The academic study of Religion is largely one of symbolic language. The basic elements in question are cosmology (an understanding of who we are and our place in the universe) and community (those who share the symbolic system of interpreting the cosmos). This is a deceptively simple schematization because both elements contain enough leeway to support a colossal number of variations, any one of which a given group of people may hold vehemently to the absolute to the exclusion of all others.

A student of World Religions can expect to give oral presentations in virtually all levels of study: class presentations; oral defenses and professional meetings to name a few. Likewise religion scholars can expect to be called upon to address civic or religious organizations, sometimes as apologists for or explicators of the tradition they identify with, or as interpreters of their own or other traditions to those who are partially or entirely unfamiliar with the subject at hand.

Religions can be approached historically, sociologically, psychologically, structurally, literarily, ethnographically and/or any combination of these methodologies. In this way, the discipline draws insights from virtually all academic fields. The unique element may be that any given audience potentially holds members who are existentially invested in the discussion. This is the infamous “insider/outsider” problem in religious studies and could have a bearing on the speech and its tone.

Generally, in an academic setting in a state school, the most prevalent setting is an “Introduction to World Religions” course in which between three and six religions are systematically presented in a factual manner. In this case, a preliminary statement of purpose may be necessary to explain a neutrality of approach that some students may misunderstand, especially in locations where students come from varying backgrounds where differing traditions are or have historically been in conflict.

Thus when considering an audience that is of mixed background, special attention should be paid to the nature of the matter under discussion and the necessity of explaining vocabulary which is more often than not in a language foreign to the audience. Likewise a bit of homework...
before a presentation can help the presenter be aware of buzz-words arising from controversies within the religion. Any presenter should take special care to be informed regarding the authority of any sources used in a presentation and of sectarian leanings (if applicable). This can be a daunting element in courses where a student is called upon as an “outsider” to make a presentation to an audience containing “insiders.” Often, in an academic setting, students are sympathetic in these areas as long as the presenter maintains a fair approach. Nonetheless, a student should have a repertoire of polite ways to move discussions forward.

Often in a civic setting, the purpose is either to a group of “insiders” who may have an interest in a particular question regarding their own tradition and they have called on a religious scholar to explain some arcane point regarding their own tradition. In this case as an “expert” in a particular point, it is good to find out why it is of interest and if it reflects a need for a scholar’s input. This may also be a propitious moment to consider one’s status as an insider or an outsider.

Another civic setting is one of “Religious Dialogue.” Often a scholar of religion is invited to sit in on a panel where her or his expertise in more than one religion is the operant element. These situations can be the most fun and the most enlightening because they usually draw people who have a curiosity for insights into other religions and sincerely wish to make inter-faith contacts. Problems arise easily, however, when points of inter-faith rivalry arise. Certainly try to find out the purpose of such a meeting and what faiths will be represented (and who is sponsoring the event) and do your homework before you arrive. It would probably be best to avoid a conference entitled “Why Jim Jones is the Fulfillment of All Religions,” sponsored by the People’s Temple and offering free kool-aid for all who attend.