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Giving Your First Speech

Preparing Your Speech

Delivering Your Speech

Sample Speeches with
Commentary

You may be surprised to learn that one of the first assignments in your class is to give a speech. You say to yourself, “What am I going to do? I have barely started this course, yet I’m supposed to stand up in front of everyone and give a speech! I’ve only read a few pages in the textbook, and I don’t know much about public speaking. Where do I begin?”

If these are your thoughts, you aren’t alone. Most beginning speech students have a similar reaction. Fortunately, giving your first speech sounds a lot harder than it is. The purpose of this chapter is to help you get started on preparing and delivering your speech. Later chapters will expand on the subjects discussed here and will apply them to different kinds of speeches.

Preparing Your Speech

ice breaker speech

A speech early in the term designed to get students speaking in front of the class as soon as possible.

Usually a brief, simple presentation, the first assignment is often called an ice breaker speech because it is designed to “break the ice” by getting students up in front of the class as soon as possible. This is an important step because much of the anxiety associated with public speaking comes from lack of experience giving speeches. Once you have broken the ice by giving a speech, you will feel less anxious and will have taken the first step on the road to confidence.

DEVELOPING THE SPEECH

There are a number of possible assignments for the first speech. One is a speech of self-introduction that provides insight into the speaker’s background, personality, beliefs, or goals. In other cases, students are asked to introduce a classmate, rather than themselves. Some instructors require yet a different kind of speech. Make sure you understand exactly what your instructor requires.

Focusing Your Topic

No matter what kind of introductory speech you are assigned, be sure to focus your presentation sharply so it conforms to the assigned time limit. One of the most common mistakes students make on their first speech is trying to cover too much.

It would be impossible, for example, to tell your audience everything about your life in a two- or three-minute speech. A better approach would be to focus on one or two events that have helped define who you are—competing in the state track meet, tutoring disadvantaged children, getting your first job, and the like. This allows you to make a few well-developed points about a clearly defined subject.

On the other hand, avoid the temptation to narrow the focus of your topic too much. Few listeners would be pleased to hear a two- or three-minute discussion of advanced trumpet-playing techniques. Such a speech would be too specialized for most classroom audiences.

Developing Your Topic

Once you have a topic for your speech, be creative in developing it. Think of ways to structure the speech so it will be interesting and meaningful to your audience. Look, for example, at the sample speeches with commentary at the end of this chapter. The first speaker explains aspects of his personality by referring to three of the apps on his cell phone. The second speaker uses the notion of a fork in the road when introducing one of her classmates. In both cases, the speakers found a creative way to frame their information.

Another possibility is to think of ways you can make your presentation mysterious or suspenseful. Suppose you are telling the audience about meeting a celebrity, visiting a famous place, or participating in a newsworthy event. Rather than identifying the celebrity at the outset, you might save his or her name for the end of your speech. As your story unfolds, tantalize your classmates with clues about your celebrity’s gender, physical characteristics, special talents, and the like, but keep the name secret until the last moment.

Audiences are also interested in dangerous situations, adventure, and drama. If your task is to introduce a fellow student, find out if she or he has ever been in danger. Suppose your classmate was caught in a flood or spent



Your first speech provides a foundation for speeches you will give later. As you develop your skills, you will find yourself able to speak confidently and with strong eye contact in class and out.

a year in Africa with the Peace Corps. The details would make excellent material for a speech.

If you think about it, every person has faced risk, done the unusual, or triumphed over hardship. Try to find ways to include such fascinating experiences in your speech.

You can also make your speech interesting by using colorful, descriptive language. One speaker used this technique when introducing a fellow student, named Alexa, to the class. The speaker began by saying:

The spotlight shines. The music blares. The crowd cheers. The colors, bright and vibrant, bleed together as Alexa and her partner sail around the dance floor. Her partner touches her hand and her waist, but only briefly. He then spins her away, and she glides across the floor in what seems like a single motion. Alexa has worked many weeks for this moment. Alexa, you see, is a championship ballroom dancer.

The speaker could have said, “Alexa is a terrific ballroom dancer and finds it quite thrilling.” Instead, the speaker painted a word picture so listeners could visualize the dance floor, the brilliant colors of the costumes, and the excitement of the competition as Alexa and her partner perform in perfect symmetry. Colorful and concrete illustrations like this are always more interesting than dull language and abstract generalizations.

You might wonder whether you should use humor to make your first speech entertaining. Audiences love witty remarks, jokes, and funny situations, but like anything else, humor is effective only when done well. It should flow naturally out of the speech content rather than being contrived. If you are not normally a funny person, you are better off giving a sincere, enthusiastic speech and leaving out the jokes. In no case should you include humor that involves obscenity, embarrasses individuals, or negatively stereotypes groups of people. The best kind of humor gently pokes fun at ourselves or at universal human foibles.

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View the introduction from “Gotta Dance” in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 4.1).

ORGANIZING THE SPEECH

Regardless of your topic, a speech usually has three main parts—an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In Chapter 10, we will discuss each of these parts in detail. Here we focus on what you need to know about them as you prepare your introductory speech.

Introduction

introduction

The opening section of a speech.

Your first job in the introduction is to get the attention and interest of the audience. You can do this by posing a question, telling a story, making a startling statement, or opening with a quotation. The purpose of all these methods is to create a dramatic, colorful opening that will make your audience want to hear more.

For an example, look at the speech excerpt on Video 4.2 in the online Media Library for this chapter. The speaker's assignment was to present a narrative about a significant experience in his life. This is how he began:

I never knew the secret until I took a year off from school, traveled halfway around the world, and lived for a year in Thailand. I was there to teach English, but the trip ended up being much more than a job. It was a voyage of discovery. I didn't know exactly what I would find, but I came home with a truly valuable secret.

After this introduction, the audience was eager to hear more about the speaker's secret.

In addition to gaining attention and interest, the introduction should orient your listeners toward the subject matter of your speech. In the longer speeches you will give later in the term, you will usually need to provide an explicit preview statement that identifies the main points to be discussed in the body of your speech. (For example, "Today I will inform you about the symptoms, causes, and treatment of sleep apnea.")

Because your introductory speech is so short, you may not need a detailed preview statement. But you still need to give your audience a clear sense of your topic and purpose. (Be sure to check with your instructor to see what kind of preview statement he or she prefers for the introductory speech.)

Body

body

The main section of a speech.

After getting the audience's attention and revealing your topic, you are ready to move into the body of your speech. In some speeches, the body seems to organize itself. If you are telling a story about a significant experience in your life, you will relate the events chronologically, in the order they occurred.

But not all speeches follow such a format. Suppose you have been asked to give a presentation introducing a classmate. You could organize the most important biographical facts about your subject in chronological order, but this might result in a dull, superficial speech: "Maria was born in Los Angeles in 1993, attended elementary school from 1998 to 2005, and graduated from high school in 2011."

A better way of structuring your remarks might be to discuss three of the most important aspects of Maria's life, such as hobbies, career goals, and family. This is called the topical method of organization, which subdivides the speech topic into its natural, logical, or conventional parts. Although there are many other ways to organize a speech, your first presentation will probably use either chronological or topical order.

chronological order

A method of speech organization in which the main points follow a time pattern.

topical order

A method of speech organization in which the main points divide the topic into logical and consistent subtopics.

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View the beginning of "The Secret" in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 4.2).

Regardless of the method of organization you use, remember to limit the number of main points in the body of your speech. In a two-minute presentation, you won't have time to develop more than two or three main points.

Once you have selected those points, make sure each one focuses on a single aspect of the topic. For example, if your first point concerns your classmate's hometown, don't introduce irrelevant information about her job or favorite music. Save this material for a separate point, or cut it.

Try to make your main points stand out by introducing each with a transition statement. In a speech about a classmate, you might begin the first main point by saying:

Rico's family moved a great deal throughout his childhood.

When you reach the second point, you might introduce it like this:

Moving a lot led to Rico's outgoing nature and confidence in making friends. In fact, he has friends all around the world with whom he corresponds regularly over Facebook.

You have now let your audience know that the first main point is over and that you are starting the second one. The third main point might begin as follows:

Corresponding with people all over the world is more than just a hobby for Rico, since he is majoring in international relations.

Transitions such as these will help your audience keep track of your main points.

Conclusion

When you finish discussing your final point, you will be ready to move into your conclusion. You need to accomplish two tasks in this part of the speech: let the audience know you are about to finish and reinforce your central idea.

If possible, end on a dramatic, clever, or thought-provoking note. For example, when talking about his "secret" in the speech mentioned earlier, the student devoted the body of his presentation to explaining his experiences in Thailand and how they opened his eyes to the universality of human experience. Then, in his conclusion, he wrapped up by saying:

I needed to be in an entirely different culture to learn the secret—that despite differences in ancestry, language, history, and religion, human beings are pretty much the same wherever they might be. I thought I was going to meet people who were totally alien to me. Instead, I found that family, friendship, kindness, and community are as important on one side of the world as on the other.

The final lines end the speech on a strong note and underscore why the speaker's time in Thailand was so important.

Delivering Your Speech

Once you have selected a subject and organized the content into a clear structure, it is time to work on the delivery of your speech. Because this is your first speech of the term, no one expects you to give a perfectly polished

main points

The major points developed in the body of a speech.

transition

A word or phrase that indicates when a speaker has finished one thought and is moving on to another.

conclusion

The final section of a speech.

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View the ending of "The Secret" in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 4.3).

When developing your first speech, plan what you want to say, organize the material clearly, practice thoroughly, and use the extemporaneous method of delivery. You may be surprised at how much you enjoy the experience.



presentation. Your aim is to do as well as possible while laying a foundation you can build upon in later speeches. With this in mind, we'll look briefly at the extemporaneous method of speech delivery, the importance of rehearsing your speech, and some of the major factors to consider when speech day arrives.

SPEAKING EXTEMPORANEOUSLY

extemporaneous speech

A carefully prepared and rehearsed speech that is presented from a brief set of notes.

You might be inclined, as are many beginning speakers, to write out your speech like an essay and read it word for word to your listeners. The other extreme is to prepare very little for the speech—to wing it by trusting to your wits and the inspiration of the moment. Neither approach is appropriate.

Most experts recommend speaking extemporaneously, which combines the careful preparation and structure of a manuscript presentation with the spontaneity and enthusiasm of an unrehearsed talk. Your aim in an extemporaneous speech is to plan your major points and supporting material without trying to memorize the precise language you will use on the day of the speech.

The extemporaneous method requires you to know the content of your speech quite well. In fact, when you use this method properly, you become so familiar with the substance of your talk that you need only a few brief notes to remind you of the points you intend to cover. The notes should consist of key words or phrases, rather than complete sentences and paragraphs. This way, when you are in front of the audience, you will tell them what you know about the topic in your own words.

Prepare your notes by writing or printing key terms and phrases on index cards or sheets of paper. Some instructors require students to use

index cards because they are small and unobtrusive, don't rustle or flop over, and can be held in one hand, which allows the speaker to gesture more easily. Other teachers recommend sheets of paper because you can get more information on them and because it is easier to print out computer files on paper. If you are unsure what your instructor prefers, ask well before your speech is due.

Whether you use index cards or sheets of paper, your notes should be large enough to read clearly at arm's length. Many experienced speakers double- or triple-space their notes because this makes them easier to see at a glance. Write or print on only one side of the index card or paper, and use the fewest notes you can manage and still present the speech fluently and confidently.

You can see an example of extemporaneous delivery on Video 4.4 in the online Media Library for this chapter. The student is giving a speech of self-introduction using a personal object—in this case, a softball glove—to explain something important about herself. As you view the excerpt, notice that even though the speaker's points are well planned, she is not tied to a manuscript. When talking about her glove, she sets down her notes and points to things on the glove that reflect different aspects of her life. All the while, she speaks directly to her classmates and makes strong eye contact with them.

At first, it may seem very demanding to deliver a speech extemporaneously. In fact, though, you use the extemporaneous method in everyday conversation. Do you read from a manuscript when you tell your friends an amusing story? Of course not. You recall the essential details of your story and tell the tale to different friends, on different occasions, using somewhat different language each time. You feel relaxed and confident with your friends, so you just tell them what is on your mind in a conversational tone. Try to do the same thing in your speech.

REHEARSING THE SPEECH

When you watch a truly effective extemporaneous speaker, the speech comes out so smoothly that it seems almost effortless. In fact, that smooth delivery is the result of a great deal of practice. As your speech course progresses, you will gain more experience and will become more comfortable delivering your speeches extemporaneously.

The first time you rehearse your introductory speech, however, you will probably struggle. Words may not come easily, and you may forget some things you planned to say. Don't become discouraged. Keep going and complete the speech as well as you can. Concentrate on gaining control of the ideas rather than on trying to learn the speech word for word. You will improve every time you practice.

For this approach to work, you must rehearse the speech out loud. Looking silently over your notes is not enough. Speaking the words aloud will help you master the content of your talk. Once you have a fairly good grasp of the speech, ask friends or family members to listen and to give constructive feedback. Don't be shy about asking. Most people love to give their opinion about something, and it's crucial that you rehearse with a live audience before presenting the speech in class.

As you practice, time your speech to make sure it is neither too long nor too short. Because of nerves, most people talk faster during their first speech

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View an excerpt from "A Heart Worn on My Hand" in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 4.4).

than when they practice it. When you rehearse at home, make certain your speech runs slightly longer than the minimum time limit. That way, if your speaking rate increases when you get in front of your classmates, your speech won't end up being too short.

PRESENTING THE SPEECH

Delivering your first speech can be a nerve-wracking experience. As your class proceeds and you gain more experience, your confidence (and skill) will grow by leaps and bounds. We will take a detailed look at speech delivery in Chapter 13, but here are a few things to concentrate on in your first presentation.

Starting Your Speech

When it is your turn to speak, move to the front of the room and face the audience. Assume a relaxed but upright posture. Plant your feet a bit less than shoulder-width apart and allow your arms to hang loosely by your side. Arrange your notes before you start to speak. Then take a moment to look over your audience and to smile. This will help you establish rapport with your classmates from the start.

Gestures

Once you are into the speech, feel free to use your hands to gesture, but don't try to plan all your gestures ahead of time. If you don't normally use your hands expressively during informal conversation, you shouldn't feel compelled to gesture a lot during your speech. Whatever gestures you do use should flow naturally from your feelings.

Above all, don't let your gestures or bodily actions distract listeners from your message. Do your best to avoid nervous mannerisms such as twisting your hair, wringing your hands, shifting your weight from one foot to the other, rocking back and forth, or tapping your fingers on the lectern. No matter how nervous you feel, try to appear calm and relaxed.

Eye Contact

During your talk, look at your classmates as often as you can. One of the major reasons for speaking extemporaneously is to maintain eye contact with your audience. In your own experience, you know how much more impressive a speaker is when she or he looks at the audience while speaking.

If you have practiced the extemporaneous method of delivery and prepared your notes properly, you should be able to maintain eye contact with your audience most of the time. Be sure to look to the left and right of the room, as well as to the center, and avoid the temptation to speak exclusively to one or two sympathetic individuals.

If you are too nervous to look your classmates directly in the eye, try looking just to the side of each person, or just above his or her head. In this way, you will convey a sense of eye contact while easing your nerves.

gestures

Motions of a speaker's hands or arms during a speech.

eye contact

Direct visual contact with the eyes of another person.

Voice

Try to use your voice as expressively as you would in normal conversation. Concentrate on projecting to the back of the room and, despite your nerves, fight the temptation to race through your speech. If you make a conscious effort to speak up, slow down, and project clearly, you will be on the right track to an effective presentation.

Look, for example, at Video 4.5 in the online Media Library for this chapter, which presents excerpts from two ice breaker speeches. Neither speaker had taken a public speaking class before, yet both rose to the occasion by focusing on the basic elements of delivery we have just discussed. As you watch the video, notice how both—despite their nervousness—convey a sense of poise and confidence, establish strong eye contact with their classmates, and use the extemporaneous method of delivery. Work on doing the same in your first speech.

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View excerpts from “Rhymes with Orange” and “My Life from Toe to Head” in the online Media Library for this chapter (Video 4.5).

Dealing with Nerves

As we saw in Chapter 1, it’s normal to be nervous before delivering a speech of any kind. By applying the tips presented in that chapter for managing stage fright, you can stand up for your speech primed for success.

If you have butterflies in your stomach while you wait to go to the lectern, sit quietly in your chair and take several slow, deep breaths. You can also help reduce your tension by tightening and relaxing your leg muscles, or by squeezing your hands together and then releasing them. Keep in mind that while you may be anxious about giving your speech, usually your nervousness will not be visible to your audience.

All the topics discussed in this chapter are developed in much more detail in the rest of this book. For now, keep your introductory assignment in perspective. Remember that neither your audience nor your instructor expects perfection. You are not a professional speaker, and this is the first speech of the class. Do your best on the assignment and have fun with it. Plan what you want to say, organize the material clearly, practice thoroughly, and use the extemporaneous method of delivery. You may be surprised by how much you enjoy giving your first speech.

Sample Speeches with Commentary

The following presentations were prepared by students in beginning speech classes at the University of Wisconsin. The first is a speech of self-introduction; the second is a speech introducing a classmate. As you read the speeches, notice how clearly they are organized and how creatively they are developed. You can watch the delivery of both speeches in the online Media Library for this chapter.

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View “There’s an App for That” and “Fork in the Road” in the online Media Library for this chapter (Videos 4.6 and 4.7).

There's an App for That



COMMENTARY

The introduction captures attention and reveals the topic. By answering questions with the phrase “There’s an app for that,” the speaker provides a creative touch that runs through the entire speech. He ends the introduction by previewing the points he will discuss in the body.

Each main point in the body is clearly stated and discussed. As you can see from the online video, the speaker communicates sincerely and with good eye contact. His wry sense of humor about his family adds a nice touch.

As the speech proceeds, notice how the speaker uses his favorite apps to provide insight into his life, rather than to talk about the apps themselves.

The speaker completes the body by explaining his love of music. Information about activities and hobbies is often included in a speech of self-introduction.

The conclusion summarizes the speaker’s main points. It then ties the entire speech together by returning to the question asked in the introduction and answering it with one last refrain of “There’s an app for that.”



SPEECH

A Portuguese dictionary? There’s an app for that. How to cook so she’s impressed? Yeah, there’s an app for that. A game to play when class gets boring? There’s an app for that, too. But is there an app for me, Michael Taylor? I’d like to think there are a few. Some of the things that make me who I am can be found by looking at the Photobucket, ESPN, and Pandora apps on my iPhone.

The first app you’d find would be Photobucket, which my little sister made me download. It holds the newest photos of life back home and allows my sister to share her photography talents with me. My family is warm and caring, and half the time they drive me nuts, but what is family for anyway? I know I can turn to them for anything, and I feel very lucky to have grown up in a family where there was always someone to support me.

Because I’m an athlete, I’d be lost without my ESPN Score-Center app. It gives me up-to-the-minute scores on any sport. I played football, baseball, and basketball in high school, and I would rather be on a team than compete by myself. Through sports, I have learned the importance of being part of something bigger than myself. I’ve also learned how to lose with dignity and how to win with class.

Finally, there’s the Pandora app, which makes it super easy to explore new songs and groups. I’ve been involved with music ever since I started playing piano as a kid. Now I play jazz guitar, and I sing. While in high school, I performed with a couple of groups around the Twin Cities, and I really enjoyed it. As for here in Madison, I’m still looking for opportunities to showcase my talents.

So, through the Photobucket, ESPN, and Pandora apps I can answer my initial question: Is there really an app for Michael Taylor? Yeah, there’s an app for that.

Fork in the Road



COMMENTARY

This paragraph is the speaker's introduction. The opening quotation gains attention, while the next sentence relates the quotation to the speaker's audience. Then the speaker identifies the central idea by noting that her classmate Bethany is facing her own fork in the road.

The body of this speech contains two main points, each of which deals with a possible direction for Bethany's life. The first focuses on her passion for art. As is evident from the online video, the speaker presents her ideas extemporaneously. She has strong eye contact, excellent vocal variety, and a personable manner of delivery.

The second main point deals with Bethany's passion for medicine. The story of J.C. explains why Bethany is so interested in medicine as a possible career. When well delivered, stories are an excellent way to make ideas concrete and to get listeners involved in a speech.

The speaker concludes by restating the central theme of her speech. Echoing language from the introduction gives the speech a strong sense of unity. The final words end on a positive note by stating that whichever path Bethany chooses, it will be "a road to success."



SPEECH

Inspirational speaker Liz Murray once said, a "fork in the road happens over a hundred times a day, and the choices you make will determine the shape of your life." At one point or another, we all come to that fork in the road, when we are forced to choose between two paths, not sure where either will lead. Our classmate Bethany is now at that point, forced to decide between her two passions: art and medicine.

From an early age, Bethany has been passionate about art. She has been drawing since the age of three and has continued to improve her skills ever since. Over the years, she has won many awards for her drawings, including the Wisconsin Scholastic Art Award. Bethany draws people, places, and things that she sees on a daily basis in the world around her. Drawing allows her to relax and to escape from the stress of life. And now, because of her passion, she is considering making art her career.

In addition to art, however, Bethany is also passionate about medicine. She dreams about one day doing medical mission work in Africa. She is motivated in part by her friend J.C., a Rwanda refugee whose leg was severely injured in an explosion about ten years ago. For eight years, J.C. lived with bomb-shell fragments in his lower leg. It was only two years ago, when he and his mother moved to the United States, that he was finally able to have surgery. Bethany's friendship with J.C. has inspired her to help those who lack sufficient medical care and to make her think that a career in medicine is right for her.

It can be said that Bethany has reached her fork in the road. She has a passion for drawing and a passion for medicine. Will she choose to follow her love for art and pursue a career as an artist? Or will she choose to follow her love for medical mission work and pursue a career as a doctor? It's hard to know right now, but either path Bethany chooses will surely be a road to success.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to help you get ready for your ice breaker speech. Later chapters will look more closely at all the aspects of speech preparation and delivery discussed here.



Once you know the exact assignment for your ice breaker speech, you can start working out your ideas. Focus on a limited number of main points and develop them creatively. Your speech will have three parts—introduction, body, and conclusion. Use transition statements to help the audience keep track of your points as the speech progresses.

Your teacher will probably ask you to deliver the speech extemporaneously. This means that the speech is carefully prepared in advance, but the exact language is chosen at the moment of delivery. To be successful, you will need to rehearse the speech multiple times to make sure you have full command of it.

When speech day comes, you will almost surely have butterflies in your stomach. Remember that nervousness is normal. Concentrate on communicating with your audience, rather than on worrying about your nerves. Try to appear calm and relaxed on the outside, no matter how you feel on the inside. Establish eye contact with the audience, use your voice expressively, and make sure your gestures and mannerisms do not distract from your message.

Key Terms

ice breaker speech (64)

introduction (66)

body (66)

chronological order (66)

topical order (66)

main points (67)

transition (67)

conclusion (67)

extemporaneous speech (68)

gestures (70)

eye contact (70)

Review Questions

After reading this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What two major steps are discussed in this chapter for developing your introductory speech?
2. When organizing your introductory speech, you should divide it into what three sections?
3. What method of delivery does this chapter recommend for your introductory speech?
4. What steps should you take when rehearsing your first speech?
5. What five elements of speech delivery are discussed in this chapter with regard to presenting your first speech?

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For further review, go to the LearnSmart study module for this chapter.

Exercises for Critical Thinking

1. Examine the two sample speeches with commentary on pages 72–73. Choose one, and answer the following questions about it.
 - a. How does the opening paragraph gain the attention of the audience, introduce the subject of the speech, and preview the main points to be discussed in the body?
 - b. How clearly is the body of the speech organized? What does the speaker do to help listeners follow the progression of ideas?
 - c. How does the speaker conclude? Does the conclusion reinforce the central theme of the speech?
2. Are there occasions outside the classroom on which you might give a speech of self-introduction? Identify such an occasion and explain how you might apply the principles of introductory speeches discussed in this chapter.