Since literature instructors study and write about language, the discipline has a special responsibility to teach students, especially future teachers, the art of public speaking. Effective speaking is a vital skill, and upper-division literature classes may contain several distinct presentations, including the formal conference essay, the team project or debate, or even a teaching demonstration. The best speakers in the discipline follow the basic rules of all public speaking. In all cases, preparation is crucial and begins with outlining and practicing a speech, along with paying attention to such essentials of delivery as appearance, pronunciation, eye contact, and physical deportment. A memorable introductory gesture or even a nicely crafted joke can launch a presentation that successfully explains a literary concept or text in an engaging and lively manner. Ultimately, the chief objective of the presentation recalls the well-constructed thesis with its argumentative thrust, founded on close readings of the text that link local elements (vocabulary, imagery, specific structural components) with the narrative as a whole.

Speaking about literature can serve a number of purposes, from explaining the composition and publishing history of a little-known text to researching the secondary literature on such classics as Pride and Prejudice and David Copperfield. Speakers may address texts that have been deemed non-literary, such as political satire, legal documents, and religious writings, or they may teach a segment of a canonical work to a group of peers. In this regard, summary may become as equally important as argument, but whatever the case, textual evidence remains paramount. Popular techniques for calling an audience’s attention to the text include the distribution of a handout containing key (and carefully chosen and relevant) passages that the speaker plans to discuss. Audience participation can be solicited at this point, especially if a speaker aims to instruct a group about a text or secondary resource. Textual passages also may be projected onto a screen, so long as the presenter can successfully

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.
pinpoint the most relevant lines and avoid the pitfall of lengthy quotations. Film clips represent still another option, particularly if one is addressing drama or other forms frequently adapted for the screen.

Unlike business presentations, speaking about literature can often be an informal exercise. In less formal settings, such as the classroom, speakers may move around the room, field questions, and communicate with an active audience. Preparation and practice are crucial to avoiding the anxiety that frequently strikes untutored speakers. Ineffective presentations usually evince, at bottom, a lack of preparedness, and frequently speakers will attempt to compensate by recycling textual material rather than actually engaging it. As a result, both speaker and audience run the risk of growing bored by the presentation. In the worst cases, a speaker may feel pressure to demonstrate complete coverage in order to make up for his lack of an outline or thesis—a setback that can affect speakers at all levels of the discipline. In order to avoid such pitfalls, speakers should transfer research and talking points to an outline that can be put aside when one segment of the presentation is concluded. They also should be intellectually prepared to be “on” for the duration of the presentation.

Many helpful tips are included in the USM Speaking Center’s handouts on public speaking. Located on the first floor of Cook Library, the Speaking Center staff prepares speakers to deliver successful presentations: go to www.usm.edu/speakingcenter/ for additional information, list of services, and hours.