GENERAL STYLE — DIRECTNESS
An old song includes the lyrics, “It ain’t what you say, it’s the way that you say it.” Of course, the song was referring to romance, not speeches. In speeches, it matters very much what you say and how you say it. But the difficult part is “what you say” — planning and organizing the main points, examples, illustrations, and so forth. “How you say it,” with respect to such things as manner, delivery, and so forth, is important also. But it is fairly easy.

Recall that the most important aspect of your overall delivery is directness. And recall that directness is the general feeling that the speaker is genuinely talking with the
audience, rather than talking at the audience, or orating in some sort of oblivious monologue. As you can guess by now, the advice for how to be direct is, for the most part, be natural — talk the same way that you would in a conversation with an acquaintance whom you respect.

This assumes that the “what you say” has been carefully planned, but that the “how you say it” is mostly spontaneous. In other words, your content should be well organized and well thought out, but it should not be memorized, written out to be read, or otherwise scripted. (This is because memorized speeches and scripted speeches almost always sound artificial, unnatural, and non-direct.) Rather, the assumption is that you will use very brief notes. The notes will be to remind yourself of what you are going to talk about, and in what order. But as for how to say it — what words to use, what gestures, facial expression, and so forth — you should let natural spontaneity take care of that, just as it does in natural conversation.

It is very important to recognize that I am not suggesting that you merely act natural, but that you truly be natural. Here is a real-life example of what I mean: A couple of years ago a friend took a new job as a public-relations representative. Her duties included going to various schools and giving one of a dozen or so one-hour speeches that her new company had prepared for its public relations team. For weeks, she had labored and fretted over just two of these speeches. Her husband, a speech instructor, had been correctly advising her all along not to memorize the speeches, but rather to focus on the main points and express them in her own words. As the deadline for her first speech approached, she became more frantic. He finally realized that she didn’t understand what he was advising, and offered to demonstrate what he meant. He took one of the scripts, spent a while reading it over a few times, and made a brief
outline. After about an hour, he came back to his wife and gave the speech very effectively from very sketchy notes. She was simultaneously amazed and frustrated that he managed to master in an hour what she had spent several weeks working on so laboriously. Her reaction was, “That was fantastic! Why can't I do that?” His reply: “You can. Try it. Take my outline and explain each of the points in your own words.” He gave her his sketchy outline, she tried it, and it worked. She did likewise when the speeches were “for real,” and it worked every time. By the way, she soon became the “model” speaker used to train new members of the firm's public-relations team.

The point of this story in our present context is that while this speaker had been advised from the beginning not to memorize the speeches and just to use her own words, she had been resistant to the idea of being spontaneous. She had been trying to use her own words, she explained later, but had been trying to get those words “down pat” before giving the speech. She was trying to ignore the original script, granted, but she was trying to replace it with another script. The demonstration by the husband, and her subsequent approach, makes the point I'm trying to make here: When I advise that you be natural and spontaneous, I am advising that once you are comfortable with your content — your knowledge of it, organization of it, etc. — that you be truly spontaneous.

This doesn't mean that you should “wing it” completely. But it means that you need to be truly talking naturally and spontaneously with the audience.

Let me give one more example to emphasize this point. In my public-speaking classes we do a very effective exercise to focus on delivery. I call it the “workout” session, because it is designed to “work out” delivery problems. The speakers come to class prepared to give their speeches, and the
instructor announces that the rules have been changed. Today the instructor will interrupt the speaker, at will, to fine-tune any delivery problems. With the instructor, the speakers work on one or two delivery problems until they are solved. All of this is done within the first couple of minutes of the speech. When the delivery problems are solved, the speaker sits down and the next speaker comes up. (Everyone gives their speech “for real” during the next class period.)

By far the most common “delivery problem” targeted in this exercise is simple lack of directness. (Probably this is because the “workout” session is always at the beginning of the term, before the communication orientation has been introduced.) The memorized, read, or semi-memorized speech sticks out like a sore thumb, usually right from the introduction. To point out (and “work out”) the problem, the instructor simply interrupts the speaker and asks questions about the forthcoming content. “So you’re going to tell us about such-and-such; what angle are you going to take? How did you get interested in that? What are some of your main points going to be?” Etc. The object, of course, is to get the speaker talking in a natural, spontaneous style. Most speakers break into their natural mode immediately. Invariably, though, some resist, trying instead to answer the questions by inserting some of the “pat” material planned for later in the speech. This usually develops into a good-natured tug-of-war, with the instructor prompting the speaker toward spontaneity, and the speaker trying to hang on to the precious preplanned words. Every time, though, when the speaker finally gives up the pat speech and starts talking more spontaneously — first with the instructor, then with the audience — several things happen: The audience reports that the speaker seems more direct and easier to listen to; the speaker reports that it is easier and more comfortable talking with the audience than reciting the pat material; and the
speaker also reports that the experience becomes much more relaxed.

I can't emphasize enough that directness requires true spontaneity. Trying to merely act direct while confining oneself to a pat script defeats the purpose. One needs to be truly conversational, truly direct, truly spontaneous, truly natural. The following sections discuss a few specifics.