It’s not shocking that the key to designing oral assignments is clarity. Like most assignments, students are comfortable with more information. Unlike many assignments, however, there’s more anxiety surrounding public speaking. Consequently, the more information that you can give students, the more assured that they will feel going into the assignment.

In general, it is good practice to keep the following ideas in mind when designing oral assignments:

**Clarity:** Make the parameters of the assignment very clear and get the information to students early in the process. This also makes it clear that you take the presentations seriously.

Consider the differences between a written and oral assignment. The oral assignment has the ability to interact with an immediate audience. Talk to students about how to take advantage of this medium.

Think about including specific assignment parameters (as you would for a written assignment):
- Time limits
- Preparation expectations
- Outline/note expectations
- Citing sources in the speech
- Delivery style
- Content expectations
- Visual aid expectations

**Stages:** If you can check on students’ progress, they are more likely to take it seriously and be more confident about the presentation. Making the stages due for some credit or just building them into the class period will help students get started earlier and have a better end product.

1. Have students prepare a draft of the presentation outline
2. Come to the Speaking Center (or review their drafts, or guide them in a peer review, etc.)
3. Then create a final product.

**Clear grading standards:** Include a clear description of the assignment and grading expectations. Include a grading rubric when possible. At the very least, give them criteria that you will use when grading the presentations. At the very least, you’ll want to give feedback on:
- Content
- Organization
- Language
- Adaptation to audience and context
- Vocal delivery
- Nonverbal delivery
- Additional Criteria specific to your course/assignment

**Support:** Use the Speaking Center, the Speaking Center website and handouts, and workshops/class visits to support oral assignments. Although it is often difficult to find class time to discuss oral communication, a few minutes spread out across the semester might make a big difference in the quality of the presentations.
Examples of oral assignments: Although standard presentations often serve the needs of the class, you might also consider some alternative assignments:

In-class or Quick Assignments:

- **Position papers**: These can be presented throughout the semester—a low risk, informal presentation of short papers. The nice thing about these assignments is that students think about the differences between written and oral communication.
- **Mini debates or counterpoints on position papers**: Students present opposing or different viewpoints (especially based on readings).
- **Presenting readings**: Have students present a short summary of readings. This kicks off discussion and gets students to struggle with their own interpretation of the material.
- **Informal or formal discussions of projects in progress**: This helps to stimulate class discussion of research and push the project along.

Research-based or Homework Assignments:

- **Mini-lectures**: These can cover alternative readings, contemporary connections, or counter-points. Students can sign up for topics early in the semester and the presentations can be spread throughout the semester.
- **Group presentations**: These can cover group projects or special topics.
- **Current event speech**: This is a great way to get students involved in class and interested in current events. Have them research the latest happenings in course-related areas and present that information. You can assign these throughout the semester (so that it doesn’t take up large portions of your semester schedule) and stimulate discussion.
- **Discussion questions**: Have students post discussion questions and then prepare oral answers to those questions.
- **Leading discussions**: Give students the opportunity to take over for the day. They can lead the discussion over some of the readings, question other class members, and offer their own interpretations of the material.
- **Debates**: Hold formal or informal debates in class. Depending on the assignment, these can be graded based on content and delivery. For more information about different debate possibilities, see the Debate Handout.

Consider using the Speaking Center in the following ways:

- We can make class visits—general or specific information about presentations
- Come to the Speaking Center (Cook Library, 117)
- Consider requiring/strongly encouraging consulting appointments
- Set up appointments to meet with the Speaking Center staff to discuss specific needs for your students (wendy.atkinssayre@usm.edu or x6-4370)
- Check out our guidesheets, available online (www.usm.edu/speakingcenter) or in-person to help assist you creating, explaining, and grading oral assignments