**Reference to Subject**

The first attention-getting method to consider is to tell your audience the subject of your speech. This device is probably the most direct, but it may also be the least interesting of the possible attention-getters. Here’s an example:

“We are surrounded by statistical information in today’s world, so understanding statistics is becoming paramount to citizenship in the twenty-first century.”

This sentence explicitly tells an audience that the speech they are about to hear is about the importance of understanding statistics. While this isn’t the most entertaining or interesting attention-getter, it is very clear and direct.

**Reference to Audience**

The second attention-getting device to consider is a direct reference to the audience. In this case, the speaker has a clear understanding of the audience and points out that there is something unique about the audience that should make them interested in the speech’s content. Here’s an example:

“Teachers, you and I know the importance of your classroom environment on student learning”

In this example, the speaker reminds the audience of their shared status as teachers and uses the common ground to acknowledge the importance of maintaining the classroom environment

**Quotation**

Another way to capture your listeners’ attention is to use the words of another person that relate directly to your topic. Maybe you’ve found a really great quotation in one of the articles or books you read while researching your speech. If not, you can also use a number of sources that compile useful quotations from noted individuals. Probably the most famous quotation book of all time is *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*([http://www.bartleby.com/100](http://www.bartleby.com/100%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)), now in its seventeenth edition. Here are some other websites that contain useful databases of quotations for almost any topic:

* [http://www.quotationspage.com](http://www.quotationspage.com/)
* <http://www.bartleby.com/quotations>
* [http://www.moviequotes.com](http://www.moviequotes.com/)
* [http://www.quotesandsayings.com](http://www.quotesandsayings.com/)
* [http://www.quoteland.com](http://www.quoteland.com/)

Quotations are a great way to start a speech, so let’s look at an example that could be used for a speech on deception:

Oliver Goldsmith, a sixteenth-century writer, poet, and physician, once noted that “the true use of speech is not so much to express our wants as to conceal them.”

**Reference to Current Events**

Referring to a current news event that relates to your topic is often an effective way to capture attention, as it immediately makes the audience aware of how relevant the topic is in today’s world. For example, consider this attention-getter for a persuasive speech on frivolous lawsuits:

On January 10, 2007, Scott Anthony Gomez Jr. and a fellow inmate escaped from a Pueblo, Colorado, jail. During their escape the duo attempted to rappel from the roof of the jail using a makeshift ladder of bed sheets. During Gomez’s attempt to scale the building, he slipped, fell forty feet, and injured his back. After being quickly apprehended, Gomez filed a lawsuit against the jail for making it too easy for him to escape.

In this case, the speaker is highlighting a news event that illustrates what a frivolous lawsuit is, setting up the speech topic of a need for change in how such lawsuits are handled.

**Historical Reference**

You may also capture your listeners’ attention by referring to a historical event related to your topic. Obviously, this strategy is closely related to the previous one, except that instead of a recent news event you are reaching further back in history to find a relevant reference. For example, if you are giving a speech on the Iraq War that began in 2003, you could refer back to the Vietnam War as way of making a comparison:

During the 1960s and ’70s, the United States intervened in the civil strife between North and South Vietnam. The result was a long-running war of attrition in which many American lives were lost and the country of Vietnam suffered tremendous damage and destruction. Today, we see a similar war being waged in Iraq. American lives are being lost, and stability has not yet returned to the region.

In this example, the speaker is evoking the audience’s memories of the Vietnam War to raise awareness of similarities to the war in Iraq.

**Anecdote**

Another device you can use to start a speech is to tell an anecdote related to the speech’s topic. An anecdote is a brief account or story of an interesting or humorous event. Notice the emphasis here is on the word “brief.” A common mistake speakers make when telling an anecdote is to make the anecdote too long. Remember, your entire introduction should only be 10 to 15 percent of your speech, so your attention-getter must be very short.

One type of anecdote is a real story that emphasizes a speech’s basic message. For example, here is an anecdote a speaker could use to begin a speech on how disconnected people are from the real world because of technology:

In July 2009, a high school girl named Alexa Longueira was walking along a main boulevard near her home on Staten Island, New York, typing in a message on her cell phone. Not paying attention to the world around her, she took a step and fell right into an open manhole (Whitney, 2009).

A second type of anecdote is a parable or fable. A parable or fable is an allegorical anecdote designed to teach general life lessons. The most widely known parables for most Americans are those given in the Bible and the best-known fables are Aesop’s Fables ([http://www.aesopfables.com](http://www.aesopfables.com/)). For the same speech on how disconnected people are with the real world because of technology, the speaker could have used the Fable of The Boy and the Filberts:

The ancient Greek writer Aesop told a fable about a boy who put his hand into a pitcher of filberts. The boy grabbed as many of the delicious nuts as he possibly could. But when he tried to pull them out, his hand wouldn’t fit through the neck of the pitcher because he was grasping so many filberts. Instead of dropping some of them so that his hand would fit, he burst into tears and cried about his predicament. The moral of the story? “Don’t try to do too much at once” (Aesop, 1881).

After recounting this anecdote, the speaker could easily relate the fable to the notion that the technology in our society leads us to try to do too many things at once.

While parables and fables are short and entertaining, their application to your speech topic should be clear. We’ll talk about this idea in more detail later in this chapter when we discuss how to link your attention-getter explicitly to your topic.

**Startling Statement**

The eighth device you can use to start a speech is to surprise your audience with startling information about your topic. Often, startling statements come in the form of statistics and strange facts. The goal of a good startling statistic is that it surprises the audience and gets them engaged in your topic. For example, if you’re giving a speech about oil conservation, you could start by saying, “A Boeing 747 airliner holds 57,285 gallons of fuel.” You could start a speech on the psychology of dreams by noting, “The average person has over 1,460 dreams a year.” A strange fact, on the other hand, is a statement that does not involve numbers but is equally surprising to most audiences. For example, you could start a speech on the gambling industry by saying, “There are no clocks in any casinos in Las Vegas.” You could start a speech on the Harlem Globetrotters by saying, “In 2000, Pope John Paul II became the most famous honorary member of the Harlem Globetrotters.” All four of these examples came from a great website for strange facts ([http://www.strangefacts.com](http://www.strangefacts.com/)).

Although startling statements are fun, it is important to use them ethically. First, make sure that your startling statement is factual. The Internet is full of startling statements and claims that are simply not factual, so when you find a statement you’d like to use, you have an ethical duty to ascertain its truth before you use it. Second, make sure that your startling statement is relevant to your speech and not just thrown in for shock value. We’ve all heard startling claims made in the media that are clearly made for purposes of shock or fear mongering. As speakers, we have an ethical obligation to avoid playing on people’s emotions in this way.

**Question**

Another strategy for getting your audience’s attention is to ask them a question. There are two types of questions commonly used as attention-getters: response questions and rhetorical questions. A response question is a question that the audience is expected to answer in some manner. For example, you could ask your audience, “Please raise your hand if you have ever thought about backpacking in Europe” or “Have you ever voted for the Electoral College? If so, stand up.” In both of these cases, the speaker wants her or his audience to respond. A rhetorical question, on the other hand, is a question to which no actual reply is expected. For example, a speaker talking about the importance of HIV testing could start by asking the audience, “I have two questions that I’d like you to think about. How many students on this campus have had sexual intercourse? Of those who have had sex, how many have been tested for HIV?” In this case, the speaker does not expect the audience to give an estimate of the numbers of students that fit into each category but rather to think about the questions as the speech goes on.

**Humor**

Humor is another effective method for gaining an audience’s attention. Humor is an amazing tool when used properly. We cannot begin to explain all the amazing facets of humor within this text, but we can say that humor is a great way of focusing an audience on what you are saying. However, humor is a double-edged sword. If you do not wield the sword carefully, you can turn your audience against you very quickly. When using humor, you really need to know your audience and understand what they will find humorous. One of the biggest mistakes a speaker can make is to use some form of humor that the audience either doesn’t find funny or finds offensive. Think about how incompetent the character of Michael Scott seems on the television program *The Office*, in large part because of his ineffective use of humor. We always recommend that you test out humor of any kind on a sample of potential audience members prior to actually using it during a speech.

Now that we’ve warned you about the perils of using humor, let’s talk about how to use humor as an attention-getter. Humor can be incorporated into several of the attention-getting devices mentioned. You could use a humorous anecdote, quotation, or current event. As with other attention-getting devices, you need to make sure your humor is relevant to your topic, as one of the biggest mistakes some novices make when using humor is to add humor that really doesn’t support the overall goal of the speech. So when looking for humorous attention-getters you want to make sure that the humor is nonoffensive to your audiences and relevant to your speech. For example, here’s a humorous quotation from Nicolas Chamfort, a French author during the sixteenth century, “The only thing that stops God from sending another flood is that the first one was useless.” While this quotation could be great for some audiences, other audiences may find this humorous quotation offensive (e.g., religious audiences). The Chamfort quotation could be great for a speech on the ills of modern society, but probably not for a speech on the state of modern religious conflict. You want to make sure that the leap from your attention-getter to your topic isn’t too complicated for your audience, or the attention-getter will backfire.

**Personal Reference**

The tenth device you may consider to start a speech is to refer to a story about yourself that is relevant for your topic. Some of the best speeches are ones that come from personal knowledge and experience. If you are an expert or have firsthand experience related to your topic, sharing this information with the audience is a great way to show that you are credible during your attention-getter. For example, if you had a gastric bypass surgery and you wanted to give an informative speech about the procedure, you could introduce your speech in this way:

In the fall of 2008, I decided that it was time that I took my life into my own hands. After suffering for years with the disease of obesity, I decided to take a leap of faith and get a gastric bypass in an attempt to finally beat the disease.

If you use a personal example, don’t get carried away with the focus on yourself and your own life. Your speech topic is the purpose of the attention-getter, not the other way around. Another pitfall in using a personal example is that it may be too personal for you to maintain your composure. For example, a student once started a speech about her grandmother by stating, “My grandmother died of cancer at 3:30 this morning.” The student then proceeded to cry nonstop for ten minutes. While this is an extreme example, we strongly recommend that you avoid any material that could get you overly choked up while speaking. When speakers have an emotional breakdown during their speech, audience members stop listening to the message and become very uncomfortable.

**Reference to Occasion**

The last device we mention for starting a speech is to refer directly to the speaking occasion. This attention-getter is only useful if the speech is being delivered for a specific occasion. Many toasts, for example, start with the following statement: “Today we are here to honor X.” In this case, the “X” could be a retirement, a marriage, a graduation, or any number of other special occasions. Because of its specific nature, this attention-getter is the least likely to be used for speeches being delivered for college courses.