Ethics in Written and Spoken Communication

Inquire: How to Be in an Audience

Overview

When speaking or writing to someone, it is important to keep in mind the responsibilities you have to your audience. This lesson will teach you about your responsibilities as a speaker and audience member, as well as how to avoid plagiarism. Finally, you will learn some simple steps to follow through on those obligations. Respect is easy to give if you are willing to put some thought into why you do what you do and how you can improve it.

Big Question: How do you behave when watching a speaker give a presentation?

Watch: An Ethical Presentation

In life you will have to give presentations, and you will have to watch presentations. When you present information, either written or verbal, there are a few things to keep in mind.

The work begins before your presentation. Choosing the topic of your presentation and the information you intend to deliver should be your first careful consideration. You want to be respectful of others and not present information considered rude or offensive. You also want to make sure information you present is factual and supported with relevant data.

Be careful when writing the presentation. Plagiarism is when you take the intellectual work of someone else and claim it as your own. You should never do this! It is important to let people know from where you get your information. Passing someone else’s work off as your own can get you in a lot of trouble. When working on a presentation of any kind, always give credit where credit is due.

Audience members also have things to keep in mind! When you watch a presentation, pay attention. It might be hard to stay awake through some presentations, but you should! Don’t check your phone or any other electronic devices, and truly listen to what the speaker has to say. Never heckle the speaker, even if you disagree with what they are saying.

Presentations can be a daunting task, but keeping in mind the tips from this lesson can help make preparing for those presentations easier. Just as well, being a good audience member will help the presenter feel more comfortable. Simply be the audience member you hope to experience as a speaker.
Read: Ethically Speaking

Overview
Public speakers have considerable power, whether they know it or not. Simply having a platform to speak to others gives them a level of influence they must wield responsibly. This lesson will cover the ethical obligation speakers have, as well as the responsibilities of audience members. Plagiarism and best practices in maintaining your ethical responsibilities will also be discussed.

What Ethical Obligations Do Speakers Have?
A speaker’s responsibilities differ from those of the audience. Before we address either, it is important to know what ethics are. Ethics are the specific moral choices we make. There are three primary areas that need ethical consideration: topic selection, research, and language. When selecting your topic, keep in mind how the audience will interpret your message. You don’t want to choose a topic that is offensive or incendiary just to try to be edgy. Be respectful with your topic, and acknowledge that some topics are sensitive to some people and should be avoided in some situations. Next, when researching, you have an obligation to present information in a straightforward, factual way. Don’t hide or change data to make it support you better. Be honest and present the data as it was intended to be presented. Finally, when choosing language, don’t choose words that are hurtful or rude. Language spoken cannot be unspoken. When you say something, it is permanent, so be mindful of what you say.

What Ethical Obligations Does an Audience Have?
As part of an audience, you also have ethical responsibilities. The first is to listen well. You do this in three ways. First, listen for comprehension so you understand what the speaker wants you to. Second, listen critically so you don’t take things for granted, but rather you engage with the material and draw your own conclusions based on what you are hearing. Finally, listen actively by taking notes and engaging in the presentation. Don’t just tune the speech out as if it were background noise.

Next, audience members should keep an open mind. Just because you disagree with the speaker doesn’t mean you should tune them out. Hear what they are saying and critically examine it. Finally, no matter whether you agree or disagree, you should pay attention to the speaker. Ignoring a speaker is disrespectful to that person. Pay attention to what they are saying until the end, even if you disagree.

What is Plagiarism?
One of the most important ethical obligations speakers have is to present information in a factual manner. This means presenting your own ideas, and citing when information isn’t your own. When you take someone else’s ideas or writings without crediting that person, it is called plagiarism. Plagiarism is taking the intellectual work of someone else and presenting it as if it is your work. There are several kinds of plagiarism to be aware of. Global plagiarism is taking an entire work and claiming it as your own. Incremental plagiarism is using part of someone else’s work without citing it. Patchwork plagiarism is taking bits and pieces from several sources, putting them together in one place, and presenting them all as your own idea without citing the individual sources. Patchworking is taking original material, changing a few words in a few places — not enough to have paraphrased the material — and not citing the material. All of these should be avoided. The easiest way to avoid plagiarism is citation. If the idea didn’t come from your head, cite it. When in doubt, cite it.
Best Ethical Practices

There are a few easy things to do to maintain your ethical obligations. First, don’t plagiarise. Cite the work you use. Second, do not heckle. When someone is speaking, be respectful and don’t interrupt. This is especially true because as a speaker, you would not want a heckler in your audience. If you don’t want it to happen to you, don’t do it to others. Third, when speaking, balance simplicity and complexity. Some people want an easily understood message. Some want to know the complex reasoning behind your message. Balance those out so you don’t overwhelm some or hide information from others. Finally, when speaking, you should avoid profanity. It doesn’t add anything, but it can certainly detract from your message. This is part of choosing your words carefully, as you don’t want to alienate the members of your audience that are upset by profanity.

Reflect Poll: Plagiarism in the Real World

Before this lesson, did you know what counted as plagiarism and what didn’t?

- Yes
- No

Expand: Gender-Inclusive Language

Overview

When speaking, it is important to be respectful of the subject matter you are speaking about and the people in your audience. One way to do both of these is to be mindful of the language you use. Gendered language is something that many people use in their day-to-day life that can have large unseen impacts on your audience.

Why Choose Gender-Inclusive Language?

When speaking to an audience, it is best not to exclude any audience member(s) with your language. This exclusion can be avoided by using gender-inclusive language. Gender-inclusive language is language that avoids gendered terms such as he, she, or man. When using gendered language, there is a basic assumption that the word you use is describing the real world. So, if you say “fireman,” it implies that people who fight fires are all men. This isn’t true. By being inclusive with the language you use, you avoid erasing people that represent the diversity that exists in the real world. For example, if a person were giving a training presentation to a group of police officers, the speaker should avoid using the term “policemen.” The female police officers in the audience would feel excluded by that term. There are several examples of gendered language that could easily be switched to gender-inclusive language! Try to use congressperson or representative instead of congressman. When flying in a plane, try flagging down the flight attendant, instead of the stewardess. Servers serve your table in restaurants, not waiters or waitresses.

The second reason to avoid gendered language is the assumption that there is a difference. Sometimes, people refer to doctors and “lady doctors” as different when there is no difference. Both went to medical school. Both are capable of helping you. But, if you talk about doctors and differentiate lady doctors, it implies they are different, or somehow unequal. Avoid assuming that someone is worse at their job because of their gender. Respecting your audience members is important, and the words you choose go a long way in giving them the respect they deserve.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A tool to help you avoid plagiarism
- Link to resource: https://smallseotools.com/plagiarism-checker/

An article providing six tips for avoiding plagiarism
- Link to resource: http://en.writecheck.com/ways-to-avoid-plagiarism/

An article providing tips on how to be a good audience member
- Link to resource: https://pages.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/~hoyer/files/On%20How%20to%20be%20a%20Great%20Audienc%20e.pdf

Lesson Glossary

ethics: the specific moral choices we make
plagiarism: taking the intellectual work of someone else and presenting it as if it is your work
global plagiarism: taking an entire work and claiming it as your own
incremental plagiarism: using part of someone else’s work without citing it
patchwork plagiarism: taking bits and pieces from several sources, putting them together in one place, and presenting them all as your own idea without citing the individual sources
patchworking: taking original material, changing a few words in a few places — not enough to have paraphrased the material — and not citing the material
gender-inclusive language: language that avoids gendered terms such as he, she, or man

Check Your Knowledge

1. Audience members should be polite and pay attention to the speaker.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Speakers should think carefully about the words they choose in a presentation.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Plagiarism only applies to written words.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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