



Book Confessions of a Public Speaker

Scott Berkun
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Recommendation

Futurist and best-selling author Scott Berkun knows all about public presentations. He speaks often at high-tech conferences and other pressurized gatherings. His easy-going, colloquial approach and unpretentious, folksy advice make this an quick, entertaining and useful read. Although about half of what he says is not new, the book is memorable because of his candor about the self-consciousness and awkwardness that most people experience when speaking in public. Berkun convinces you that anyone can excel at public speaking. He offers many techniques to help with the most difficult aspect: being yourself. *BooksInShort* recommends this amusing guide to anyone who has to get up and talk to a roomful of strangers.

Take-Aways

- The speaker sets the “pace for the audience” and establishes a narrative rhythm.
- Contrary to popular advice, imagining that your audience is naked will not help you.
- Presentations are made up of points in a sequence that tell a story.
- Trying to be a perfect speaker will undermine your confidence and create fear.
- Solid public speaking depends on solid “private thinking” in advance.
- Practice enables you to control the aspects of your presentation that you can control, and to be prepared for unexpected problems you can’t control.
- If your crowd hates you, connect with the person who “hates you least.”
- Ten minutes is about the longest period anyone can pay attention to anything, including your speech.
- Always make eye contact.
- If your speech is being broadcast or webcast, exude extra energy and presence so you don’t shrink on screen.

Summary

Don’t Picture Anybody Naked

“Public speaking is a form of expression.” It takes emotional commitment. Your material defines you to your audience much more than your actual speaking. When you present well, you disappear and the audience experiences only your subject matter, since every presentation should concern a single, specific topic.

“I don’t want to be perfect. I want to be useful, I want to be good, and I want to sound like myself.”

Public speaking makes you awkward because it is awkward. Studies suggest that nobody can pay attention for longer than 10 minutes at a time, regardless of the theme. Before you even start, the majority of your audience wishes you were already done. Most people will give you a fraction of their attention at best. Getting them to focus is not easy, so, of course, you’re nervous. But picturing your audience naked won’t help. That useless piece of advice, which seems to have originated with

Winston Churchill, is always the first thing people tell you to admit to being nervous about a public presentation. If you even could imagine such a scene – and why would you want to? – that image will just distract you.

Perfect Imperfection

The possibility of failure is a common reason people procrastinate before starting a project. As long as you make no effort, you can't fail. Fear of failure paralyzes. Being afraid often assumes the guise of an urge to do something perfectly. If you obsess about not making a single mistake in your speeches, that obsession guarantees that you will make several errors. A more effective mind-set is to understand how to respond when you make that inevitable mistake and to recognize that your reaction will guide the audience's response. Perfection is never your goal. Your goals are to be "useful, good and to sound like yourself." Harness your anxiety; let that energy fuel your focus.

"The things speakers obsess about are the opposite of what the audience cares about."

Your speech will never be what you envisioned. It will never sound to you as it sounds to your audience and, afterward, it will never be the speech you wished you had given. You and your listeners want different things from your speech – you want to be flawless; they want to learn and enjoy a little entertainment. Believe it or not, every member of your audience "wants you to do well." Savor their encouragement. But remember: If you are unprepared, you will already have made the most destructive mistake possible before you ever start speaking.

"A title divides the universe into what you will talk about and what you won't."

Your advantage "over the audience is knowing what comes next," because you practiced your presentation many times. You may not want to do so; nobody does. But if you invest the time, you will reap the rewards. While you're rehearsing, you can mess up and correct every mistake in the safety of your home. Practice makes your presentation second nature.

"The more effort you put into the clarity of your points, the easier everything else about public speaking becomes."

If something beyond your control goes awry – the projector breaks, your laptop crashes, hecklers smack you with a pie – you can devote your focus to coping, because you will have mastered your presentation.

"The Lecture Circuit"

People on a speech-making tour say they are hitting the lecture circuit, but few know where the phrase originated. Americans made public speaking popular in the early 1800s. In the 1820s, Josiah Holbrook founded a popular, well-attended lecture tour called Lyceum. In 1835, US presenters staged some 3,000 similar events. The Associated Literary Society created a set, town-to-town schedule for its speakers – a lecture circuit. Mark Twain sold out at \$20 a head, equal to \$200 today. Now authors such as *The Tipping Point*'s Malcolm Gladwell might get \$80,000 for a speech; former president Bill Clinton charges \$125,000.

"Good Private Thinking"

To be relaxed in public, you have to think hard in private. Take your rough ideas and turn them into a clear, linear presentation. People crave and respond to stories – narratives presenting a series of events in sequence. The best presentations are a series of ideas or story points that build to a conclusion. Try to turn your points into stories of situations your audience has probably faced.

"If you can speak a truth most people are unwilling to say, you're a hero."

Your narrative should attempt to satisfy the reasons people came to hear you talk, which could include: learning, inspiration, entertainment, a desire to meet like-minded people or even obligation because their "bosses, parents, professors or spouses" made them attend.

Prepare Your Presentation

"Audiences are very forgiving." But if you are ill-prepared, if you are confused by your own notes, or if you mumble – all problems that fall under the rubric of "eating the microphone" – your audience will turn against you.

"If you want to know how good a speaker really is, watch him give the same lecture twice."

Prepare your presentation by following these four rules:

1. **Have a "strong" title** – Define your point of view in your title. Let people know exactly what you are going to discuss and how you feel about it.
2. **Know your audience** – What informs this particular group? Consider their likely common interests and identities. Are they students, professionals in the same field or random adults? Certain groups will not only understand industry jargon, they will insist on it. Others will hate it. Structure your content and tone accordingly.
3. **Use tight phrases** – The points you raise are "claims." Your arguments should support each claim in turn. Make each point in a short, clear sentence. Use concise arguments so that no one can forget your point.
4. **Prepare to rebut** – The best way to rebut is to know and understand every position contrary to your own. Good preparation means knowing both sides of your arguments.

Working the Room

Do not limit your preparation to the content of your presentation. Prepare the environment as well. You want to "work" the room to make sure the room doesn't work

you. The best room is always the smallest, and the best small room is always the one most like a theatre, with rising rows of seats that face the podium. Worse than a big room is a big empty room. If you draw only 200 people in a room designed for 2,000, you will feel disconnected from the people in the room and they from you.

“The problem with most bad presentations is the lack of timing.”

Should this happen, invite the audience members to do what no audience member wants to do: Come sit in the middle of the front rows. To create the feeling of a full house, pack the few people you’ve got into the smallest possible space. When your troops hesitate, as they will, offer a prize to those who sit in the middle seats of the first three rows. Always have copies of your book, or whatever it is you’re promoting, to give away as prizes. As soon as one or two people move, the rest will follow.

“Nothing kills your power over a room as much as a lack of silence.”

When people sit closely together, they are more likely to respond in similar ways. If you can move a scattered crowd into close contact, the first person who smiles or nods will inspire others to do the same. The more distance between people, the more disjointed their responses will be. Make whatever room you’ve got into your turf. Show the audience you are in control. Watch your crowd. When you find someone nodding and smiling, work to that person. Gradually, those near your target will share the positive energy. If the room seems against you, “seek out the person who hates you the least” and talk just to that least hostile soul.

Don’t Be an Encyclopedia

You can’t say everything about your topic, and nobody wants you to even try. Audiences wait for “an angle,” a new take, your specific acumen. Make a list of all your initial ideas. Condense it by ordering the points in accordance with your enthusiasm for them. Start arguing with yourself in favor of each one. When you have five strong points supported by five cogent, condensed arguments, you have your topic list. The more clearly you express each point, the stronger your presentation will be.

Yes, Their Minds Will Wander

One of the few moments people share in silence is just prior to the start of a performance – waiting for a speech. But, shortly after you begin, their minds will wander. That won’t necessarily be your fault; the brain functions that way. While every other form of human interaction has undergone vast transformation, the lecture has remained pretty much unchanged during the past 200 years. It’s the sort of thing no one does anymore: Sit still in one place and listen to someone in the room speak. If you avoid boring your audience under such trying conditions, you stand an excellent chance of commanding the fraction of their attention they are able to offer.

Whose House? Your House

To hold the audience’s attention you must take power and control the room. People respond to power, but if you give power to the audience, they will lose interest in you. To let your audience know they are going to do things your way, tell them at the start what’s going to happen. Explain how long you will speak, how many points you will make, how much time you will spend on each point and how much time you will devote to questions and answers. Your audience will be grateful. Don’t waste their time reciting your accomplishments or history. If they hate you, they won’t care. And if they love you, they’ll either ask afterward or find out on their own.

“If the speaker [before you] was awesome but only got cold stares from the crowd, you’ll know something is up that’s larger than you or the other speaker. But if he does well and...yet you go down in flames, you know it’s not the audience – it’s you.”

Being powerful means projecting confidence. Always keep making eye contact. Look various people right in their eyes. Don’t play to the entire room. Play to individuals – lots of them. Do not let yourself “shrink onstage.” Stand tall. Don’t be too polite, don’t speak quietly, don’t beat around the bush, and don’t say “umm” or “uhh.”

“Imagining naked people in the daytime makes most things more complicated, not less.”

To hold power, you must, like a good drummer, control the rhythm. A good rhythm “creates energy.” To maintain pace, spend the allotted time, and no more, on each point. To generate an engaging narrative rhythm, make each point a story with a beginning, middle and end. Your audience will respond. The best way to demonstrate your power is to end early. Take less time than you said you would. Give the crowd your email address, and tell them to continue the discussion online. They’ll love you.

Broadcasting or Webcasting: Ham Is Good

Television, radio and webcasts demand performance. If your talk is being webcast, either live or as a recording, you must become larger than life. Computer screens make you appear smaller and quieter. If you are low-key, you will disappear. To appear life-size, you must do things that will make you feel self-conscious in the studio: Exaggerate your smiles, your emphasis, your laughter and your reactions. Play big to the room so you will play at normal size on video. An added bonus of exuding extra energy and volume is that TV and radio producers love an energetic guest.

“Most people listening to presentations around the world right now are hoping their speakers will end soon.”

Go ahead – be a shameless ham. The camera will love you for it. And heed these tips:

- **The “confidence monitor”** – You need to make eye contact; you also need to see your slides, which are projected behind you, but you know you must never turn your back on the audience. The solution is a confidence monitor. Ask your host for one. This monitor sits at the edge of the stage, between you and the audience. Your slides appear on the monitor, and you know where you are without ever losing eye contact.
- **A “countdown timer”** – This digital clock counts down how much time you have left. You’ll be surprised how helpful this is; no matter how many times you speak in public, measuring the passage of time is still hard.
- **A “remote control”** – You need your own remote control to run your laptop, which runs your slides. A good remote, like a good wireless microphone, lets you walk wherever you want, onstage or off. Good remotes have built-in countdown timers. Your host may tell you that you don’t need your own. Your host would

be wrong.

- **Tuck in your mike wire** – Your mike has a wire running from the microphone, which is clipped to your lapel, to the transmitter box clipped to your belt. To clip a mike to your lapel, you have to wear a lapel in the first place – so don't show up in a sweater over a T-shirt. Wear a button-down shirt. Before you go on stage, run the wire from the mike inside your shirt to the transmitter box. A wire hanging out of your shirt is absolutely going to catch onto something at the most embarrassing moment possible.
- **Lectern or podium** – A lectern is not a podium. You stand on a podium; you stand behind a lectern. If you want to annoy your speaker friends, point this out – often.

About the Author

Scott Berkun is the best-selling author of *Making Things Happen* and *The Myths of Innovation*. He is a former teacher of creative thinking at the University of Washington, and his writing has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *Wired*.
