

## Better Public Speaking

### Becoming a Confident, Compelling Speaker

Whether we're talking in a team meeting or presenting in front of an audience, we all have to speak in public from time to time.

We can do this well or we can do this badly, and the outcome strongly affects the way that people think about us. This is why public speaking causes so much anxiety and concern.

The good news is that, with thorough preparation and practice, you can overcome your nervousness and perform exceptionally well. This article explains how!

### The Importance of Public Speaking

Even if you don't need to make regular **presentations** in front of a group, there are plenty of situations where good public speaking skills can help you advance your career and create opportunities.

For example, you might have to talk about your organization at a conference, make a speech after accepting an award, or teach a class to new recruits. Public speaking also includes online presentations or talks; for instance, when training a virtual team, or when speaking to a group of customers in an online meeting.

Good public speaking skills are important in other areas of your life, as well. You might be asked to make a speech at a friend's wedding, give a eulogy for a loved one, or inspire a group of volunteers at a charity event.

In short, being a good public speaker can enhance your reputation, boost your **self-confidence**, and open up countless opportunities.

However, while good public speaking skills can open doors, poor speaking skills can close them. For example, your boss might decide against promoting you after sitting through a poorly-delivered presentation. You might lose a valuable new contract by failing to connect with a prospect during a sales pitch. Or you could make a poor impression with your new team, because you trip over your words and don't look people in the eye.

Make sure that you learn how to speak well!

### Strategies for Becoming a Better Speaker

What's great about public speaking is that it's a learnable skill. As such, you can use the following strategies to become a better speaker and presenter.

#### Plan Appropriately

First, make sure that you **plan** your communication appropriately. Use tools like the **Rhetorical Triangle**, **Monroe's Motivated Sequence**, and the **7Cs of Communication** to think about how you'll structure what you're going to say.

When you do this, think about how important a book's first paragraph is; if it doesn't grab you, you're likely going to put it down. The same principle goes for your speech: from the beginning, you need to intrigue your audience.

For example, you could start with an interesting statistic, headline, or fact that pertains to what you're talking about and resonates with your audience. You can also use **story telling** as a powerful opener; our Expert Interviews with **Annette Simmons** and **Paul Smith** offer some useful tips on doing this.

Planning also helps you to **think on your feet**. This is especially important for unpredictable question and answer sessions or last-minute communications.

#### Tip:

Remember that not all public speaking will be scheduled. You can make good impromptu speeches by having ideas and mini-speeches pre-prepared. It also helps to have a good, thorough understanding of what's going on in your organization and industry.



Become a confident and compelling speaker.

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## Practice

There's a good reason that we say, "Practice makes perfect!" You simply cannot be a confident, compelling speaker without practice.

To get practice, seek opportunities to speak in front of others. For example, **Toastmasters** is a club geared specifically towards aspiring speakers, and you can get plenty of practice at Toastmasters sessions. You could also put yourself in situations that require public speaking, such as by cross-training a group from another department, or by volunteering to speak at team meetings.

If you're going to be delivering a presentation or prepared speech, create it as early as possible. The earlier you put it together, the more time you'll have to practice.

Practice it plenty of times alone, using the resources you'll rely on at the event, and, as you practice, tweak your words until they flow smoothly and easily.

Then, if appropriate, do a dummy run in front of a small audience: this will help you calm your jitters and make you feel more comfortable with the material. Your audience can also give you useful **feedback**, both on your material and on your performance.

## Engage With Your Audience

When you speak, try to engage your audience. This makes you feel less isolated as a speaker and keeps everyone involved with your message. If appropriate, ask **leading questions** targeted to individuals or groups, and encourage people to participate and ask questions.

Keep in mind that some words reduce your power as a speaker. For instance, think about how these sentences sound: "I just want to add that I think we can meet these goals" or "I just think this plan is a good one." The words "just" and "I think" limit your authority and conviction. Don't use them.

A similar word is "actually," as in, "Actually, I'd like to add that we were under budget last quarter." When you use "actually," it conveys a sense of submissiveness or even surprise. Instead, say what things are. "We were under budget last quarter" is clear and direct.

Also, pay attention to how you're speaking. If you're nervous, you might talk quickly. This increases the chances that you'll trip over your words, or say something you don't mean. Force yourself to slow down by breathing deeply. Don't be afraid to gather your thoughts; pauses are an important part of conversation, and they make you sound confident, natural, and authentic.

Finally, avoid reading word-for-word from your notes. Instead, make a list of important points on cue cards, or, as you get better at public speaking, try to memorize what you're going to say – you can still refer back to your cue cards when you need them.

## Pay Attention to Body Language

If you're unaware of it, your **body language** will give your audience constant, subtle clues about your inner state. If you're nervous, or if you don't believe in what you're saying, the audience can soon know.

Pay attention to your body language: stand up straight, take deep breaths, look people in the eye, and smile. Don't lean on one leg or use gestures that feel unnatural.

Many people prefer to speak behind a podium when giving presentations. While podiums can be useful for holding notes, they put a barrier between you and the audience. They can also become a "crutch," giving you a hiding place from the dozens or hundreds of eyes that are on you.

Instead of standing behind a podium, walk around and use gestures to engage the audience. This movement and energy will also come through in your voice, making it more active and passionate.

## Think Positively

**Positive thinking** can make a huge difference to the success of your communication, because it helps you feel more confident.

Fear makes it all too easy to slip into a cycle of negative self-talk, especially right before you speak, while **self-sabotaging** thoughts such as "I'll never be good at this!" or "I'm going to fall flat on my face!" lower your confidence and increase the chances that you won't achieve what you're truly capable of.

Use **affirmations** and **visualization** to raise your confidence. This is especially important right before your speech or presentation. Visualize giving a successful presentation, and imagine how you'll feel once it's over and when you've made a positive difference for others. Use positive affirmations such as "I'm grateful I have the opportunity to help my audience" or "I'm going to do well!"



## Cope With Nerves

How often have you listened to or watched a speaker who really messed up? Chances are, the answer is "not very often."

When we have to speak in front of others, we can envision terrible things happening. We imagine forgetting every point we want to make, passing out from our nervousness, or doing so horribly that we'll lose our job. But those things almost never come to pass! We build them up in our minds and end up more nervous than we need to be.

Many people cite public speaking as their biggest fear, and a **fear of failure** is often at the root of this. Public speaking can lead your "fight or flight" response to kick in: adrenaline courses through your bloodstream, your heart rate increases, you sweat, and your breath becomes fast and shallow.

Although these symptoms can be annoying or even debilitating, the **Inverted-U Model** shows that a certain amount of pressure enhances performance. By changing your mindset, you can use nervous energy to your advantage.

First, make an effort to stop thinking about yourself, your nervousness, and your fear. Instead, focus on your audience: what you're saying is "about them." Remember that you're trying to help or educate them in some way, and your message is more important than your fear. Concentrate on the audience's wants and needs, instead of your own.

If time allows, use **deep breathing exercises** to slow your heart rate and give your body the oxygen it needs to perform. This is especially important right before you speak. Take deep breaths from your belly, hold each one for several seconds, and let it out slowly.

Crowds are more intimidating than individuals, so think of your speech as a conversation that you're having with one person. Although your audience may be 100 people, focus on one friendly face at a time, and talk to that person as if he or she is the only one in the room.

## Watch Recordings of Your Speeches

Whenever possible, record your presentations and speeches. You can improve your speaking skills dramatically by watching yourself later, and then working on improving in areas that didn't go well.

As you watch, notice any verbal stalls, such as "um" or "like." Look at your body language: are you swaying, leaning on the podium, or leaning heavily on one leg? Are you looking at the audience? Did you smile? Did you speak clearly at all times?

Pay attention to your gestures. Do they appear natural or forced? Make sure that people can see them, especially if you're standing behind a podium.

Last, look at how you handled interruptions, such as a sneeze or a question that you weren't prepared for. Does your face show surprise, hesitation, or annoyance? If so, practice managing interruptions like these smoothly, so that you're even better next time.

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## Key Points

Chances are that you'll sometimes have to speak in public as part of your role. While this can seem intimidating, the benefits of being able to speak well outweigh any perceived fears. To become a better speaker, use the following strategies:

- Plan appropriately.
- Practice.
- Engage with your audience.
- Pay attention to body language.
- Think positively.
- Cope with your nerves.
- Watch recordings of your speeches.

If you speak well in public, it can help you get a job or promotion, raise awareness for your team or organization, and educate others. The more you push yourself to speak in front of others, the better you'll become, and the more confidence you'll have.

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