Religious studies students, as they embark upon careers both within and outside academia, can expect numerous opportunities for public speaking to share and discuss ideas. Students continuing to study religion in graduate school and professionally in academia will be expected to share research findings at professional conferences as well as with non-academic general audiences. This sheet outlines particularities of this discipline as it pertains to public speaking.

Given that religious studies is an amalgamation of diverse subspecialties (e.g., Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, etc.) and methodological approaches (e.g., historical, anthropological, textual analytical, etc.), students will be expected to speak on very different religious traditions spanning any number of historical and contemporary contexts over the course of their careers. Students must be aware that academic colleagues may not be conversant with the specific terms and concepts of their research topics. Therefore, they should use and clearly explain only the most essential technical terms necessary for conveying the subject matter at hand. Also, it is customary for formal talks and presentations to be followed by question-and-answer sessions where speakers are expected to address audience questions in a free and extemporaneous manner. Even the delivery of formal talks is increasingly expected to be extemporaneous, fluid, and engaging rather than a word-for-word reading from a prepared text.

Speaking about religion at a secular, state-sponsored university requires that undergraduate researchers adopt an academic rather than faith-oriented approach towards their topics. There is a stark difference between what observers of human culture, including religion, refer to as the “emic” and “etic” approaches. The “emic” perspective is that of the religious practitioner while the “etic” is...
that of the unbiased researcher trying to understand beliefs and practices from “outside” the confines of the said tradition. Students should strive to adopt the latter perspective in their presentations. Rather than refuting or substantiating particular religious claims, students should contextualize specific beliefs and practices and offer concrete evidence and critical modes of analysis in discussing them.

To this aim, students should be careful in their choice of sources. While students will need to take into account the perspectives of religious insiders and consult sacred scriptures and the writings of religious practitioners, their sources should include articles and monographs from respected scholars in the field. Reading footnotes and endnotes of respected secondary sources is also a good way of locating additional materials helpful to a student’s research and presentations.