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What Presidential Speeches Can Teach us about Audience Analysis

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Instructor's Corner #2: What Presidential Speeches Can Teach Us About Audience Analysis



Public speaking textbooks generally identify audience analysis as the first step to take when preparing a presentation. Good audience analysis can make or break a speaker's ability to connect with an audience and form some sort of common ground. If a connection is not made, the audience may be left asking, "What is in this message for me?" and "Why should I listen?"

Good audience analysis begins with a clear demographic assessment—age, sex, religion, socio-economic status, etc. From this basic assessment, the speaker develops a psychological profile of the audience that identifies beliefs, attitudes, and values. For example, a demographic analysis of a college classroom may produce a simple demographic breakdown of an average age of 19.5, 60 percent female, at a private religious college. The psychological profile taken from that demographic information could reveal that this group is at a small private school, which costs more than a public school. This indicates that the audience has access to financial resources. Regardless of age and sex, the entire audience is in college, which reveals they believe that college is a means to an end—a better job, better employment, and a better quality of life. This audience believes in short-term sacrifices for long-term gain, with hope that a brighter future exists. Given this audience analysis, a good speaker should incorporate themes of hope, brighter futures, work ethic, and quality of life.

One practical way of understanding audience analysis is to see it used in the text of a speech. Presidential speeches offer an excellent forum for evaluating effective and ineffective use of audience analysis in speech preparation. One comparison of audience analysis is an examination of two different presidential "victory" speeches. An example of effective audience analysis can be found in Barack Obama's 2008 remarks on election night. The second less effective victory speech is former President George W. Bush's May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech declaring an end to major conflict in the Iraq war.

Upon reading the text, the reader can quickly identify words, concepts, or ideas that reflect Obama's audience analysis. Obama's repeated themes of "yes we can," "change," and "hope," plus the focus of his victory being all about "you"—the audience that voted him into office—are easily identified. These themes reflect the entirety of the president-elect's 2008 rhetorical campaign strategies. In addition, Obama recognized his opponents and focused on common American values.

Obama's victory speech received a great deal of acclaim for many reasons. Scholars have praised the speech for Obama's construction of social

identity, interpersonal relationships, and ideology. Obama did this by adapting to the audience. The opening paragraph included the words “tonight is your answer” when addressing skeptics that all things are still possible in America. Phrases such as “it belongs to you” and “you did not do it for me” shift the ideology of the speech to the audience. The phrase “yes we can” was used more than seven times in the concluding page to connect the interpersonal relationships taking place. The audience is told, “We are all in this together.”

An example of ineffective audience analysis can be found by examining Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech. The invasion in Iraq officially began on March 20, 2003. This speech came just a few weeks later on May 1, 2003. Bush delivered the speech on the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, anchored in San Diego harbor, to announce the end of major combat operations and the beginning of securing and reconstructing Iraq. Bush arrived at the carrier with a great deal of pomp and fanfare and wore a flight suit upon arrival. He then changed into a very presidential suit for the speech and stood in front of a large banner that proclaimed “Mission Accomplished.”



Bush’s speech appears to be targeted to the military personnel on the carrier, and he often refers to “you”—his immediate audience. However, he also addresses the American public as well as the broader international community. Trying to speak to two or more audiences in the same speech can prove problematic for any speaker.

In addition, there is some potentially problematic content based on poor analysis. For example, the third paragraph of the speech implies that Operation Iraqi Freedom is done, yet there is never any mention of what exactly was accomplished, let alone whether and when troops would withdraw. The speech is titled “Mission Accomplished,” and if Bush’s desired response from the audience was to believe that “victory” had been accomplished, the content does not achieve that goal.

Later in the speech, Bush claims there is much more work to do. If the mission is truly accomplished, as the banner declares, the audience might ask why more work is needed. Bush also stated, “Al Qaeda is wounded, not destroyed.” How can Bush stand under a banner declaring “Mission Accomplished” yet state that the enemy is not destroyed?

The uncertainty of what was accomplished would haunt Bush for several years. Immediately after delivering the speech, journalists questioned how the war could be over but military death tolls continued to rise. A year after giving the speech, Bush’s thesis statement was still questioned. Three years later, the Democrats used the speech as an example of Bush’s “dangerous incompetence” in Iraq. John Kerry took advantage of the alleged rhetorical blunder and used the speech and the alleged victory against Bush in the 2004 presidential campaign.

If Bush's attempt with his "victory" speech was to connect better with the American public, then the audience analysis driving his thesis and speech content failed. Gallup polls noted on March 22, 2003, two days after the invasion of Iraq, that Bush maintained a 94 percent approval rating. However, by the time he delivered his May 1, 2003, speech, he had slipped to a 69 percent approval rating. His rating scores would continue to decline over the next several months, dropping to 62 percent in July, 60 percent in August, and 52 percent by September 2003.

Presidential speeches are quickly scrutinized and debated by many different groups. Knowing that his speech would be put under a microscope, Bush would have been better off not posting the "Mission Accomplished" sign and instead offering words showing some success in Iraq. After statements such as "Al Qaeda is wounded, not destroyed," Bush should have followed up with examples of how Al Qaeda had been wounded. This would have shown the forward progress and success of the conflict. Had Bush avoided the "victory" claim and focused more on small achievements, he could have avoided the scrutiny of the speech that followed him for years.

Quite often a speaker may have such a specific agenda that they write and deliver only the speech they want to give. Good audience analysis often requires the speaker to address what the audience wants or needs to hear. That does not mean the speaker cannot accomplish their agenda. It means that a good speaker strongly analyzes the audience demographics and psychological profile and delivers the speech the audience wants to hear.



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