The two most common kinds of speaking skills demanded of students in the discipline of English are speaking during informal discussion and speaking during prepared presentations. In a discussion-based course, student speech is literally the life-blood of the class. When students are asked to prepare a presentation they may be asked to prepare a formal conference paper or to take on the role of lecturer or discussion-leader role in relation to their peers. Whether presenting a conference paper or a class discussion, students at all levels can gain from the opportunity to speak confidently about literary works and can prepare themselves for future experiences in public speaking, whether on the topic of literature or not.

When participating in a class discussion, students can contribute most effectively to the discussion by using the suggestions and questions of their professor and their peers as a jumping off point for their own suggestions and ideas about the work. In discussing a work of literature, as with writing about a work of literature, one of the most crucial tools a student has is the work of literature itself. For this reason it is important to always bring the readings to class. Closely reading and attending to the form and expression of the literary text during class conversation is just as important as performing such an analysis during the writing process. In fact, one of the benefits of in-class discussion is the discursive quality of the experience. Rather than working alone with the novel or poem and wondering how convincing their ideas will be when they are read by their professor or peers later, students can learn from one another while testing out the plausibility of different interpretations with a live audience.

When it comes to giving formal presentations, the generic convention of the English literature conference paper is to read aloud a formal, written paper. In this case, the most important skill that a presenter needs is the ability to speak slowly and clearly, and to especially enunciate the most important points in his or her paper, so that at least some of the most important subtleties of the presenter’s analysis will be communicated to an audience whose members will usually not have a copy of the paper and will be relying entirely on their ears and note-taking skills to remember and comprehend the presenter’s argument. When students are asked to present in class, on the other hand, they may be asked by their professor to make a presentation that resembles more a lecture than a conference paper, or even to act as discussion leaders for the class. In this case, the professor is asking the student to take on the role of teacher and to figure out how to effectively communicate information to his or her peers. Clarity, simplicity and logical organization of the material being presented, adaptation to audience, and a confident verbal and non-verbal delivery style are crucial for the success of such a presentation.
Speaking plays a rather paradoxical role in the discipline of English: generally writing is privileged over speaking in the discipline, but at times speaking can make or break the progress of a student or scholar. The privileging of writing over speaking in English is suggested by the fact that peer-reviewed journal articles are valued more highly than conference papers, and that even at the undergraduate level students’ ability to write about literature is often rewarded more highly, or at least more tangibly, than their ability to speak about it (since the former is usually assessed by a specific grade on a specific paper, while the latter is often assessed more generally as part of “class participation”). At the same time, being able to orally express intelligent insights about a literary or critical work, or to intelligently answer a question about one’s work, ex tempore, is often considered a telling mark of an individual’s intellectual prowess and abilities, especially as that individual rises higher in the ranks of the discipline. Whether the speaker is a well-known professor answering questions after an invited lecture, an undergraduate student speaking up in class, or a job candidate explaining his or her dissertation in an interview, often in the discipline a person is judged more critically on his or her ability to express his or her thoughts on the spot than on the content of his or her prepared paper or thesis (whether written or presented orally). Thus, the most important advice I would give to members of my discipline at any level is not to see polished written work as the prize and speaking as an afterthought. Good speaking skills, whether during a prepared speech or an informal discussion, are crucial to academic success in the discipline of English.