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Digital Article / Presentation Skills

# Nervous About Public Speaking? Here's How to Use Notes Like a Pro.

Even seasoned presenters worry about their minds going blank.

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**Michael was the head of a sales** team at a Fortune 500 technology company. He and his colleagues felt fairly comfortable delivering presentations in a conference room or over Zoom, but the company wanted more visibility. Michael and his team were tasked with speaking at conferences to raise the visibility of the company and demonstrate its thought leadership in their industry.

Michael was nervous about being on stage “with the lights in my eyes.” Specifically, he was afraid that his mind would go blank and he’d forget his material.

This is very common: speaking in front of a smaller group is different than speaking on a large stage. Hearing your own voice over the speakers, being elevated above your peers with all eyes on you in an unfamiliar environment — these factors pull you out of your comfort zone and can trigger a fight or flight response, which can manifest itself as your mind going blank, either in the middle of the presentation or while fielding tough questions from the audience.

So what can you do to prevent this fear from becoming a reality? My recommendation: bring notes. After over two decades of teaching public speaking, I’ve come to realize just how stress-reducing they can be, and what a difference they can make in the delivery of a presentation, especially if it’s your first time on a stage. The key is knowing how to prepare them, and then how to use them effectively in the moment.

### **Why Notes Are Better Than Scripts**

Notes — a general outline of your presentation — are different from a script, which is the entirety of your text word-for-word. Notes provide an easy way to glance down and find your place in a presentation while staying focused on your audience, while a script forces you to look down for most of your presentation and direct your energy toward the paper in front of you or, even worse, a small cellphone.

The best notes are bullet points consisting of short phrases (3-4 words) as opposed to full sentences. I recommend printing them out, single-sided, in large font, with plenty of white space on the page.

Notes are not the same as slides, because they serve different purposes. Slides are intended to reinforce your words, while notes are intended to remind you of your words. Slides are for your audience, while notes are for you.

## **How to Use Notes Effectively**

Once you prepare your notes, practice your presentation out loud using those notes as well as any accompanying slides. This ensures you have enough information on the page to jog your memory, you ensure the language is in your voice, and you know when to transition from one slide to the next.

On the day of the presentation, when you arrive in the room, place your notes on the lectern at the front or on a small table on the stage. I'll often request a small table on stage for just that purpose. I'll carry the notes up in a clear, unassuming plastic folder and place them on the table before I begin.

Recently, I was delivering a new keynote and, while I was comfortable with the material, I was still having trouble remembering the transitions. My mind went blank several times on stage, and here's what worked for me.

### **Move towards your notes**

When you find yourself wondering what comes next, start casually moving toward your notes while speaking. I normally teach people to walk during transitions and then pause to make a point; this technique ensures your movement comes across as purposeful body language.

### **Pause and breathe**

Even though you might feel physically flustered when your mind goes blank, you don't have to broadcast it to your audience. Let yourself take

a minute before moving on to the next part of your presentation. Rather than looking flustered, you appear thoughtful and meaningful.

### **Strategically drink water**

This is one of my favorite speaking hacks on stage, and I always have a bottle of water available for just this purpose. If my mind goes blank, especially while taking questions from the audience, I will nod thoughtfully, take a sip of water, glance down at my notes, and then continue speaking. It may feel obvious to you what you're doing, but your audience will rarely notice.

### **What to Do If Your Mind Goes Blank ... and You Can't Look at Your Notes**

Certainly, there are still occasions where your mind will go blank and you can't look down at your notes. Sometimes you can acknowledge it with self-deprecating humor, saying something like, "I had the most brilliant point I was going to make, and it just flew right out of my head! Let's keep going and I'm sure it will come back to me."

Or you can pause for questions: "Let me stop here and see what questions you have, then I'll summarize what we've covered so far."

Try to remain calm: If you are comfortable, you'll make your audience comfortable.

Remember, there are three versions of every speech: the version you write, the version you deliver, and the version you *wish you had delivered*. They are rarely the same. Your audience doesn't want you to be perfect. While they expect accuracy and preparation, they crave authenticity. This mindset allows you to relax knowing you don't have to memorize every word.

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So how did Michael and his team do?

To prepare for the conference circuit, Michael and his team rented a community theater for the day. We brought in a videographer, projected their slides on the big screen, and practiced their presentations all day with the “lights in their eyes.”

The combination of repetition plus feedback in a safe learning environment made them feel comfortable, and asking each other difficult questions made them feel prepared. They left enthusiastic and ready to conquer the stage.

There's a lot you can do to prepare for your mind going blank. When you have a set of practices in place to manage it, you can relax and focus on your message. Give yourself grace, pause and breathe, and keep going. And you will deliver a powerful presentation.

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