Oral presentations made in English classes allow us to share our thoughts and arguments about literature to a group of peers while extending the way we present our ideas in writing. Whereas an essay is intended for an individual audience, oral presentations allow for dialogue and exchange with a variety of people. In undergraduate classes, oral presentations will most likely be informal and might involve a group of students preparing material to share with the rest of the class. They give students the opportunity to guide the class discussion on a particular literary work, while providing deeper and more specific insight than might typically emerge from a general discussion. Oral presentations thus encourage students to articulate their own perspectives on the literature discussed in class while providing an opportunity to lead discussion and transform the traditional mode through which the class receives information.

Typically at the graduate student level and beyond, oral presentations take place at academic conferences where scholars participate in panels, roundtables and seminars. Graduate students can prepare for such avenues of professionalization by making oral presentations in the classroom. Although more informal than the conference experience, these in-class presentations enable students to do preliminary work for the more extensive research that will go into seminar papers. Oral presentations are especially valuable for thinking through the problems of an argument, pursuing questions rather than answers, and raising the stakes of any given position on literature. They break open the hermetic thought process by compelling students to express what they have been thinking when reading alone. These presentations not only motivate the speaker to think more deeply about their particular topic, they also allow inherently complex ideas to emerge in discussion with peers. Conferences are also helpful in this regard while bringing scholars from different backgrounds together and allowing their ideas to be juxtaposed under a shared conceptual umbrella. The conference talk must be polished and seamless in delivery; speakers who are familiar with the language of their papers and can read them while maintaining basic strategies for successful public speaking tend to be the most rewarding for audiences.

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.
Ideally, students who study literature should have consistent and ongoing opportunities to present their ideas orally – to small groups, classrooms or colleagues. As they move further along in their careers, the mode of presentation becomes more formal and public, but the building blocks of strong speaking strategies can be learned in the earliest stages of undergraduate coursework. In particular, English majors should remember the implicitly communicative nature of what we study and realize that the first step of shared discourse happens when we read a book or poem. Engagement of the material can therefore take on many guises, one of which is the collaborative and enriching experience of public speaking.

The Speaking Center on campus (http://www.usm.edu/speakingcenter/) can be extremely helpful to student preparing for any type of oral presentation or speaking assignment. The tutors at the center can assist students with all phases of preparing a presentation and can even offer constructive feedback on practice speeches. Their handouts are very helpful.