

environmental youth forum

DIRECT ACTION TOOLKIT: ORATION AND POETRY



What is direct action?

Direct action refers to the political tactics and methods used to raise awareness or force discussion on an issue. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolent direct action “seeks to dramatize the issue [so] that it can no longer be ignored.” Like voting, direct actions, which include protests and sit-ins, are an essential part of a democracy. Unlike voting, however, direct actions can happen at any time, and anybody in a society can initiate a direct action—not just those of voting age.

Public Speaking and Spoken Word Poetry

Activism and direct actions are always ultimately about bringing new voices into a larger conversation, and few methods are as direct as oration, or a public speech. A well crafted speech can inspire, educate, and inform, whether it takes the style of a spoken essay or a creative writing piece, such as a poem. From Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech” to Amanda Gorman’s poem at the 2021 presidential inauguration, speeches have shown their power to illuminate critical issues with words that draw from the past, speak to the present, and shape the future.

INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Research the issue

Effective direct actions always start with a solid understanding of the issue you are trying to address and the community you are trying to reach with your message. First, understand both sides of the issue. Then, figure out what you are trying to say and, just as importantly, who you are trying to say it to. Are you addressing people who feel differently from you to raise their awareness of your perspective? Or are you addressing people who agree with you to create a feeling of solidarity?

Step 2: Identify your central message

The best speeches are often brief and to the point; the Gettysburg address is only 275 words long. To ensure your audience remembers your message, focus on defining the most important point of your speech. How can you summarize this point in a single, memorable sentence?

Step 3: Draft your speech


With your central message in mind, write out the rest of your speech or poem. An effective structure for a speech is similar to an essay: Use an introduction to explain the issue, provide a series of arguments, and close with a powerful conclusion. Weave your central message throughout the speech. A poem's structure can be more flexible. Be creative, but make sure to keep tying ideas back to your central message.

Step 4: Practice

Practice reading your speech aloud. As you do, you might notice parts that sound repetitive or confusing, and you can continue to revise as you practice. Take note of which sections you can emphasize by changing your tone of voice. Change the rhythm and volume of how you read. Slowing down before a key point is an excellent way to ensure your audience hears it. Speaking faster can help build energy and momentum. Record yourself practicing so you can hear how you sound and how your delivery is likely to affect your audience. Try practicing your speech on a friend or family member.

Step 5: Share it!

After rehearsing your speech, you need to get it to your audience. If you are involved with a local activist group, they may have openings for student speeches at rallies and events. Sometimes there are local contests for speeches as well; a teacher or guidance counselor may be able to guide you to these. And lastly, you always have the power to share via the internet or in a digital classroom space.



"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Maya Angelou
Poet and Civil Rights Activist