When we think of a sport coach given an oral presentation we are likely to envision Vince Lombardi walking up and down the sideline calling out orders or perhaps Pat Summit shouting her Lady Vols to “get back” on defense. At first glance, it may appear that sport coaches do not require special knowledge of speaking or oral communication. We might naively think that good and successful coaches merely need to be able to shout instructional messages related to sport skills. However, this is an oversight and does not accurately reflect the breadth or depth of speaking skills required by coaches.

In reality, the field of sport coaching, more than many other professions, necessitates that the coach speak in a myriad of situations for an equally diverse number of purposes. Coaches routinely speak to a variety of audiences such as athletes, parents, administrators, the media and other coaches. The time when a coach speaks and to whom he or she is speaking with will influence the content of his or her message. For example, what a coach says to his or her team before the game is not the same as what he or she says after the game. Sport coaches often have to be communicative chameleons. At one minute a coach may be speaking informally amongst his or her fellow coaches and then the same coach may literally have to turn around to address thousands or even millions of stakeholders at a press conference. Indeed, sport coaches need a wide variety of skills to clearly and concisely communicate with these audiences.

When coaches speak with any of these audiences they also speak to their relationship with these groups. Coaches communicate this relationship based on their verbal and nonverbal language. A coach’s nonverbal facial expression after a player makes a careless mistake does not have the same meaning as a coach’s smiling face and hand waving to a crowd of eager fans or boosters. Additionally, the way a coach speaks to an athlete during a practice is not indicative of how he or she speaks to the same athlete off the court or away from the field. In effect, sport coaches need a wide range of speaking skills to help them communicate effectively in a variety of domains such as interpersonally and public speaking.

The basics of speaking are, for the most part, consistent across disciplines. Knowing the expectations of a discipline is an important part of adapting to your audience, however. The papers in the “Speaking, in my opinion…” series do not represent an official statement from the department. They do, however, give you an introduction to different faculty opinions on effective speaking.
Sport coaches are fortunate that scholars in our field are beginning to take an interest and systematically examine effective communication (Yukelson, Jowett & Lavallee, 2007). In addition to these sources, the University of Southern Mississippi speaking center (http://www.usm.edu/speakingcenter/) offers many resources for improving oral communication. With that said, here are a few essential and practical tips for sport coaches to remember when speaking:

Know your audience. Because coaches may have to speak to so many different audiences, a one-size-fits-all approach to speaking may be inappropriate. Think about what message you want to convey and how the audience may direct or influence what you say (e.g., the media may give you leading questions, but athletes usually do not).

The basics. Speak clearly and articulate your words. Think before you speak; you may have something more meaningful to say. If you don't know something, tell them you will think about it and get back to them; don't lie or fabricate a mindless answer. Practice makes perfect for coaches too—practice what and how you might respond to the varying audiences you may have to address.

Communicate care. Anecdotally, it seems that sport coaches like to be “honest” with their audiences; that is they speak “the Truth.” Telling an athlete they are not good does not communicate care. Instead, focus on positive growth. Similarly, parents don’t want or need to be told their son or daughter is “lazy” or a “bad kid.” Rather, sport coaches can focus on what athletes are doing and what the coach would like for them to do.

Power is everywhere. Sport coaches should remember that everybody, to some degree, has power; some have more, some have less. What will the athletic director think about the message I just told the media? How will the athlete interpret what I just said? Whenever they speak, sport coaches should be mindful of how a particular stakeholder’s use of power will influence their job.

Presentation of self. Sport coaches often want to present themselves as confident, all-knowing beings. That is, they know exactly what they are doing and what effect it will have. Unfortunately, that’s not the way it works. Presenting the self as overly confident may be interpreted as arrogance or unapproachable which could stymie interpersonal (coach-athlete) communication. Also, presenting yourself as something than you are, that is changing how you presented yourself during recruiting to how you really act may result in a loss of respect and trust.