



## **How to Improve your Public Speaking as a Law Student**

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I remember in secondary school the first opportunity I had to speak on behalf of my school at an externally organized debate competition.

I had to present my arguments in front of quite a number of teachers and I had been preparing all week, I had even been excused from classes all for the sake of this very competition.

As a result, I devoted myself to making sure my points were exquisite; I practiced with my partner vigorously and I was ready.

The D-Day came, and it was time for me to present my speech to the team. I started quite well and things were going as smoothly as I could ever want.

Then, I started stuttering, slipping up and forgetting the most basic parts of my speech; in short I couldn't go for that particular competition.

Looking back, I realized that my presentation then was poor because I was ignorant of some very vital points.

Luckily I am no longer so ignorant, and have been able to apply a few important principles to improve my public speaking. If you have been suffering a similar experience, perhaps this article will help you overcome some of your own difficulties with public speaking.

### **Pre-Speaking Preparation**

First things first, you have to get prepared adequately before you engage in the actual speech process.

You can do this by conducting adequate research (the importance of which cannot be overemphasized), ironing out quirks or idiosyncrasies which the audience might find distracting.

If for instance you are fond of repeating a certain word even when it is not necessary, when the audience gets wind of this, they will be far more interested in observing you make that repetition than listening to what you really do have to say.

You should also seek out resources on public speaking such as books and videos. Some good examples include [TED talks](#) and [Toastmasters videos](#). In respect to books, Dale Carnegie's *The Art of Public Speaking* is also a very useful resource.

Also practice consistently and familiarize yourself with the topic adequately such that you do not need to rely on notes to speak, and you can do so with confidence. It is [recommended](#) that you try to record yourself while preparing.

This way, you get to see yourself the way the audience sees you. If you look through the video recording and don't like what you see, make some modifications and record yourself again.

Do this until you're satisfied with your presentation.

Public speaking is like an iceberg. The speech itself is what you see, the preparation is the 80 percent submerged underwater. For a TED talk of 15 minutes, [speakers prepare for an average of 19 to 20 hours](#).

That's how important preparation is.

The actual speaking process becomes substantially easier when the little details are ironed out before the speech itself.

As Dale Carnegie put it: "Only the prepared speaker deserves to be confident."

# The Introduction

Next comes the easy part which is the actual process of speaking. You want to do this by opening with a spectacular introduction.

An impressive introduction is an opportunity to make a good starting impression.

Begin with something that is sure to captivate your audience. A short story, a quote, a pun, or even a clever joke but make sure this is done speedily and closely related to the subject matter.

If properly executed, it would give you an edge in controlling your audience subsequently.

## Speaking With Confidence

Now you have made an impression and you have an attentive audience. The question becomes how can you keep their attention?

Well, this is also very simple. This is where confidence comes in.

People want to listen to a confident speaker. It gives an assurance that such an individual knows what he's talking about. A nervous speaker on the other hand is usually a turn off and would only gain pity and not attention.

If you are naturally nervous and think yourself incapable of giving a speech confidently, you need to realize it's not necessarily about having much confidence but being able to convince your audience that you do.

Take note of the following when trying to portray yourself as a confident speaker.

### Body Language

Confidence can be reflected by posture as body language is also part of speech presentation. Your body language should not be too rigid or too at ease, stand straight with shoulders back and your eyes directly on the audience.

### Eye Contact

Eye contact is also very important. If you're speaking to an audience of medium size, try to make eye contact with different segments of the audience. You shouldn't just focus on one person though. Try to make sure you go through as much of the audience as possible.

If it's a competition where there are judges, then you should make eye contact with all the judges. Try to maintain eye contact for about 30 seconds per person. With eye contact, you will be sure to gain the attention of who it is you're staring at.

If it's a large crowd, make eye contact in a scanning manner. Ensure you don't focus on only one part of the crowd and neglect the others.

### Calmness

Another marker of a confident speaker is calmness, the audience can easily sense a nervous speaker. So ensure you resolve internal conflicts before you speak, you can do this by drawing up an outline of everything you want to address.

This is less than a summary of your speech and it helps you to improvise if you do forget any parts of your speech. This is because you already have an idea of that particular point in your outline.

Also avoid dead-giveaways of tension like stuttering and gap fillers like "um" "ah" "like" etc. once again a calm disposition should prevent this.

Most of all, a smile and a high voice pitch reflect confidence seamlessly.

## Speaking With Factuality

Likewise on the issue of factuality, it is expected that you would have adequately researched before the presentation of your speech as previously discussed. As such, your speech is your opportunity to show off all of your hard work.

So, do not hesitate to draw up facts now and again. And as a matter of fact (pun intended), if you are giving an argumentative speech the only way you can substantiate your claim is by backing that argument up with meaningful and relevant facts.

For instance in speaking at a moot competition, you are expected to use relevant **statutes** and **precedents**. This is because mooting is not just regular public speaking but an application of the art of persuasive advocacy. In essence, you should be speaking as a lawyer would in the court with legally-backed claims.

When looking for materials to use for your presentation, do take note of the following:

### Law Textbook

When doing your research for either a moot competition or presentation and you need legal authorities, the best place to start is a good textbook on the subject matter. A good textbook already categorises the information into specific subject areas.

So, if you need legal authorities on that specific area, check the contents of the textbook to locate the specific area and find the authorities you want. You should also pay attention to the footnotes. This is because they contain additional information and additional cases on that subject matter.

## Papers and Journal Articles

If you don't find what you want in the textbook, your next point of call is to find a paper or journal article published on that subject matter. You can easily get this online by using [Google Scholar](#). If you don't find anything reasonable on Google Scholar, you can do a google search for the subject matter and add "pdf" after it.

For instance, if you're looking for materials on "independence of the judiciary", you can do a Google search for "independence of the judiciary pdf". This would bring up published papers on this subject matter.

## Law Report Index

If you still don't find what you're looking for, then your best bet is a law report index. A law report index arranges cases by subject matter in an alphabetical order. Essentially, this means that if you're looking for cases on "trespass to land", you can easily find multiple of them in a law report index.

Law report indexes are very simple to use. They might appear daunting at first, but when you use it once, they become very easy to use.

When applying precedents, if the opposing counsel cites a case, you can draw out enough differences between that precedent and the facts (distinguishing). If you are the one citing the authority, you can draw out enough similarities between it and the fact so that the precedent will be applicable.

Remember that the strength of your authorities such as; the relevance, the applicability and so on, determine the strength of your case.

However there is a real need to be careful and not present more facts than the audience can process at a time. Basically use facts smartly.

## Speaking With Clarity

The most resonant speeches have been the most comprehensive, clear, and eloquent; made by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela etc. Martin Luther King's "[\*I have a dream\*](#)" speech as simple as it was, continues to be referred to as one of the most poignant speeches ever made.

Why? Simply because of its clarity and eloquence.

It is quite one thing to be vocal about your ideas, and another thing to be eloquent.

In a presentation, the latter will favor you far more, and as such, you have to be able present your ideas with great clarity and eloquence such that your audience can understand and appreciate the message you are trying to convey.

This can be achieved by practice, improved vocabulary and the ability to draw imagery in the minds of your audience through your speech(that is, paint a picture or leave an impression in their minds).

For instance, notice the rich imagery in this part of Martin Luther's I have a Dream Speech:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!

One way to achieve this level of eloquence is by reading. The most articulate speakers are usually the most well-read speakers. The reason for this being the ability of books to stretch your mind's capacity to form images.

Unless Martin Luther King Jr actually visited Georgia and Mississippi, the only way he would know of Georgia's red hills and Mississippi's sweltering heat is by reading about it.

Reading also helps improve your vocabulary. However, you must know how and when to use it.

Unnecessarily spouting big words can be irritating and get in the way of actual communication. If your audience fails to comprehend, you have failed to communicate and that would do more harm than good.

Don't be a Patrick Obahiagbon.

## Points of Caution

Similarly, there is a need to be cautious of things that may affect your presentation negatively. An example of this is improper dressing which is actually graded in some more formal competitions.

Noticeable mannerisms and quirks, brashness, unsubstantiated claims, and mispronunciation of certain words could also count.

All these can be quite detrimental to an excellent presentation so there is a need to work on them and sift them out in practice before the actual speech.

Conclusively, these are just a few of the very important things that can be applied for improved performance.

The most important however is to keep on practicing and effecting changes where need be. Hopefully this article has helped you realize some of those changes to be effected. Good luck!