

FORMAL SPEECH: Structure and Emphasis

John Coleman[†]

Signpost and Review

In a written essay, readers can revisit confusing passages or missed points. Once you lose someone in a speech, she may be lost for good.

- In your introduction, state your thesis and then **lay out the structure of your speech ahead of time** (e.g., “we’ll see this in three ways: *x*, *y*, and *z*”).
- Then, as you work through your speech, **open each new point with a signpost** to let your listeners know where you are with words such as, “to begin,” “secondly,” and “finally,” and **close each point with a similar, review-oriented signpost** (e.g., “so we see, the first element of success is *x*”).

This lack of subtlety can be repetitive and inelegant in a written document, but it is essential to the spoken word.

You are your punctuation

When you’re speaking, your audience doesn’t have the benefit of visual signifiers of emphasis, change in pace, or transition — commas, semicolons, dashes, and exclamation points. They can’t see question marks or paragraph breaks. Instead, your voice, your hand gestures, your pace, and even where and how you’re standing on stage give the speech texture and range.

- Vary your excitement, tone, and volume for **emphasis**.
- Use hand gestures consciously and in accordance with the **points** you’re trying to make. Walk between main points while delivering the speech — literally transitioning your physical position in the room to signify a new part of the argument.

Standing motionless while speaking in a monotone voice doesn’t simply drain your audience’s energy, it deprives them of understanding — like writing a text in one run-on sentence with no punctuation or breaks.

[†] John Coleman. “A Speech Is Not an Essay.” *Harvard Business Review*, 11 Sept. 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/09/a-speech-is-not-an-essay>. Accessed 5 Apr. 2017.