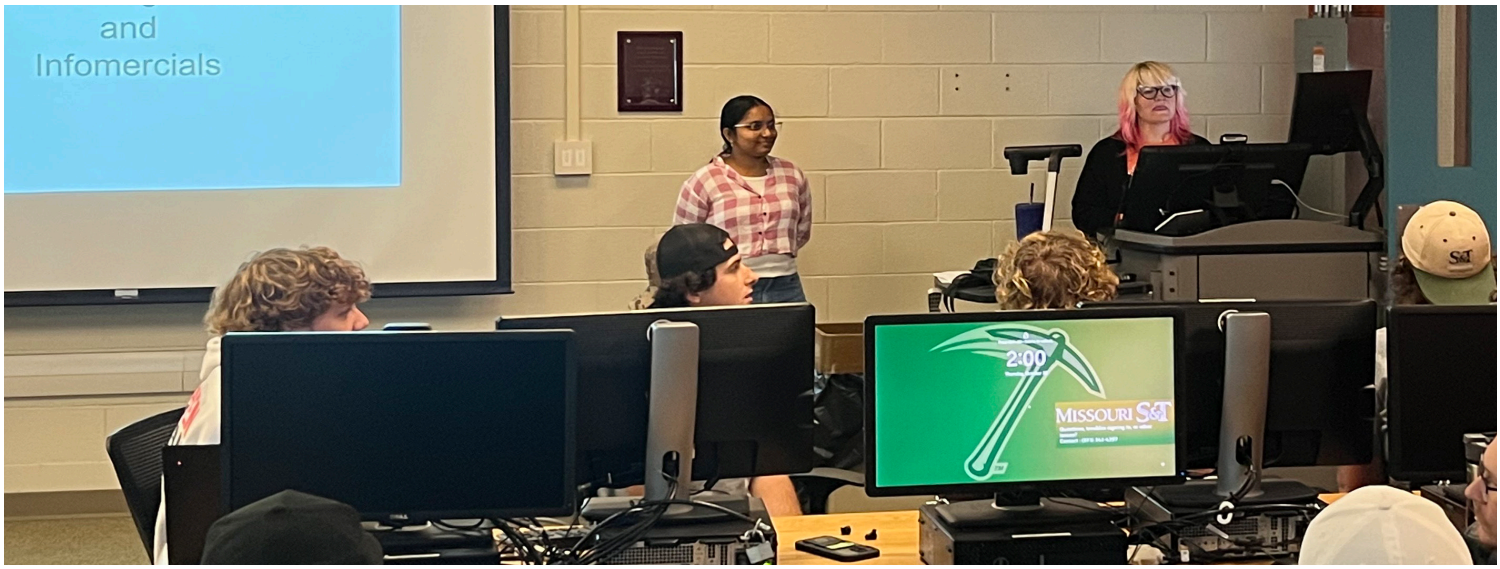
DEVAULT HELPS STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR INTERACTIONS



Professor Tracie Devault facilitates a Question of the Day interaction with students in her SP&MS 1185 Principles of Speech, the university's foundational speech course.

For more than a decade, Professor Tracie Devault has been teaching Missouri S&T students how to speak—and, more importantly, how to be heard. She has taught the university's foundational speech course for 11 years, beginning as a lecturer in the Department of Arts, Languages, and Philosophy. Since the Speech and Media Studies (SP&MS) program moved to the Department of English and Technical Communication (ETC) in 2021, she has continued teaching the course as an Assistant Teaching Professor in ETC.

While many STEM majors enroll in SP&MS 1185 Principles of Speech expecting to learn how to present technical projects, they quickly discover that the real lesson runs deeper: how to navigate human relationships with clarity, empathy, and confidence.

"You can be the best engineer on this campus," Professor Devault said, "but if you can't communicate your idea with somebody, it might as well be a bad idea. That's the bottom line. Nobody will understand it."

Building Lifelong Communication Skills

Missouri S&T's foundational speech course sits at the heart of the university's broader SP&MS program, and it covers far more than presentation skills. According to Devault, it is really about interpersonal communication: how students handle interviews, conflict, team dynamics, and even everyday conversation.

"How do you approach your boss to ask for a raise? How do you talk to the annoying guy in the office who won't shut up?" she asked. "Those are the real-life communication skills our students often struggle with. And that's the driving force behind my teaching."

This expansive philosophy imbues a program with a distinctive character at a STEM-focused institution. Devault argued that communication is not a soft skill but a professional core competency.

"The first person they talk to in a job interview is not going to be another engineer; it's going to be someone in HR," she said. "So they have to be able to break their knowledge down for someone who doesn't speak their language. That's a skill."

Professor Tracie Devault welcomes visitors to her office in the Humanities–Social Sciences Building at Missouri S&T.

Confidence Beyond the Classroom

Over the years, Devault has watched students carry these skills into their personal lives as well as their careers. She recalls one student who had always been too intimidated to speak to his girlfriend's father. After finishing her course, he told her he had finally been able to have a real conversation with the father.

"That class gave him the confidence to connect with someone who scared him," she said. "That's why I teach this. It's not just about presentations. It's about building relationships, even with people you disagree with or don't understand."

Many students report more immediate payoffs as well. After a class session on handshakes and body language, several told her they felt newly prepared for the career fair; some even credited the course with helping them secure interviews.

Teaching for a Changing Communication Landscape

Devault continually updates her curriculum to reflect the realities of modern communication. Students learn how to use AI tools like ChatGPT responsibly for brainstorming, practice-mediated communication across platforms such as Discord or WhatsApp, and examine how emojis function as nonverbal cues in digital spaces.

"Older generations write all these articles about how terrible your generation is at communicating," she said with a grin. "But they don't get it. Emojis and GIFs? That's just a different form of nonverbal communication. You're fluent in it, they aren't."

Generational awareness, she argued, is now a fundamental workplace skill. "You may need to soften your tone when speaking to someone older. Not everyone reads texts the same way. For example, punctuation can come across as aggressive to some people."

From Lecture Hall to Industry Simulation

To help students experience how communication operates in real professional contexts, Devault recently co-designed a hybrid course that merges speech with Intro to Engineering Design. The course uses project-based learning to simulate workplace scenarios such as client meetings, project briefs, and team check-ins.

"They're doing actual engineering projects, but through a communication lens," she explained. "We practice things like one-on-one check-ins, listening to client needs, and giving feedback. These are the kinds of conversations they'll have in any job."

For Devault, the course underscores a central message: communication isn't ancillary to engineering; it's woven into the practice of it.

Helping Students Manage Anxiety

Despite the practical focus, many students enter the course with a single fear: public speaking. Devault meets that anxiety with equal parts strategy and empathy. One daily practice, "question of the day," invites students to stand and answer a casual prompt,

such as their favorite recent movie. Over time, small moments of speaking build confidence for the moments that matter.

“Most of our students aren’t going to be motivational speakers. But in a meeting, when your boss asks, ‘Where are you on that project?’ you need to be able to respond clearly on the spot.”

Her toolkit also includes mindfulness meditation, power posing, and (until recently) the support of her late service dog, Angus, affectionately known as “the speech dog.”

“He’d walk over to nervous students during speeches and just sit at their feet,” she recalled. “It grounded them. I’m still looking for a dog that can fill those paws.”

A Vision for Speech and Media at S&T

Although the foundational speech course reaches many students, Devault hopes to expand options for those who want to study communication more deeply. She envisions advanced courses in public speaking, interpersonal communication, and mass communication offered more regularly, eventually building toward a dedicated track within the Bachelor of Science in English and Technical Communication.

“Students are seeing how communication intersects with media and human-computer interaction. There’s a real market for this. And now that we’ve got more faculty, I think we can build it out.”

Communication as Career Currency

At the end of each semester, Devault leaves her students with one lesson they may not expect from a required Speech class at a technical university.

“Don’t underestimate this skill. Technical ability is important, yes. But what sets you apart is how well you can explain your ideas. Technical skills will get you a job. Communication skills will get you a promotion.”

FACULTY BABY CONTEST

ETC graduate student Lilian Abirika won the faculty baby photo contest by correctly matching 15 of the 23 photos to current faculty in ETC, History, and Psychology. She received a $20 gift card, two T-shirts, an S&T pendant, and a mug. First-floor custodian Jerri Thompson proposed the idea for the contest. The photos were displayed on the second floor of the H-SS building in late September and early October 2025.