

How to Select a Speech for Your Project

A detailed, step-by-step guide to choosing the right topic every time

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Why Topic Selection Matters

The topic you choose shapes everything else: how easy the speech is to write, how well it meets the project's learning objectives, and how engaged your audience will be. Rushing this step is the #1 reason members get stuck. Spending 15–20 focused minutes choosing well saves hours of rewriting later.

Step 1: Re-Read the Project Requirements First

Before thinking of any topic, open the project in Base Camp and reread it carefully. Every project has a specific PURPOSE and OVERVIEW — your topic must serve that purpose, not just fill time.

1. **Note the required speech length** — Most projects specify a time range (e.g., 4–6 or 5–7 minutes). This alone rules out overly broad topics.
2. **Note the project's skill focus** — Is this project about vocal variety, persuasion, research, leadership, body language, or something else? Your topic must let you practice that specific skill.
3. **Note any special constraints** — Some projects require a topic unfamiliar to your audience; others require a true personal story; others allow "any topic." Read this line carefully — it changes your whole search.
4. **Check for required elements** — Some projects need supporting materials (visual aids, a 360° evaluation, a panel, etc.) — these can influence what topics will actually work.

Skipping this step is the most common mistake — members pick a topic they love, then discover it doesn't fit the project's actual objective.

Step 2: Brainstorm Broadly — Don't Filter Yet

Give yourself permission to list many raw ideas before judging any of them. Draw from these proven sources:

- Personal experience — a challenge you overcame, a trip, a mistake you learned from
- Expertise — anything from your job, education, or a skill you've mastered
- Passions and hobbies — anything you'd talk about for free, unprompted
- Current events or trends — something you've been reading or thinking about lately
- Curiosities — a topic you don't know much about but want to learn (great for research-based projects)
- Firsts and lasts — the first time you did something, or the last time something changed your mind
- Conversations — topics that came up recently with friends, family, or coworkers

Quick technique: the "Start With What You Know" list

Draw three columns on paper: Work, Life, Interests. Under each, list 5 things in 2 minutes without stopping to judge. You'll have 15 raw ideas in under 10 minutes.

Step 3: Filter Ideas Against the Project's Purpose

Go back to what you noted in Step 1 and cross out any brainstormed idea that doesn't fit. Ask of each remaining idea:

- Does this let me practice the specific skill this project is testing (not just "give a speech")?
- Does this match the required topic type (personal story vs. researched topic vs. persuasive stance vs. unfamiliar-to-audience)?

- Am I allowed to use this topic under the project's rules (e.g., some projects say a topic must NOT be one you've already given)?

Step 4: Narrow the Scope to Fit the Time Limit

This is where good ideas often fail — a topic that's fine for a 45-minute talk is impossible in 5–7 minutes. Narrow it down using these techniques:

5. **Pick one slice, not the whole subject** — Instead of "my career," pick "the week I almost quit my first job." Instead of "healthy eating," pick "why I stopped skipping breakfast."
6. **Use the "one sentence test"** — Try to state your speech's core message in a single sentence. If you can't, the topic is still too broad.
7. **Time yourself talking it through once, roughly** — Explain the idea out loud to yourself or a friend for a few minutes. If you're barely scratching the surface at the time limit, narrow further.

A narrow, specific topic almost always makes a stronger speech than a broad, general one — depth beats breadth in a short speech.

Step 5: Consider Your Audience (Your Club)

- You already know your club members' interests and personalities — use that. A topic that surprises or teaches them something new tends to land better than a generic one.
- For projects that specifically require an "unfamiliar" topic, deliberately avoid anything your club has heard you discuss before.
- Avoid repeating a topic you or another member has already presented recently, unless the project specifically allows it.
- Keep sensitive or divisive topics (politics, religion, graphic content) off the table unless you're confident it fits your specific club's culture and the project's tone.

Step 6: Sanity-Check Feasibility

8. **Can you speak with confidence and credibility on this?** — For personal/informative topics, you should already know the material well.
9. **Can you find reliable sources in time?** — For research-based projects, confirm credible sources exist before committing — don't discover a research dead-end two days before your speech.
10. **Is it emotionally safe for you to share?** — Personal-story projects (like the Mentorship project) can surface vulnerable memories — make sure you're comfortable presenting it to the room.
11. **Do you have enough material, but not too much?** — You should be able to outline 3–4 solid points, not 1 (too thin) or 10 (too much for the time limit).

Step 7: Draft a One-Line Purpose Statement

Before outlining the full speech, write one sentence that completes this: "By the end of this speech, my audience will ____." If you can't finish that sentence clearly, keep refining your topic before you start writing.

Step 8: Get a Second Opinion

- Run your topic idea by your mentor or a fellow club member before you commit — a five-minute conversation can save hours of rework.
- Ask them: "Does this sound interesting? Is it clear what I'm trying to say?"
- If you're unsure whether a topic fits the project's rules, check with your VP Education.

Quick Reference by Project Type

Different Pathways projects call for different kinds of topics. Use this as a fast lookup:

Project Type	What to Look For in a Topic	Example Angle
Icebreaker / Introductory speech	Something personal and easy to talk about — no research needed. Goal is comfort, not polish.	Your name's story, a hobby, a life-changing moment
Informative / "speech on any topic"	Something you already know well, narrow enough for the time limit.	A skill you have, a place you've lived, a process you understand
Researching and Presenting	A topic you're curious about but don't fully know yet — needs credible sources.	A science topic, a historical event, a health issue
Persuasive speech	A topic with a genuine viewpoint you can support with evidence and address counter-arguments.	A change you want your audience to consider or act on
Speech using body language / vocal variety	A topic that naturally invites movement, emotion, or vocal range — story-driven works well.	A dramatic personal story, a how-to demo
Mentorship speech	A true story about a mentor who impacted you — not a report on mentoring theory.	A specific memory of being guided by someone
Leadership / "lessons learned" speech	Your real experience leading a team or project, including what went wrong.	A project you led, challenges faced, what you'd change
Unfamiliar-to-audience topic (Presentation Mastery)	Pick something your specific club members are unlikely to already know.	A niche hobby, a technical topic from your job

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Choosing a topic before reading the project's actual requirements
- Picking something too broad for the time limit ("my life," "climate change," "leadership")
- Reusing a topic your club has already heard, when the project calls for something fresh
- Choosing a research topic without checking that credible sources actually exist
- Picking a topic you don't actually care about — audiences can tell, and it makes the speech harder to write and deliver
- Ignoring the required topic "type" (e.g., writing an informative speech when the project calls for a persuasive one)

Quick Selection Checklist

- ☐ Reread the project's purpose, overview, and time limit
- ☐ Brainstormed at least 5–10 raw ideas without filtering
- ☐ Filtered ideas against the project's specific skill focus and topic type
- ☐ Narrowed the topic to one clear slice, not a whole broad subject
- ☐ Confirmed the topic fits my specific audience (or is unfamiliar to them, if required)
- ☐ Confirmed I have enough credible material — not too little, not too much
- ☐ Wrote a one-line purpose statement for the speech
- ☐ Got feedback on the topic from a mentor or fellow member before writing the full speech

Need Help?

If you're stuck choosing a topic, or unsure whether an idea fits a specific project's requirements, ask your club's VP Education or your assigned Pathways mentor — they can point you to the exact project requirements and give quick feedback on your idea.