Imagine you are a small child lying on the dirt roads of Calcutta, India. You are severely dehydrated because no one you ask will offer you some of their water. You are weak and malnourished because you have not eaten for days. You are hysterically and painfully coughing from your tuberculosis. You have no family, no friends, and, it seems, no future.

As you begin to shut your eyes, gentle but strong arms reach out and pick you up off the dirt road. You regain enough strength to focus your eyes on the face before you. Her face is wrinkled with age and love and is like a ray of light in your dark world.

This is a familiar story for the many poor and needy of India that were touched by Mother Teresa. Her death in September of 1997 touched the nation and the world almost as much as her life had. I chose to speak about Mother Teresa today, because, like many people, I was moved by her compassion for the poor and her devotion to the needy. Through my research I have learned more about her outstanding character. In my speech, I would like to focus on her mission in life to serve humanity, the amazing work she accomplished, and the vision and hope she left behind. Let's begin with her mission in life.

Mother Teresa always felt a calling from God to serve in the world. She was born to an Albanian building contractor and his wife in 1910. In her quest to serve the needy, she joined the Sisters of Loretto at the age of eighteen. They were a community of Irish nuns who ran schools in India. Even there, she felt that her work was too limited, and she soon left her religious order to work in the slums of Calcutta. It was there that she established her goal in life. In her own words, she wanted to minister to the “unwanted, unloved, and uncared for.”

With a small group of nuns at her side, she ran a makeshift clinic where the poor and dying could come to die in peace. She led this group, known as the Missionaries of Charity, to live out a simple life and to devote themselves entirely to the poorest of the poor. She and her sisters lived in poverty with only a single change of clothes and minimal possessions.

Her mission did not seek fame or wealth. It sought only comfort for the dying, the abandoned, and the outcast. When given a white Lincoln Continental from Pope Paul VI, she immediately auctioned it off to build a leper colony. Her only ambition, as biographer Srinivasa Murthy has written, was “responding to the human need, hour by hour, day by day, whether the need” was “for food, for love, for prayer, or for medicine.”

In fulfilling her mission, Mother Teresa became known all over the world as a living saint because of her abundant good works. In Calcutta, she established homes for the dying and orphanages for abandoned children. In Bengal, she built a leper colony where she
could aid the frail and the sick. In war-torn Beirut in 1982, she stopped a siege so she could rescue handicapped orphans from a nearby hospital.

8 Everywhere her calling took her, she was a savior in desperate times. Although she was a small woman, barely five feet tall, she was, to quote biographer Kathryn Spink, “strong-willed, resolute, determined and totally fearless, because God was on her side.”

9 In 1979 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She, of course, skipped the lavish dinner and asked that her monetary prize of $190,000 be donated to the poor. In 1985 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Five years later, her health began to fade, but her compassion never did. Even after two heart attacks, she was reelected by her sisters to head the Missionaries of Charity. On September 5, 1997, at the age of 87, Mother Teresa passed away. Her funeral was attended by over 200 foreign delegates from 23 countries and was broadcast live on television across the world.

10 Although no longer able to carry on her work personally, Mother Teresa left behind a vision—a bright light that continues to inspire compassion for the poor and needy. In this light, AIDS victims feel love from an otherwise indifferent society. In this light, battered women are given a place to feel safe from the horrors of their lives. In this light, drug addicts find hope in an otherwise bleak future. As she stated, “Right here in the United States, I'm sure you know better than I do, there are many poor people that need love and compassion, that need your hands to serve them, that need your hearts to love them.”

11 Since her death, Mother Teresa's compassion for the needy has continued to flow into the hearts of others who have decided to be a part of her mission. The original charity begun by Mother Teresa in 1950 now numbers more than 4,500 sisters in 126 countries around the world. The lasting appeal of her mission was stated well by biographer Anne Sebba, who wrote, shortly before Mother Teresa's death, that “She is, so transparently, someone who eschews the values of our age where success in life is measured by the number of trappings acquired, and in doing so she offers us hope that spirituality, not materialism, will triumph, hope that there are higher standards we can aspire to, and hope that maybe one day all the children in the world will be fed.”

12 In conclusion, Mother Teresa followed a long road from her birth in Albania to her position as one of the most recognizable and beloved people on the globe. In her memorable life, she amazed the world with countless acts of mercy and compassion. To paupers, to lepers, to orphans, she was the mother of love. In the words of one of her biographers, she was “a spiritual giant . . . in a world torn with greed, selfishness, and oppression.”

13 Mother Teresa once said of herself, “By blood and origin I am Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus.”
Commentary

"Mother of Love" provides a good example of an informative speech about a person.

Specific Purpose: To inform my audience about the life of Mother Teresa.

Central Idea: In addition to the many good works she accomplished during her life, Mother Teresa left behind a vision that continues to inspire others to help the poor and needy.

Method of Organization: Topical

Introduction: The vivid scenario in the opening two paragraphs relates the topic directly to the audience and gets them involved in the speech. Paragraph 3 reveals the topic, establishes the speaker's credibility, and provides a clear preview of the main points to be covered in the body. In all respects, this is an outstanding introduction.

Body: Organized in topical order, the body contains three main points. The first summarizes the development of Mother Teresa's mission in life (paragraphs 4-6). The second focuses on the good works Mother Teresa achieved in fulfilling that mission (paragraphs 7-9). The third explains how Mother Teresa's vision has inspired others, after her death, to continue the work of her mission (paragraphs 10-11).

   In developing these points, the speaker uses a blend of historical facts, revealing anecdotes, and well-chosen quotations. Rather than recounting names, dates, and places as if she were writing an encyclopedia article, she highlights major aspects of Mother Teresa's life and achievements and explains those aspects clearly and engagingly.

Conclusion: The conclusion consists of paragraphs 11-12. Paragraph 11 provides an excellent summary of the speaker's main points, while paragraph 12 brings the speech to an end with a strong quotation from Mother Teresa herself.
Nothing to Sneze At

Jeffrey Moran

1 You feel it welling up inside you, this delicate tingling, as if your every nerve were firing at once. You want to grope for the newspaper, your homework—anything—but you no longer control your body.

2 These seconds of helpless anticipation seem like an eternity, but then the spell is broken. You crash forward, your muscles contracting like a fist, and you can’t even see that people are running away from you because something has forced your eyes shut.

3 And then it’s over. You relax. Your head is clear, your body under control.

4 I’m talking, of course, about sneezing. I come from a long line of sneezers. My father sneezed, and his father and his father’s father before him were all men for whom a blast from the nose was every bit as bracing as a plunge into the snow following a sauna.

5 This involuntary reflex known as the sneeze is not one of the burning mysteries of our time, but I’d like to tell you about some superstitions that have sprung up around sneezing and also let you know what’s actually happening when you sneeze. Finally, in the interests of social harmony, I’ll tell you how to sneeze safely and politely.

6 Sneezing is old. Citizens of the Roman Empire sneezed, but they were only following the tradition of the ancient Greeks, among them Aristotle, who considered the sneeze a favorable omen.

7 A sneeze worked wonders for Xenophon, the Greek historian and general. According to the Concise Dictionary of Ancient History, in 400 B.C. Xenophon, while still a mere foot-soldier, marched with the Greek army deep into hostile Persia, where the enemy slew all the Greek leaders and threatened to do the same to the confused troops when nightfall postponed the slaughter.

8 The desperate Greeks spent the night debating who should lead them in battle the next day. Xenophon rose to give a dramatic oration exhorting the men to follow him to liberty or to death. He spoke for an hour in the flickering firelight until a soldier to his right seconded his conclusion with a sneeze. Thinking this sneeze a favorable sign from the gods, the Greeks made Xenophon general, and when the sun rose the next morning, they marched to safety 10,000 strong behind their new leader.

9 Sneezing is seldom this dramatic, but many cultures echo the Greeks in their praise of the nose’s most conspicuous function. Indeed, the Encyclopedia of Occult Sciences, Superstitions, and Folklore devotes eleven tightly spaced, oversized pages to the subject. For
example, a Zulu who has just sneezed proclaims, “I am now blessed; the ancestral spirit is with me. It has come to me. Let me salute it, for it is he who causes me to sneeze.”

10 Sneezing in India provokes a shorter, but no less salutary, response. If you were walking down the dusty streets of Karim Nagar, for instance, and you sneezed, bystanders would shout, “Live!” and you, as a polite tourist, must reply, “Live with you!” Most Indians consider sneezing healthy, if not supernatural; it is the inability to sneeze that is cause for alarm. *Science* magazine reports Indian scientists have labeled this malady “asneezia” and are currently researching ways to artificially induce the healthy sneeze.

11 In the West, despite the cheerful, almost compulsive blessing we give anyone experiencing spontaneous nasal expulsion, the sneeze has long been regarded with suspicion. Some people, my grandmother among them, believe we say “Bless you” because the heart skips a beat when you sneeze. It’s true your eyes must close when you sneeze, but the heartbeat remains steady. I used to think we say “Bless you” because of the superstition that when you sneeze the soul exits through your nostrils. If no one blesses you, evil beings with a penchant for nasal drip will snatch your spiritual essence. Natives of Motlan and Mota in the South Pacific believe this, but our European blessing has a grimmer origin.

12 The Black Death of 590 A.D. left one half of Europe’s population dead. The bubonic plague responsible for this holocaust didn’t kill its victims without warning. Instead, it signified its presence by rosy rashes, swelling, and, as any medical student can tell you, telltale fits of sneezing. Since death so frequently followed sneezing, people began to say “Bless you”—a final blessing.

13 However differently a sneeze is reacted to throughout the world, its cause is generally the same: nasal irritation. Pollens from grass, trees, house dust, and a dozen other sources are basically harmless, but when they irritate the nose your body responds as if they were rampaging predators. In a case of mistaken identity and overkill, you inhale sharply and exhale with explosive force—up to 104 miles per hour.

14 Pollen is not the only culprit, though. The nose mistakes strong odors, sudden chills, and even bright lights for more dangerous parasites, and it tries to defend itself by banishing the intruders with a sneeze.

15 In addition to its physical causes, the *New York Times* reports a sneeze can also be brought on by psychological and emotional factors. If a man lunged at you with a knife, fear might make you sneeze. Once he left, your anguish and frustration over losing your valuables could cause you to sneeze again. If you decide to chase the criminal, bring along some tissues—the excitement could give you another sneezing fit.

16 In each of these cases, sneezing is assisting the nose in reaching equilibrium. Strong emotions can cause your nasal membranes to shrink or expand, and a sneeze brings you back to normal quickly and forcefully.

17 Occasionally, someone is blessed with an overly active equilibrating mechanism. In 1966 June Clark had a fit in which she sneezed every twelve seconds for 174 days. Before
she finally stopped, doctors had tried tranquilizers, narcotics, x-rays, muscle relaxants, shock treatment, and even hypnosis, which almost worked until she sneezed and broke the trance.

18  Sneezing will probably never give you the trouble it gave June Clark, but the odds are that sooner or later you’ll have to sneeze in a social setting. This can be especially uncomfortable given that no one carries a handkerchief any more—at least not in my social circle. Nevertheless, when you’re in a crowded room, don’t try to stifle or abort your sneeze in the interests of social propriety—you don’t want to stop a force going over 100 miles per hour. With the air pressure that builds up from a stifled sneeze, people have been known to get nosebleeds, pop blood vessels, or even go blind.

19  Instead, open your mouth while you sneeze so your nose doesn’t take all your force. Most important, cover your nose. Jane Brody writes in the New York Times that “An unimpeded sneeze sends two to five thousand bacteria-filled droplets into the air.” With a single sneeze, any one of us could raise this room’s bacterial count for the next forty-five minutes. Understandably, every etiquette theorist from Lord Chesterfield and Amy Vanderbilt to Eleanor Roosevelt and Miss Manners advocates being a quick draw with a handkerchief. Failing this, hold the hankie over your nose after the sneeze—it shows good faith.

20  Whatever the cause and whichever country you’re sneezing in, with practice and luck you’ll be able to cover your sneeze quickly and effectively. Then you can sit back and relax, waiting for someone to bless you, wish you gesundheit, or, if you’re in the right place at the right time, appoint you to high military command.
Nothing to Sneeze At  by Jeffrey Moran

Commentary

“Nothing To Sneeze At” is a top-notch informative speech. It is interesting, clearly organized, fits well within the informative speech guidelines.

Specific Purpose: To inform my audience about the superstitions associated with sneezing, the causes of sneezing, and the proper way to sneeze.

Central Idea: Sneezing has long been the subject of superstition, has a number of causes from pollen to strong emotions, and should be done safely and politely.

Method of Organization: Topical

Introduction: The introduction consists of paragraphs 1-5. After cleverly arousing curiosity and relating the topic to the audience in paragraphs 1-3, the speaker reveals his topic in paragraph 4 and previews the body of the speech in paragraph 5. His tongue-in-cheek approach to establishing credibility in paragraph 4 is consistent with the overall tone of the speech, but some listeners felt it should have been supplemented by a brief reference to the speaker’s research.

Body: The body is arranged topically and contains three main points, the first of which deals with superstitions that have sprung up around sneezing (paragraphs 6-12). This point is particularly effective because it casts new and interesting light on what would appear to be a mundane subject. The story about Xenophon (paragraphs 7-8) is a model of clear explanation. Rather than assuming the audience knew about Xenophon before the speech, the speaker provides all the necessary details. Yet he does so in a way that does not oversimplify the story for someone already familiar with it.

The statement in paragraph 9 that “the Encyclopedia of Occult Sciences, Superstitions, and Folklore devotes eleven tightly-spaced, oversized pages to the subject” of sneezing not only identifies the speaker’s source, but reinforces the importance of the subject. The final example of this section—about sneezing and the bubonic plague (paragraph 12)—is highly effective. Notice especially the dramatic impact of the final sentence: “Since death so frequently followed sneezing, people began to say, ‘Bless you’—a final blessing.”

The second main point in the body deals with the causes of sneezing (paragraphs 13-17). While the information about pollen is fairly ordinary, the speaker brings it alive through his use of colorful language. He follows this with the interesting observation that sneezing can also be caused by psychological and emotional factors. Rather than getting overly technical, however, he explains with a hypothetical example that personalizes the subject for his listeners (paragraph 15). The story of June Clark (paragraph 17) ends this section on a strong note.
It should also be noted how well the speaker uses connectives here (and throughout the speech) to help listeners keep track of his ideas. At the beginning of paragraph 13 he introduces the second main point with an excellent transition (“However differently a sneeze is reacted to throughout the world, its cause is generally the same: nasal irritation”). He then has a signpost (“Pollen is not the only culprit, though”) at the start of paragraph 14. Another transition at the start of paragraph 15 leads listeners from the physical causes of sneezing to its psychological and emotional causes.

The third main point explains how to sneeze politely and safely in a social setting (paragraphs 18-19). Its first observation—that stifling a sneeze can cause nosebleeds, popped blood vessels, even blindness (paragraph 18)—is an important bit of information that was new to most members of the audience. Indeed, it was so new that some thought the speaker should have presented a source here. Although the second observation—that a person should cover his or her nose when sneezing (paragraph 19)—is commonplace, it could not have been left out of the speech. Fortunately, rather than just saying, “You should cover your nose when you sneeze,” the speaker provides a wealth of colorful information that keeps the audience’s attention.

Conclusion: The conclusion consists of only two sentences (paragraph 20). The first sentence subtly reminds the audience of the main points discussed in the body. A good question for discussion is whether the speaker should have provided a more detailed summary here. One point of view holds that he did not need such a summary because the body of the speech was sufficiently clear and nontechnical. Another point of view holds that a summary is always helpful in the conclusion of an informative speech because it helps the audience remember what the speaker has said. Whatever one’s position on this question, there can be no doubt that the final sentence of the speech brings everything together and concludes on a spirited, upbeat note that gives the speech a sense of psychological unity.

It is also important to note that the conclusion—like so much of the speech—is related directly to the audience. One of the strongest features of this speech is that the speaker consistently personalizes his ideas. Rather than talking in abstract terms, he gets the audience involved by employing the terms “you” and “your.” Particularly effective examples of this occur in paragraphs 1-3, 10-11, 15, and 18-20. Indeed, by my count, the words “you” or “your” occur sixty times in the full speech. In addition, there are a number of references to “us,” “we,” and “our”—all of which reinforce the personal tone of the speech.