The plight and privilege of the modern languages major is to master another language or languages as close as possible to one’s own mother tongue. This means that what others usually find hard about speaking in public or just in an everyday situation, becomes exponentially more complicated when you have to use another code to express your ideas, opinions, or beliefs. By now you know that being able to “speak” in another language goes beyond merely stringing together the necessary words. The speaker must understand the cultures that find expression in that language. This is important for two reasons: to make oneself really understood when addressing an audience of native speakers of that language, and to be able to accurately reflect the cultures of that language when speaking in one’s own mother tongue to an audience who is not conversant in that language. As the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (2001) point out, as a result of being a modern language(s) major and becoming proficient in another language(s), you will gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures, connect with other disciplines and acquire information, develop insight into the nature of language and culture, and participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world. In one way or another you will be called on to “speak.” What does this mean for you? Let’s see.

Throughout your university years and later on in your career and other spheres of life you will find yourself as a speaker in a variety of formal and informal contexts, including but not limited to the following:

- Class participation and presentations
- Interpersonal communication: personal and professional
- Conference presentations: domestic and abroad
- Diverse communities
- International organizations

As a consequence, you will likely find yourself speaking to different audiences, that will range from professional colleagues and peers, to possibly multicultural and multilingual groups, and international organizations, to name a few.

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.
Moreover, the purposes of your speaking will also be varied, not only because of your future interests and profession, but due to the fact that many times you will be regarded as a bridge between different cultures and peoples. You might speak for:

- Advocacy
- Community resources
- International collaboration
- Research implementation
- Intercultural communication

You will see that your chosen language(s) of study will open the door to many interests whether they be personal or professional, and you will find yourself speaking about many and varied topics that go beyond the field of language studies, and the literary, cultural and linguistic issues pertaining to it. But don’t worry! You don’t need to know all the lingo of every field in your language(s) of study, just as you don’t know it in your own language. You will discover your interests and your passions and you will find that your language(s) of study as well as the knowledge of how to be an effective speaker will serve you well, regardless of the professional field(s) you choose.

Just remember that no matter the topic, the context, the purpose, the audience or the language(s) you “speak,” you will need to pay attention to form, content, and delivery. Your continued language study will help you with the first, your interests and professional career will give you the second, and consulting with the Speaking Center will help you with the third.