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Preface

Books addressing public speaking often focus either on (1) a collection of skills that a prospective speaker can develop, keep in reserve as part of a communication repertoire, and then choose to apply, as they see fit, to a given opportunity established by a speaking context; or (2) a set of exemplary speakers and their accomplishments that can guide us, through study, to better understand effective speaking as an art. However, we, the authors of this book, find that what makes public speaking a compelling topic for us is a bit different: We are interested in how public speaking is a process that creates and sustains communities. We are most interested in the immediate, unpredictable, ever-evolving impact of public speaking on our lives as people who live in communities with others—communities that often demand intentional, difficult negotiations about how we should relate to one another and how we should share resources. Consider Greta Thunberg, who is perhaps an unlikely candidate as a world-transforming speaker given that she is a teenager as of this writing, that she was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome at age 12, and that a primary focus of her activism (the “Fridays for Future” movement) involves urging other school-aged children to skip school. Yet she has “become the face of climate-change activism” and served as an invited speaker at a 2018 United Nations climate change conference, two distinctive accomplishments that attest to her persuasive power (Woodward and De Luce). Greta’s example indicates that effective public speaking depends on speakers engaging others from their unique subject positions, in situated relation to particular communities, using the communication resources available to them, in response to shared perceptions of community needs.¹

As an explicitly social-justice oriented introductory public speaking text, this book represents an important departure from conventional approaches. This departure stems from our central goal to foster readers’ development as engaged speakers who appreciate the power of public speaking from two interrelated perspectives:

1. **We frame core dimensions of public speaking—such as audience and situation, topic selection, research, organization, supporting materials and delivery—as parts of widely established communication codes.** This frame supports students’ practice of effective public speaking by foregrounding not only the constituent skills involved in effective public speaking, but also the ways that effective public speaking is a primary means through which particular people recognize and wield power at particular times, for particular reasons, in particular communities. This book thus highlights the unique importance

¹ Greta Thurnberg is *Time* magazine’s 2019 Person of the Year (Alter, Haynes & Worland, 2019).
of public speaking in contemporary life as both a dimension of personal power (common to other public speaking texts) and a dimension of social, economic and cultural power (common only to other public speaking texts grounded in a “civic engagement” approach, and then with different values and emphases, as we explain below). In this way, we describe “the power of public speaking” as always more than a tool that can be taken up, or not, as speakers and audiences choose. In our book we treat this “power” as one communicative thread, among potential others, that students can trace in their own environments to more fully grasp how communication shapes social relations, identity development, and the sharing of scarce resources. Educators who expose the status of public speaking as a widely ratified code of power can help students to simultaneously acquire the capacity to effectively use the code and call into question the current social conditions created and sustained by this, and similar, codes (Delpit, 1995).

2 We provide examples and discussions that raise the profile of public speaking as a socially significant act. These examples and discussions promote exploration of how social, economic, and cultural power are historically rooted and are distributed among local communities rather than centralized within the resources of some alleged group of “those in power.” We emphasize how each act of public speaking (re)makes the world by directing resources and by taking up power, even if the immediate (re)making appears localized in classrooms or similar speech communities. Through this approach, we treat socially significant public speaking as oriented not to civic engagement but to social transformation, because “civic engagement” connotes an existing speech community with mutually agreed upon rules for dialogue and change. Our focus on the historical and distributed roots of power, instead, encourages public speaking students to treat public speaking opportunities critically—i.e., to identify which speaking opportunities develop, for whom, in which communities, for which purposes, in the service of whose interests. Thus, we call upon students as present and future speakers to recognize and respect the differential access to power embedded in the concept of a “public speaker” when they themselves decide when, how and with whom to speak.

These interrelated perspectives on power and public speaking are unique to our textbook and are the rationale for its title: Empowering Public Speaking indicates that those who speak empower themselves and, perhaps, others through learning how to speak effectively; it also, simultaneously, indicates that the act of public speaking enfolds us in power relations that precede us and through which we are integrated as members of particular communities. Empowering Public Speaking adopts an advocacy position in how we discuss introductory communication concepts. We strive to extend the ways that existing public speaking texts implicitly normalize disciplinary discussions of public speaking; these discussions are, from our perspective, characterized by instrumental treatments of a set of established public speaking
skills that, in and of themselves, serve as tools that students can master, include in their academic toolkits, and take up as needed. We contend that public speaking does not happen in sharply defined situations or well-formed speech communities and that, therefore, public speaking texts should begin with actual speakers’ efforts to speak into the messy, incomplete, and often oppressive circumstances of the status quo. *Empowering Public Speaking* takes power, in the two overlapping senses described here, as its point of departure. The text is therefore an outgrowth and extension of relatively fresh research in critical communication pedagogy, through which curricular texts and pedagogical contexts are framed as responses (positively re-inscriptive of or negatively resistant to) a status quo marked by inequity.

**Features and Benefits**

This text introduces public speaking to readers as a socially (trans)formative communicative act, through which particular speakers utilize personal and public resources to shape our society according to particular purposes. Its sustained focus on power, privilege, and social transformation as necessary elements of any properly conceptualized speaking situation make it distinctive among other public speaking texts. Some specific features and benefits that flow from this approach include:

*Attention to significant skills and concepts in public communication, engaged as readers might encounter them in situated contexts*

- This textbook addresses concepts common to a broad array of public speaking texts, including, for example, listening (Chapter 2), audience analysis (Chapter 3), speaking situation (Chapter 4), topic selection (Chapter 4), organization and development (Chapter 6), research and evaluation of the credibility of source material (Chapter 7), and delivery (Chapter 8).

- Further, we introduce and accessibly define rigorous and contemporary concepts and vocabulary (such as “communication as constitutive” or “public speaking is ephemeral”), retaining the complexity of current communication studies research but sharing with readers in ways they will engage and retain it.

*Issues-focused chapters*

- Rather than organize this textbook through units driven only by public speaking curriculum concerns, we develop each of the concepts named above by exploring how a specific issue, and specific texts that have emerged in connection with this issue, reflect that concept. Such issues include the public communication surrounding events like the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, including concomitant debates around gun
control and mental health care access, or the recent rape of a 23-year-old female physiotherapy student in New Delhi that has become a catalyst for global and cross-cultural conversations about violence against women in India and around the world. Our rationale for this approach is twofold: First, it models the social justice orientation we advocate by engaging important issues in which public speaking concepts help speakers actively (re)make our world. Second, it embraces Freire’s (1970/2003) call for problem-posing education, in which teachers organize curriculum not based on an established, abstract system of expertise but, instead, through how that curriculum links to immediately relevant concerns in students’ lives.

**Innovative sequencing of public speaking concepts**

- Rather than moving, as more conventional public speaking texts do, from the self (concepts such as communication apprehension, listening, and ethics) to informative speaking to persuasive speaking, this book explicitly assumes from the outset that communication is neither neutral nor apolitical and that all public speaking, to some extent, is persuasive. To this end, we have structured the book to address *foundations and commitments* (our own, those of the discipline, those of our readers, those of the communities to which we belong or about which we care), *techniques and tactics* (including attention to power and privilege in the speech-making process, from topic selection and organization, to research and evaluation of source material, to delivery and response), and *challenges and changes* (which, instead of guiding students to static and fixed understandings of public speaking, helps students explore questions and contingent claims about public speaking as it will necessarily evolve with time).

**Critical/cultural focus**

- This book emerges from and embraces a critical pedagogy. Drawing from Paulo Freire’s commitment to a problem-posing approach to teaching and learning, where students and teachers work together to build knowledge of a given phenomenon, we invite students to explore both public speaking concepts and contemporary and controversial public communication events in light of critical, social justice-oriented understandings of power and access, identity and dialogue.

**Unconventional voice**

- Rather than adopt a neutral or objective voice for this text, we engage in intellectually stimulating, appropriately argumentative, and accessible language and examples that help readers engage, apply, and challenge the text. By showing our seams, in a sense, we hope to invite students to participate in the process of knowledge construction that is the book and encourage them to question understandings of textbooks as neutral,
impartial, and encyclopedic. This occurs through the use of first-person voice, personal examples, and by directly addressing readers. We identify a distinct social issue at the start of each chapter, then ground our exploration of relevant public speaking concepts in specific texts created by rhetors engaging this issue. In our opening chapter, for example, in exploring power, community, and advocacy, we consider the public speaking of Emma Gonzalez, a high school student who survived a February 2018 mass shooting as her school and, subsequently, became prominently associated with calls for government action to end gun violence in schools.

**Expansive understanding of public communication**

- Rather than limiting our textual analysis to traditional public address, we explore the broadening range of contexts that encapsulate core dimensions of public communication. These include social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) and internet-based broadcast platform posts (such as YouTube), as well as public performances (such as boycotts and altering or destroying of iconic images).

- In this book, we embrace our agenda-setting role as textbook authors. This shapes our personal writing voices and, especially, our selection of social issues as the anchor of each chapter. We hope that we model throughout the book our argument about the significance of our voices in public community. We also hope that this approach makes this book interesting to contemporary readers, for whom discourse is often personal and public at once.

**Acknowledgments**

There may be authors out there in the world who simply write without regard for whether there is an audience for their words. We are not those writers. This book is a collaboration in every sense of the word; without our colleagues, our students, and each other, this book would not exist.

As our dear friend JTW would often say, there are those who find acknowledgments lovely and those who find them “icky”; if you’re in the former, please read on, and, if you’re among the latter, then you can safely turn the page, knowing that we appreciate everyone who has supported us in the long process of bringing *Empowering Public Speaking* to life, including you.

We’d first like to recognize our editorial and publishing support team. Todd Armstrong, Publisher, immediately caught our vision for this book, for which we are grateful. The entire Cognella team has been stellar, though we’d like to single out here: Abbey Hastings, Associate Production Editor, and Tony Paese, Project Editor, for their roles in helping bring this project to fruition. Laura Perry played an essential role in providing photo research for this project. Finally,
Elise Caffee should receive a medal for her grace and tact in helping us turn our—shall we say academic?—writing style into something a little more reader-friendly.

We are also proud to acknowledge here our reviewers, many of whom read multiple chapters multiple times. What we have written, and, really, who we are as educators and authors, is stronger for their generosity.

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We are especially thankful for our colleagues at San José State University for their work in developing instructional materials to accompany this text that are engaging, carefully designed, and consonant with the core principles of our argument: Laura Bell, Jemerson Diaz, Aggie Kuczera, Tiffany Martinez, Lindsay Walsh, Lucas Wang, and their mentor Tabitha Hart.

Finally, we recognize those closest to us, without whom none of this would be possible. Love is in the details, in the mundane as much as (and likely more than) the remarkable. We don't write for ourselves. We write for others, for those who are no longer with us, the ones who grow and change before our eyes, and those whom we have yet to meet.
Public Speaking Is Constitutive

In this chapter, we will work together to:

- Explore the relationship between public speaking and power
- Distinguish between communication as representation and communication as constitutive
- Identify contexts for public speaking as socially significant advocacy
Emma González was a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where in February 2018 a gunman opened fire on students and staff, killing 17 and injuring 17 more. As she sheltered in her school’s cafeteria, González wasn’t thinking about becoming the face of a movement: “I didn’t know what was going on. . . . I didn’t want to go on my phone to check and see if anything was real because I was in a complete state of denial” (Eller, 2018, para. 5). Yet 3 days later, she faced a crowd of hundreds on the steps of the federal courthouse in Fort Lauderdale and boldly proclaimed:
Emma González was and is empowered to speak on matters that affect us all, and so are you.

Public speaking doesn't always feel empowering, especially if a teacher or an employer is asking us to do it. Whether it's raising a hand in class to ask a question, presenting data to colleagues, or shouting into a megaphone in the pouring rain, public speaking can leave us feeling vulnerable and unheard. However, in the moment we decide to speak—when we take the floor—we do empower ourselves.

Power is not a possession, a tool we can wield whenever we want. Instead, power is something more fluid and complex. Power is relational. Understanding power—our own and others’—requires us to recognize the ways ideas and institutions operate through us as individuals in ways that may be harmful to us. When we can recognize power for what it is and act in ways
that are consistent with our values, we can say we are empowered. This book is our effort to help you better recognize power in the communication around you and to practice communication in ways that help you initiate change. It is our hope that you will become more empowered as a result of reading this book and that you will be better prepared to enter into and to start conversations that will shape our lives for the better.

Our Introduction to Public Speaking

Before we go further, we must note that as the authors of this book, we are participating in a relationship with you, the reader, that is already imbued with power. Textbooks are not neutral or apolitical. Readers often assume that textbooks are like dictionaries or encyclopedias that seem to represent reality in an objective or impartial way. (Note that we are arguing here that even dictionaries and encyclopedias may hold a bias or perspective in what they value or choose to include or exclude.) This is our introduction to public speaking, and as the authors, we’ve chosen what to include based on what we feel would be most valuable for you, our reader. We hope that, like good teachers, we are showing you where to look but not what to see. However, we are particular people in the world, with identities and experiences that shape our worldviews, and inevitably that will affect our choices about examples, concepts, and even photographs or other features of the book like key terms and discussion questions. It is our hope that you will find our approach invitational and maybe even provocative, and we hope you’ll bring your own identities, experiences, questions, and skepticism to your reading.
Please feel welcome to reach out to us with your questions and thoughts by e-mailing us at Deanna.Fassett@sjsu.edu and knainby@csustan.edu. Our conversations with you help us become better educators.

We will attempt to bring attention to power throughout this book in novel ways. In addition to inviting your direct communication, we will be writing in a style that is somewhat less formal than other books you've read (though, sadly, not as informal as really gripping fiction). This is to help you raise questions about what you're reading and to challenge us, so that you're not just accepting everything we write at face value. Every writer you read is biased; the word biased means favoring one perspective, focus, or outcome over others. Biases are based on existing perceptions or assumptions. What we hope to do here is remind you that we, the authors, are biased, that this is inevitable, that we may still share valuable insights with you, and that you should exercise your intellect to critically evaluate what you read. Our identities as authors are intertwined with forces of power that emerge from race (we are both White, though we work to be antiracist educators), class (we are both middle class, though Keith grew up working class), cisgender and heterosexual (though we hope to better understand the people we love who are gay, bisexual, transgender, gender fluid, and genderqueer), and ability (we are both currently able-bodied, though Deanna is a cancer survivor). We are both highly educated, but in the United States. This means that we have been taught communication and public speaking in a Western tradition. In this sense we are still learners, working to learn and incorporate non-Western and indigenous approaches to public speaking in our
teaching and speaking. This is all to say that there are many different ways to explain how to be a compelling speaker, and what you are reading here is our way. You will add to this story in your own ways.

As authors, we will inevitably write in ways that are contradictory or paradoxical. Take, for example, our use of boldfaced terms throughout the book. We have included these because they can help you navigate the contents of this book to find concepts and definitions without a lot of hassle. However, as educators, we worry that removing the mental friction that comes from having to revisit a chapter and read it more than once will make reading the book less rewarding for you in the long run. We hope that naming this tension for you here brings it to mind when you read any textbook.

We will write in ways that are at times more casual, but we will also support our insights by referencing trustworthy source material. These moments will feel significantly more formal because they will be accompanied by academic citations in APA style. You read the first of these at the end of the opening speech example: “(González, 2018).” You’ll be able to find this source material in the references by looking at the author name (González) and, if necessary, the year. These moments aren’t meant to interrupt your reading. Instead, these citations are how we as educators and researchers have learned to show our work, support our positions, and invite you into the process of building an informed argument.
We imagine the readers of this textbook to be diverse in all the ways that humans can be diverse. How do you think this perspective will shape the way we have written this book?

We believe that opening up the book in this way, by showing you that we are making particular and intentional choices as writers, will help you think about how teachers, researchers, writers, and others decide what is worth your time and energy to study and practice. And we believe that opening up the book in this way will help you imagine yourself as a speaker and a writer, as someone who persuades, and as someone who is nestled in relationships that are affected by power. Our goal is to imagine you both as broadly and as intricately as possible (yet another paradox, perhaps). We imagine that you might be reading this book as someone enrolled in an introductory communication course, but we don’t want to assume students are the only people reading this book. We imagine that you are learning public speaking, and that you have some interest in using this skill to navigate classes you’re taking. We expect that you intend to use these skills in your work (and perhaps even in work you can’t imagine yet). We also know that you will need these skills in your lives more broadly, in your neighborhoods and in your communities, to speak your truth to those in power. Finally, we imagine you as readers to be diverse in all the ways that humans can be diverse—in ethnic and racial background, economic class, gender and sexual orientation, age and ability, faith, political perspective, educational background, geographic location, and so on. With this in mind, we intentionally use they as a generic pronoun to refer to people of any gender or gender expression.

We imagine all of our readers, both generally and particularly, in dialogue with us about communication as powerful and empowering. With this introduction, we will invite you into an exploration of the power of communication to create the reality around us—from ourselves to our relationships, our communities, and our cultures. This is not only a philosophical insight;
it is also a personal and shared responsibility that will shape how you engage in public speaking as a speaker and listener. You may not yet know where you will make a difference with your words, but you undoubtedly will.

Communication, Including Public Speaking, Is Constitutive

Most of us learn at a young age that words represent things, and that communication is basically a process of sending and receiving messages. The old rhyme “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” springs to mind. This makes it seem like words are of little consequence, not as sharp or as hard as stone. This is a misleading statement, and it is further amplified by popular images and stereotypes of communication in general, and public speaking in particular, as monological and unidirectional. Yet the words we use are more than containers for ideas. Words shape and build our realities, our possibilities for interaction with ourselves, others, and our environment. Think, for example, of the new words that evolve to articulate the new experiences we share, such as mansplain, coparenting, false flag, or lactivism. Sometimes new words such as date rape or sexual harassment help us better name, recognize, and act on abuses of power.

Communication as representation is a model or way of thinking that invites us to see words as symbols or representations for things in the world, such as the word coffee standing in for the drink you may be holding in your hand. When we talk about communication as representation we are talking about the way words can be symbols or representations for things in the world.

The word “coffee” sometimes means an actual cup of coffee and sometimes the word “coffee” just stands for the drink you may be holding in your hand. When we talk about communication as representation we are talking about the way words can be symbols or representations for things in the world.
for or represents the item, idea, or experience (though, as we’ll argue here, it does so much more). Finally, words and gestures are always to some extent ambiguous. The word coffee can evoke, variously, the type of roast, a hot or cold drink, something bitter that you may not like, and so on. What you imagine when you say the word coffee may not be exactly what your listener imagines, though there will likely be some overlap. Here it may help to consider that words have both denotative and connotative meanings. A denotative meaning of a word is what you would find in the dictionary. It denotes or specifies an official meaning for the word. However, any given word also has a connotative meaning, which may be highly personal or individual. Denotatively, a cat is a feline—a small, often domesticated, carnivorous animal. Connotatively, a cat may evoke fear, affection, or indifference, and you may think of a particular cat in your world or even a 1960s “hip cat.”

“Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities.”
—George Lakoff & Mark Johnson

Communication Shapes and Creates Our Social Reality

Communication may always be to some extent representational, but that is not all it is. To say that communication is constitutive is to argue that communication shapes and even creates our social reality. In this model, our words do not simply represent individuals, organizations, and cultures. Instead our words make those individuals, organizations, and cultures. Here it may help to think of names. When a baby is born, they receive a name, one that will inevitably shape and define them. Names often carry expectations—of your gender, your ethnicity, or your generation. Consider how challenging it can be to change your name. If the difficulty doesn’t lie in changing how you see yourself, then perhaps it lies in transforming how others have seen you. When you change your name, you must address not only all the feelings leading you to want to make the change but also the feelings of your parents who named you and the loved ones who experience your name and you as intertwined. Further, there are all the layers of legal and institutional communication that may make this process challenging. To officially change your name, you must work with county, state, and federal government offices, to say nothing of executing the change with schools, banks, doctors, and even social media platforms. It is also important to consider where there are established and easy pathways for name change (such as when a woman marries a man) and when name changes are fraught, difficult, or exclusionary (such as when someone wishes to choose a name that better matches their gender identity). Our names, like other words, reflect and shape reality.

It is not that surprising that popular understandings of language and communication still imply that words mainly represent things or ideas. The very structure of our language encourages this. In their germinal text, Metaphors We Live By, authors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) illuminate how language is essentially metaphorical. By this, they mean
that we often use one concept to understand and explain another. They offer the example of argument as war: Here we use the metaphor of war to identify and better understand different aspects of the experience of argument. Think of how we have to “fight” for our ideas or defend them from attack. These sorts of expressions evolve from the metaphor of argument as war. To show how the metaphorical quality of our words can make it harder or easier to observe different aspects of experience, Lakoff and Johnson offer a different metaphor: Argument as dance. Reimagining argument as dance helps us see our differences in collaborative, invitational ways, as a necessary back-and-forth that can be beautiful rather than hostile, where everyone plays an important role, but where no one is necessarily a loser.

This perspective helps illustrate how language does not simply follow thought, as if we package our ideas into words that we can send easily to our listener or reader. Instead, language co-occurs with or even precedes our ideas, with our communication choices making some ideas possible and not others. Take, for example, a speaker’s use of the term illegal alien. Not only does this language choice imply a particular power relationship, it reinforces it too. Compare this term to undocumented immigrant or even a term like Dreamer. Each term both indicates and creates a different way of understanding someone and therefore a different relationship with that someone. Each is partial and incomplete.

To say that communication is constitutive implies an ethical stance. If communication both illuminates and obfuscates, or hides, understandings, if it opens some conceptual (and actual) doors and closes others, then we must bring a more nuanced understanding of ethics to our communication. Instead of ethics being limited to well-chosen words—for example, to include people rather than exclude (though it does involve this)—ethics must as well include a dimension of accountability for what our communication creates in the world.

Communication, Including Public Speaking, Is Relational

When she accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison (1994), author of classics like The Bluest Eye and Beloved, observed, “language doesn’t represent violence, it is violence; it doesn’t represent the limits of thought, it limits thought” (p.16). Here Morrison not only establishes
communication as constitutive but also reveals the ethical imperative in such an understand-
ing. As communicators, whether we are speaking to our family members, into an ethereal
social media platform, or to a crowd gathered on the courthouse steps, we must know that
there are very real consequences of our actions and inactions, our voices and our silences.
Morrison argues something more complex than a rebuttal to the old “sticks and stones”
rhyme. She wants us to understand that words are not just representations or symbols of
violence, they are violence in their own right—to both the speaker and the listener. Consider
exclusionary language. Racist, sexist, (cis)heterosexist, ageist, ableist, theist, or other oppres-
sive language not only reflects or mirrors violence in the world, it enacts its own violence by
marginalizing, dehumanizing, and silencing others. Further, use of oppressive language vio-
lates not only its target but also the people who bear witness to it and those who utter it. If
we only know argument as war, we will miss the nuanced understandings another metaphor
would offer. Similarly, if we only understand marginalized groups of people in terms of ste-
reotypes and narrow worldviews, we will continue to participate in the disenfranchisement
and dehumanization of others.

In other words, we are inextricably intertwined in our communication with others. Our
motives and intentions matter. The outcomes of our communication matter. Our successes
and our mistakes matter and have consequence not only for ourselves but for others around
us. Because communication—from whispers to howls and even our silence—creates us and
our relationships from the interpersonal to the global, we must communicate in ways that
invite care, reflection, insight, and change.

Our responsibility to one another as communicators becomes all the more important when
we consider that our communication is often explicitly or implicitly persuasive. For some of us,
this may be surprising—especially with respect to moments when we see our communication
as casual or spontaneous. We may think of persuasion as something we do when we argue: We
fight for a particular position and furnish evidence in a purposeful way to convince someone.
But, again, thinking back to Lakoff and Johnson’s theory that our understandings of persuasion
will be inevitably metaphorical, perhaps persuasion is not always so adversarial. Our commu-
nication also has a reciprocal, back-and-forth quality that requires participation from others. It
is always relational. Our communication shapes our perceptions of ourselves as well as others’
perceptions of us and our shared reality. We persuade ourselves, and we persuade each other.
In that persuasion, we become something new—perhaps a different person, a community, or
a political or social movement.

**Rhetoric Helps Us Think Critically About Communication in Our Lives**

Communication studies scholars study *rhetoric* or persuasion in all forms in order to better
understand how language shapes and defines us and our world. What do you think of when
you hear the term *rhetoric*? Do you think of politicians going on about ideas about which they may have little conviction or commitment? Do you think of spin doctoring—attempts to manipulate or turn public understandings of an event to someone’s advantage? Do you think of famous speeches and maybe the scholars who analyze them? Public speaking teachers in Western cultures often begin the study of rhetoric with ancient Greece. In ancient Greece, citizens represented themselves in courts of law, giving rise to the Sophists, who were in some sense our earliest public speaking teachers. Sophists such as Gorgias and Protagoras felt that perception and how an individual articulates their experience affects our understanding of truth (and even what counts as truth). Believing that “nothing exists outside the human senses” and “man is the measure of all things,” the Sophists advanced a practical understanding of persuasion: We simply cannot know what actually happened, when someone’s understanding of actions and events is inherently partial and incomplete. Every experience is filtered through humans, who are inevitably imperfect.

The Sophists’ understanding of rhetoric stands in direct contrast to Plato’s. Plato, perhaps best known as a student of the classic Greek philosopher Socrates, was dismissive of Sophistry, believing instead in the importance of systematic philosophical examination and attempts to better know an external, verifiable reality (what we might think of as the *Truth*, as opposed to multiple contingent and arguable truths). Plato described rhetoric or persuasion as “mere cookery, a habitude or a knack” (see Plato’s Gorgias, for e.g.). In other words, Plato argued that rhetoric was more a matter of style than substance, giving rise to perceptions of rhetoric as manipulation.

It is Plato’s student Aristotle who gives the field of communication studies perhaps its most often-cited definition of rhetoric. Believing that it was important for everyday citizens (and not just philosophers) to have an effective means of discerning truths, Aristotle developed the first comprehensive book on rhetoric, titled *Rhetoric*. In it, he defines rhetoric as “uncovering, in any given situation, the available means of persuasion” (Rapp, 2010; Sachs, 2008). Aristotle’s definition has been and remains immensely helpful to the analysis of communication, helping people to become better producers, consumers, and evaluators of messages.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”
— Nelson Mandela
Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, by challenging us to think of anything as potentially persuasive, helps us think critically about communication in our lives. Let’s take a minute to analyze his definition here. *Uncovering* refers to the work of careful analysis and investigation, taking nothing for granted. “In any given situation” means anything might be persuasion, from a politician’s joke to the structure and plan of a city. “The available means of persuasion” refers to the tools someone can use to convince us. As part of his definition, Aristotle identified three types of artistic proofs or persuasive appeals to a listener: ethos, pathos, and logos.

**Artistic appeals** involve the intentional and artful use of language to persuade. **Ethos** refers to a speaker’s efforts to appear credible: qualified, trustworthy, and confident. For example, the speaker may call on or cite other sources in a speech or share their own prior experience with the topic. When González, in the speech quoted at the start of this chapter, indicates that she herself was present at a shooting and offers audience members exact statistical figures (“17 of our friends were taken from us, 15 were injured”), she is developing an ethical connection with these audience members by assuring them that she is a highly credible, trustworthy speaker on this topic. **Pathos** refers to a speaker’s efforts to draw on listeners’ emotions, helping them connect with a person or issue in personal ways. For example, this might include sharing an extended and emotionally fraught story. González appeals to pathos when she says, “Everyone who was there understands. Everyone who has been touched by the cold grip of gun violence understands. For us, long, tearful, chaotic hours in the scorching afternoon sun were spent not knowing.” Finally, **logos** refers to the speaker’s efforts to demonstrate the sound logic or reasoning of the speech. For example, the speaker would work to establish the connective tissue between evidence and the conclusions they’ve drawn from that evidence.

Classroom teachers use a combination of ethos, pathos, and logos to establish credibility and to persuade students to pay attention to what they are saying.
demonstrating unequivocally for the listeners that the argument is valid. González’s use of a logical appeal is especially nuanced and compelling, in our estimation. When she says, “Six minutes and 20 seconds with an AR-15, and my friend Carmen would never complain to me about piano practice” and follows this with the names of each of the other victims of the shooting, she is subtly but very effectively making a logical, causal connection between the rapid-firing capacity of the weapon and the long-lasting impact of such a weapon on those it affects.

To better understand ethos, pathos, and logos, it may help to consider the communication that occurs in the classroom. Your teacher very likely engages in a number of behaviors to establish credibility, even beyond reminding you of their qualifications. They might refer to other trusted sources, speak with you instead of at you, and/or dress in particular clothing. You may find that your teacher uses emotional appeals in the classroom as well. For example, they might share examples that help illustrate the importance or value of the skills they’re teaching you, such as a story about a student whose careful mastery of public speaking led to a successful career as a local public official or a story that illustrates the power of public speaking to effect material change in people’s lives. Finally, your teacher is likely to demonstrate valid reasoning, for example, when they show a causal relationship between length of time practicing for a speech and a sense of self-confidence on speech day, or when they draw the comparison between learning to speak in public and training to run a race.

It is also highly likely that you engage in some form of all three persuasive appeals in order to convince listeners in your life. In this same classroom example, for example, in order to make your best case for a deadline extension, you would want to show your teacher that you’re trustworthy and deserving of the exception (ethos); that you would be appreciative because you care about learning the content of the class; that you wouldn’t usually ask but you’re struggling with a difficult situation that is interfering with your ability to complete the assignment in a timely way (pathos); and finally, that you have sound reasons (logos) for requesting the extension (that you would be better able to show your best work because you could give the assignment the time and attention it deserves). Your argument will be strongest when you engage in all three appeals. Think of how you decide where to make a donation of time or money. Chances are, while you may be moved by particular examples that evoke an emotional response, you are likely more persuaded by results, by evidence that your time and/or money will make a real difference.

Aristotle gives us a very practical approach to creating and evaluating persuasion in our lives. That we can analyze communication (whether a press conference or a first date’s clothing choices) for how it shapes our perception and understanding of reality is significant. Communication shapes and creates our social reality, and it is our responsibility to creatively, critically, and compassionately explore that process. Otherwise we risk complacency and manipulation.

One of the most accomplished and well-known Roman orators, Quintilian, defined rhetoric as a good [person] speaking well (Golden, 2011; Quintilian, 1856). This, again, reminds us of the ethical dimension of public speaking and offers us a powerful way of evaluating it. To say
communication is constitutive is analogous to saying we are what we eat. We build realities through our language choices, shaping both understandings and actions. So, to be an effective communicator, you must be more than technically skilled—you must also have a moral compass, a sense of what is meaningful and just, and a sense of how your communication affects others and yourself for better and for worse.

**Empowering Public Speaking Is Socially Significant Advocacy**

Whether or not we are aware of it, the communication that moves in and through us is inevitably persuasive, knitting together or pulling apart ways of seeing and being. Each utterance, whether word or gesture, advocates for a particular version of reality; it names what we love or uphold and what we choose to neglect. This is true whether we are communicating in the streets or in our homes, places of worship, places of employment, or classrooms. Therefore, it is important to make the most of every opportunity to be heard.

Our goal in this book is to help you become an empowered and empowering public speaker. By this, we mean that we would like to support you as you become more attentive to power as it is created and challenged in communication. When you speak, you are empowered to name what is important, for you and for your listeners. This means that you must consider whether you are

In your public speaking class you may be required to participate in a debate. If you are going to argue for ten minutes to/with 20–30 people, and want your discussion to be socially significant, your listeners must either agree (or come to agree during the course of your speech) that this is time well-spent.
addressing issues of **social significance** (and for whom). One way to think about social significance is to address its different parts. Socially significant communication would address topics that are relevant or meaningful for some culture or group. This requires you to understand to whom you are speaking and why or to what end. You will need to consider how your focus, your argument, and your examples draw together these listeners in support of some common goal or objective (whether that is to learn more, have a lighthearted moment of celebration, or make a change).

We would also like for you to consider the role of power in social significance. How does your communication strengthen or weaken power within and for a particular group of people? Let’s imagine that you have 10 minutes in which to speak with a group. In this example, let’s assume this is a public speaking class, and you may choose, within some set of parameters (such as that the speech must be persuasive), what you plan to discuss. If you are going to argue for 10 minutes to/with 20 to 30 people, to be socially significant, your listeners must either agree (or come to agree during the course of your speech) that this is time well spent. Socially significant speeches help listeners become more informed and better understand some aspect of their lives so that they can act in ways that improve their own and others’ lives. Socially significant speeches help nurture your own and your listeners’ sense of **agency**. Agency refers to a person’s ability to feel as though they can take action in the world that is meaningful. They see themselves as having the understanding, skills, and resources to make a positive difference. In our classroom example, it means that you’ve chosen to speak on something about which you know and care deeply and that will excite your listeners to think, feel, know, and/or do something that matters.

Kamala Harris speaks to a crowd of supporters at a Democratic Rally. Political speeches, like the ones Kamala Harris might give, are socially significant and help listeners become more informed and better understand ways that they can improve their own and others’ lives.
Let’s take social significance and this sense of power a step further: Instead of speaking in a classroom, let’s imagine you have been invited by a group to speak on a topic (issue, skill, or process) that matters to them. In such settings, you will likely share what you know and help others through your insight and expertise. It can be very useful to both you and your listeners to understand what has motivated your invitation to speak. Here it can help to consider the role of power beyond your own and your listeners’ sense of personal empowerment by exploring the power relationships involved in the speaking opportunity. Are you speaking as part of a desire to be employed by that group (as in a job interview), and do you feel as though you can speak candidly to the group? Has someone required this group to have additional training and that’s why you’re there (at the request of someone with power over the listeners)? Is this group looking to make a change in their process? Who has been included with your invitation? And who has been excluded? How are members of this group positioning your talk with respect to their own beliefs, values, and frustrations? Do you want to play the role they’ve assigned you? Or do you want to resist or complicate their expectations? These questions can help you consider how your own and your listeners’ sense of agency may be constrained.

Advocacy Entails Speaking Alongside Others to Amplify Their Voices

Thinking carefully about power in communication also helps us embody an understanding of public speaking that is advocacy. More than just arguing or making a request, advocacy

Emma Gonzalez and her peers at Parkland have spoken to many different audiences about gun legislation. They understand that through their voices and actions they have the ability to enact change. Other students around the country have been mobilized because of their examples. Your voice can join theirs in the classroom, at the lunch table, or on the train. How will you use it?
entails speaking alongside others so as to amplify their voices. It is often the case that those in power do not need advocacy—their voices carry because they are woven into the fabric of our lives, from laws and institutions to stereotypes and expectations. We would like to challenge you to think about whose voices need and deserve amplification in our world. Socially significant topics aspire to create spaces for speakers and listeners to join others in discussing matters that are marginalized or overlooked and yet important to us all. This can include learning from and with others who have been affected by unique or incompletely understood lived experiences (such as living in shelter housing following a natural disaster or living with a particular physical condition like an addiction), government legislation (regarding, for example, immigration or firearms possession), or corporate or organizational policy (including, for example, actions around privacy, sustainability, or free speech).

Agency matters because, through it, we effect material change. One type of change involves development of or revision to the policies and procedures that governments and other organizations create and enforce. In such conversations, you and your listeners may hold an organization accountable, and in influencing policy, you make that change for others beyond yourselves. Another type of change involves interpersonal justice, where you work in small ways, one person and one conversation at a time, to change someone’s mind or behavior. As you learn the concerns that the marginalized voices in your world would like amplified, your voice can join theirs in the classroom, at the lunch table, or on the train. In these moments, your sense that you can make a difference can open spaces for you and the people you meet to explore their assumptions, stereotypes, prejudices, and biases. Through your agency, you and others make a difference.

“Fight for Your Lives Before It’s Someone Else’s Job”

It’s difficult to imagine exactly what Emma González and her peers were thinking and feeling as they sheltered in place in their school cafeteria. What does seem clear is that this terrible tragedy changed her, turning her sense of agency toward action in the world. While she has spoken for many audiences, the speech that frames this chapter (and book) illuminates how what we say matters. Our words are action in the world. But, all the more remarkable in this speech, González proves that our silences communicate in powerful ways.

In the months since the Parkland shooting, González and her peers have spoken to many different audiences (from legislators to the media to parents and near-voting-age youth) about gun legislation. They have taken up this fight—what will you fight for?

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”

—United Nations
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Toward Praxis

1 **Reflection:** When have words or gestures changed you or defined you? When was this helpful? When was this harmful?

2 **Discussion:** Consider everyday examples of language shaping and defining or limiting our actions. What cultures were central or normative? What cultures were marginalized? How so?

3 **Action:** Reflect on an issue of social significance. How has understanding of that issue been defined by contested, misleading, or dehumanizing language? Find occasions in your everyday communication to surface unspoken or unreflective assumptions, clarify key terms, or intentionally underscore the personhood of people speaking into and/or affected by the issue.
Discussion Questions

1. In what ways has naming shaped you? In what ways have you embraced and/or resisted these expectations?

2. How do you typically use textbooks and features like boldfaced terms or discussion questions? How do books, assignments, and other instructional materials enhance or interfere with your learning?

3. Where do you find persuasion in your lives? Think broadly to include this textbook, your classroom, or even your city as an argument. Explore those different settings for Aristotle’s persuasive appeals.