It also shows that one needs to consider the facts of a situation carefully in making ethical judgments.

In the scenario at hand, at least three defensible ethical positions can be advanced: (1) that the speaker should not quote the expert in support of any point if the expert does not support the speaker's policy; (2) that the speaker can ethically quote the expert on one aspect of the topic (the existence of a problem, for example) as long as the speaker does not state or imply that the expert supports the speaker's position in general; (3) that the speaker cannot ethically quote the expert on any aspect of the topic unless the speaker states explicitly that the expert does not support the policy advocated by the speaker. The purpose of class discussion on this scenario is not to reach unanimous agreement on one of these three positions, but to make students aware of the ethical issues involved and, in the process, to heighten their sensitivity to the wide range of ethical issues faced by public speakers.

Using Public Speaking in Your Career *(from text page 41)*

Having graduated with a degree in public administration and hoping to pursue a career in politics, you have been fortunate to receive a staff position with one of the leading senators in your state legislature. Since your arrival two months ago, you have answered phones, ordered lunch, made copies, stapled mailings, and stuffed envelopes. Finally you have been asked to look over a speech the senator will deliver at your alma mater. Surely, you think, this will be the first of many important assignments once your value is recognized.

After reading the speech, however, your enthusiasm is dampened. You agree wholeheartedly with its support of a bill to fund scholarships for low-income students, but you're dismayed by its attack on opponents of the bill as "elitist bigots who would deny a college education to those who need it most." You haven't been asked to comment on the ethics of the speech, and you certainly don't want to jeopardize your position on the senator's staff. At the same time, you think his use of name-calling may actually arouse sympathy for the opposition.

The senator would like your comments in two hours. What will you tell him?

Discussion: Like many of the other Using Public Speaking in Your Career scenarios throughout the book, this one does not admit of an unequivocal right-or-wrong answer. Recognizing the ethical problem with the senator's speech is one thing; pointing out the problem to the senator is another. In most circumstances, a new staff member would not find it prudent to confront his or her employer on a matter of rhetorical ethics. It might be more prudent to raise the practical question of whether the senator's attack on "elitist bigots" is likely to create a backlash against the senator's position, but even this would need to be approached tactfully. On the other hand, if the senator did not want an opinion, he probably would not have asked. Apart from the ethical implications of remaining silent, there are potential practical pitfalls in this course of action as well. As your students discuss the scenario, remind them that the kinds of issues raised by it are not limited to politics and could occur in a wide range of rhetorical situations.

Additional Exercises and Activities

1. Lead a class discussion in which students develop a code of ethical speaking for their classroom. The final product of the discussion will be a list titled "Ethical Speaking for Our Speech Class." By the end of the discussion, the entire class should not only agree on the content of the list, but should pledge themselves to follow it throughout the term.

Discussion: This exercise works extremely well in promoting dialogue about the ethics of public speaking. It also relates abstract issues of ethics to the situation in which students will be giving speeches for the next several months. By developing their own rules for ethical speechmaking, students will be more committed to following those rules.

Don't be surprised if much of the discussion turns on questions related to plagiarism. This is probably the most pressing ethical issue facing students in a speech classroom, and many do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and what does not.

As students develop their code, encourage them to be specific in their criteria. For example, rather than saying "We will not plagiarize our speeches," they should try to develop more precise statements such as "We will not copy our speeches from the work of current or previous students," or "We will always cite the sources of ideas or supporting materials that we use in our speeches."

2. Lead a class discussion in which students develop a code of ethical listening for their speech classroom. The final product of the discussion will be a list titled "Ethical Listening for Our Speech Class." By the end of the discussion, the entire class should not only agree on the content of the list, but should pledge themselves to follow it throughout the term.

Discussion: A companion to Additional Exercise/Activity 1 above, this is an excellent way to get students thinking about the ethical obligations of listeners. Like Exercise 1, it relates ethical issues directly to the speech classroom and gives those issues more immediacy than might otherwise be the case. Also like Exercise 1, it allows students to formulate their own ethical criteria, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will feel committed to following those criteria.

As with Exercise 1, encourage students to be specific as they develop their code. Rather than saying "We will listen courteously and attentively," for instance, they should work for statements such as "We will not do work for other classes while listening to our classmates' speeches," or "Even if we disagree with a speaker's position at the start of a speech, we will listen with an open mind to the entire speech before making a judgment about it." One way to generate criteria is to ask students what kinds of attitudes and behavior they would like to see in listeners to their own speeches.

3. Give each student the following assignment: Identify a situation in your life in which an issue related to speech ethics was involved. The issue could have affected you either as a speaker or as a listener. Work up a brief analysis in which you explain the situation and the ethical issue (or issues) involved.

Discussion: This exercise can work very well to promote class discussion about ethical issues in public speaking. Because it deals with issues that are related to the experience of each student, the exercise often gives the discussion more immediacy than dealing with hypothetical ethical scenarios. It usually works best when given as a homework assignment so students have plenty of time to develop their analyses.

4. If your class meets during a presidential election year, ethical issues are bound to arise in relation to the candidates' campaign rhetoric. Such issues might include the use of negative campaigning, the distortion of evidence in campaign speeches and advertisements, the use of name-calling to denigrate the opposing candidate or party, and the tendency of candidates to say different things to different groups of voters. Set aside time periodically during the term to deal with such issues—especially when they achieve prominence in press coverage of the campaign.

Discussion: Because presidential campaigns usually generate fairly intense reactions, they provide an excellent vehicle for getting students interested in questions of communication ethics. They also have a tendency to provoke heated discussion—especially among students who are fiercely partisan to one candidate or another. The challenge for instructors is to keep discussion focused on ethical issues rather than on the general merits and policies of each candidate. It is important that students learn to separate their feelings for and against the candidates from their reasoned judgments about the ethics of the candidates' rhetoric.

The aims of this exercise can be achieved either through informal class discussion or through more formal assignments in which students—working individually or in groups—prepare systematic analyses for presentation in class. The same kind of exercise can also be used during local or state elections.

5. Have students create “Speech Ethics” scrapbooks in which they keep articles that deal with ethical issues in public speaking. The articles can touch on any aspect of speech ethics, including consideration of a speaker's goals, preparation, truthfulness, evidence, reasoning, language, emotional appeal, or impact on audiences. They can also deal with the ethics of listening. Students should be sure to record the source and date of each article. Collect the scrapbooks near the end of the term.

Discussion: Once students start thinking about ethical issues and looking for articles that deal with them, it is astounding how many they can find. Although some instructors use this exercise as a required assignment, others use it as an extra-credit opportunity. In either case, if done properly it can be of considerable benefit for the students. Not only does it help sensitize them to the range, complexity, and importance of ethical issues in public speaking, but it often gets them reading newspapers, magazines, and substantive Web sites more regularly than they would otherwise.

As an alternative to having students keep a literal scrapbook, you can have them save articles digitally in a shared, virtual scrapbook. Popular course management programs—*Connect*, for example—often include tools for organizing and managing links to external content. Other free tools for managing links among multiple users include Evernote, Pinterest, and Tumblr. Collecting articles digitally can be a great way to encourage collaboration among students, and it will allow you to save the articles for quite some time and across multiple semesters.

6. Students often ask about ghostwriting when dealing with the issue of plagiarism. Why, they ask, is it ethical for politicians, business leaders, and other public figures to have ghostwriters but unethical for students to have someone else write their speeches? If students raise this issue, be prepared to conduct a class discussion on the relationship between plagiarism and ghostwriting.

Discussion: Scholars and popular commentators alike have spent a great deal of time on the subject of ghostwriting. Most regard it as ethically acceptable among politicians, business leaders, and other public figures as long as (1) the speaker does not deceive the audience by claiming to have written a speech when in fact it is ghostwritten, and (2) the speaker takes full responsibility for what he or she says regardless of who may have written the actual words of the speech.

Speeches given in the classroom, however, are quite different. Students are in a learning situation. They cannot learn the skills of speech preparation by having someone else compose their speeches for them. Nor can their performance in class be fairly evaluated if they do not do their own work. As noted in the chapter, when students stand up to deliver a speech, it is just like putting their name on a paper in their English class—they are declaring that the speech represents their own work, their own thinking, their own language.

7. Have students complete the Avoiding Plagiarism Worksheet, which is available on page 68 of this manual.

Discussion: Given that plagiarism is one of the most significant issues associated with ethics and public speaking, the Avoiding Plagiarism Worksheet can be valuable for helping students understand the many forms plagiarism can take in their speeches. Because the worksheet should not take students too long to fill out, it can be completed in class or as a homework assignment. You can also assign it as a worksheet in *Connect*.

