

# The Art of Public Speaking

By Stephen E Lucas

Because public speaking is a form of power, it carries with it heavy ethical responsibilities. Today, as for the past 2,000 years, the good person speaking well remains the ideal of commendable speechmaking.

There are five basic guidelines for ethical public speaking. The first is to make sure your goals are ethically sound—that they are consistent with the welfare of society and your audience. The second is to be fully prepared for each speech. Every audience you address—in class and out—deserves your best effort. You do not want to waste their time or mislead them through shoddy research or muddled thinking. The third guideline is to be honest in what you say. Responsible speakers do not distort the truth for personal gain. They are accurate and fair in their message and in their methods.

The fourth guideline for ethical speaking is to avoid name-calling and other forms of abusive language. Name-calling is the use of language to defame or degrade other individuals or groups. It is ethically suspect because it demeans the dignity of the people being attacked and because it can undermine the right of all groups in American society to be fairly heard. The final guideline is to put ethical principles into practice—to follow them through thick and thin, not just when it is convenient.

Of all the ethical lapses a public speaker can commit, few are more serious than plagiarism. Global plagiarism is lifting a speech entirely from a single source and passing it off as your own. Patchwork plagiarism involves stitching a speech together by copying more or less verbatim from a few sources. Whenever you give a speech, you must be sure it represents your work, your thinking, your language. You must also take care to avoid incremental plagiarism, which occurs when a speaker fails to give credit for specific quotations and paraphrases that are borrowed from other people.

In addition to your ethical responsibilities as a speaker, you have ethical obligations as a listener. The first is to listen courteously and attentively. The second is to avoid prejudging the speaker. The third is to support the free and open expression of ideas. In all these ways, your speech class will offer a good testing ground for questions of ethical responsibility.