



Business Communication

Speaking From a Podium: Simple Tips to Get Started

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For example, when Barack Obama had to [debate John McCain at Old Miss in 2008](#), his team created an exact replica of the stage where Obama would debate McCain. “No detail was overlooked,” [according to a Newsweek retrospective published just after the election](#). Incredibly, Obama even rehearsed in the evenings because the debate would be in the evening, and this would “match his natural [circadian rhythms](#).”

This concept is nothing new. Obama was simulating the full experience. It’s why actors and dancers have dress rehearsals and soldiers have military exercises.

But you don’t need a stage or replica board room to prepare for your own presentation. Here’s the way to do it in a stepped-down manner and get the same benefits:

- **Put your script or notes on a stack of books or something that will elevate them for easy viewing.** At home or in a conference room, this will simulate the podium experience. Use your speaking voice as you would on stage, and imagine that you're speaking to an audience.
- **Keep your feet planted and stand straight.** This will empower you. Stepping back and forth, slouching, shifting weight — these can convey anxiety.
- **Consult the notes or script as much as you need during run-throughs.** Repetition will enable you to look down less often, so you can increase eye contact with your listeners.
- **Have the script in large type, amply spaced — or use notes.** You'll be able to find your place more readily after looking at the audience. Why invite panicky moments when you lose your place or need to check a figure?
- **Do not memorize, unless it's very brief.** Doing so will introduce a whole new dimension of anxiety. After a lot of rehearsal, you may be able to speak almost from memory, and that's fine. But if you hold yourself to a word-for-word standard, you're inviting anxiety when a phrase doesn't fall in place.
- **Make a place for your hands.** Lightly grip either side of a straight-backed chair at home — or if it's a side chair in a conference room chair, grip the top — and then forget about your hands. They'll come up naturally to gesture at times.
- **Write a reminder.** In large letters with a red pen, print atop your notes or script a single, important reminder. Choose well. It might be, "Speak Slowly." Or, "Make Eye Contact." Or, "Slow Down." Take it to heart just before you start speaking.

Afterward, you may hear that your presentation was better than your self-assessment. This often means the anxiety you were feeling didn't come through because you created a steady physical presence up there. Yes, you may have felt unnatural or "manufactured," but it came across as confidently in command.

Once you've developed enough confidence and a good style at the mike, the value of this rehearsal regimen declines. Moreover, you may well discover shortcuts or tips of your own. Do you have any you can share now, which you think might help others?

Daniel Kennedy is an adjunct professor within the [Graduate School of Management at UC Davis](#), where he has taught presentation skills and public communications strategy to MBA students for more than two decades. He also coaches executives, professors, and even children in the craft of public speaking.

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