

Be a Better Speaker

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Public speaking is one career that is here to stay! Its roots go back to antiquity, it flourishes today, and it will continue growing as long as someone has something interesting to relate or valuable information to share.

As long as people want to learn, grow and have fun, there will be speakers to teach and entertain and audiences to learn and enjoy. Thus, I would like to encourage you to learn to be a speaker, to become one of the teachers who impart their knowledge to the enlightenment of humanity.

In this media-driven age, people want REAL speakers and live action. Certainly, electronic images and sound-bytes can be beamed to larger audiences but a real person speaking to a live audience will always have the advantage over electronic illusion.

Even if you do not intend to become a professional speaker, you will benefit greatly from the experience. Preparation for a speech will give you practice in researching for material and organizing your thoughts and ideas in a logical, orderly fashion. Done properly, it will increase your vocabulary and improve your grammar. Practicing the speech will improve your voice and diction. The actual presentation will increase your self-confidence and sharpen your thought processes when you are questioned.

Many people are terrified at the thought of standing before an audience and delivering a speech. This is not unusual; even the most experienced speakers have confessed that they are often apprehensive and suffer from "stage-fright" just before a presentation. In fact, it would be unusual if this did not occur. Do not let this deter you; once you have taken this first step, "broken the ice", so to speak, you will have overcome this first hurdle and will relax and enjoy the experience.

At this point you may ask, "Who are you and what qualifies you to be giving this advice?" It is precisely who I am that allows me to feel qualified to encourage you, because I have experienced all the doubts, fears, and uncertainties that you may feel. I certainly don't claim to be a great speaker. I have never had any training or classes in public speaking. Notwithstanding, I am a professional speaker; I began my career about sixteen years ago, starting out slowly until now I am presenting workshops and programs almost every week throughout the country (and frequently in foreign countries). Thus, I feel that, using my own experience as an example, I can encourage you to take that first step, get started, and share your knowledge and experience.

Let's look at it this way. You speak to people every day; if you can speak to one person, you can as easily speak to two. When you can speak to two, it is easy to speak to three, and so on. Everything in life starts slowly. All learning is gradual.

You have already done the hard part: you have learned a language and have spoken to ONE person. If you sit around with family or friends and talk, THAT is informal speaking to a group. You probably ALREADY do that. Soon you can expand to other informal groups like a club, or a book discussion group. Many people belong to study groups where sharing is easy and comfortable. Toastmasters International is one such group with local clubs in virtually every city. If you can join a Toastmasters Club, I recommend it highly. Membership in a Toastmasters Club will give you an opportunity to practice before a sympathetic, supportive group, which will give constructive criticism and practical advice in a friendly, non-threatening atmosphere. Its primary advantage is that it permits one to practice, and the only way one can become a good speaker is with practice.

But be careful. If you mainly focus your talk on YOU, you'll never be a great speaker. When your primary focus is to help others, you will encourage and inspire them to reach their highest potential. This is the goal of great speakers. Most speeches are given to teach, to entertain, or to recognize and credit others for their work or example. YOU are only the presenter -- WHAT you have to give is far more important than WHO you are. THAT is the great secret of public speaking. If you think only of yourself, you'll become nervous and ineffective. When you think of how much you can give to the group, then you excel!

Successful speakers share certain practices and techniques. Among other things, they make it a point to entertain as well as to inform -- just as good teachers do. In fact, you can think of yourself as a teacher, as you share your knowledge with others. Good speakers also deepen and expand their bond with their audiences through openness, sensitivity, and humor.

TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR SPEAKING SKILLS

1. Be thoroughly prepared and comfortable with your material. Enthusiasm builds automatically when your topic is something you know and are excited about. The audience perceives this immediately, and responds accordingly. But remember that the actual spoken words are only a SMALL part of the message you convey. People communicate in numerous ways, such as body-language, eye movements, unconscious signals, a smile or a frown - even a well-chosen silence can be filled with meaning. A pause has been said to be "pregnant" - it can give birth to great inspiration or revelation.

Most important of all, be yourself. You are only human - we all are - that includes being spontaneous, candid, kind, vulnerable; whatever else happens is what happens! Your audience will identify with you. I surely have done and said some truly stupid things through the years, but I have learned the MOST through my worst experiences. You will, too, if you don't take yourself too seriously.

2. Enhance your presentation by the creative use of newspaper clippings, cartoons, music, appropriate quotes, or relevant experiences. Don't bore your audience with material that's common knowledge; keep them expectant and "on their toes" with fresh

and interesting material.

3. Develop a bond with your audience. If possible, greet them individually as they enter the room. Thank them for their promptness and encourage them to preview any handouts or reference materials. Move around the room during the presentation rather than standing behind a lectern. This makes you and your audience more accessible to each other. Involve them in the talk by soliciting comments and information. You will be surprised at the knowledge of the audience and the insights you will receive. One word of caution, however: don't lose control of the agenda and allow the discussion to get out of focus.

4. Use self-deprecating humor to get your points across. This allows your audience to identify with your foibles. Don't use canned jokes. Humor will develop naturally from your work or your presentations. Humor is the icing on the cake of your presentation.

5. Avoid reading scripts. Few speakers are able to read a script effectively, and the result will be a dull, boring experience. If people want a technical presentation, they would probably do better to read a journal or a book. Your talk should teach helpful procedures (I suggest you provide a manual or other handouts), but the overall purpose is for your audience to enjoy the learning. Instead of a prepared lecture, I use only a small card listing or outlining a few general topics to cover. As mentioned above, you should be comfortable with, enthusiastic about, and know your subject. If you do, you do not need a script. You could tell the group that if they desire reference notes or a list of sources, they could write you.

6. Avoid "UMMMS" and "ERS". These are the unconscious chants that speakers hum when they are thinking of what to say next. When you need to think for a minute, STOP, take a deep breath, or smile or something, but not UMMMMS. The audience will not mind a brief pause--most appreciate it so they can absorb what you had been saying.

7. Practice your speech. Experts say, "Practice makes perfect"; even if the practice doesn't make you perfect, it will certainly make your presentation better. First, outline the major items you want to cover and the order that you want to present them. Organize your references and supporting material to follow your outline. Then go over the speech mentally; I would not recommend writing a text. Do this several times until you are satisfied that you are comfortable with the material. Now you are ready to practice it aloud.

Find a place where you will not be disturbed as you practice. At first, you will find that you forget things, make mistakes, etc. Don't let that discourage you. If you are not satisfied, just start over, and continue until you have gone through the speech at least once to your satisfaction. At this point, you may want to record the speech and listen to it to identify places where it can be improved. Listening to your first attempt can be a very humbling experience, but you will learn from it. Just do it. Finally, if you want to, practice it before a friend or loved one and ask for comments. If you do all this,

when the time comes, you will be prepared and comfortable with your material.

8. Go to the location early and check out the facilities. Is the seating properly arranged? Are the visual aids ready? Test the microphone and audio system; people won't appreciate it if you have to waste time adjusting the system, or if it is too loud or too low. If this is an all-day presentation, have you arranged for refreshments at the breaks? Are they there? Attention to these small details beforehand will get you off to a smooth start. You can be sure that if anything can go wrong, it will. These advance preparations will make it unlikely that anything will go wrong.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

Okay, you have a topic that you are excited and knowledgeable about. You have practiced with friends or small informal groups. You want to share your information. You have been invited to speak. Now is a good time to prepare yourself psychologically. In my case, I often teach self-hypnosis techniques and have learned to USE these valuable tools for myself. I have learned to channel adrenaline into enthusiasm and high energy, to pre-view my audiences and to develop a better sense of humor for public speaking. Many other speakers also use self-hypnosis and positive programming to alleviate nervousness, build confidence and enrich their work.

The big day has arrived. You are introduced now what?

Go up, adjust the microphone, and THANK your introducer and the organization which invited you, Greet the audience.

Then take a moment to smile and slowly look around the audience - this minute may seem like an eternity - but you need this minute to get ready for the biggest shock of your life. Not nervousness, but shock.

As you look out across the audience what you see will shock you - it shocked me at first - but now I recognize it everywhere. People will be facing you but they will be frowning. Yes, some will look sad, others dull and some stare blankly. This look has nothing to do with you -- it is simply how most people sit when listening to a speaker. (If you are lucky, about one person in a hundred will dare to smile at you!)

Immediately you'll wonder, "Oh God, what's wrong?"

NOTHING is wrong. That simply is what an audience looks like from the speaker's stand. That is the reason many speakers tell a joke - to test if everyone is actually alive! You do NOT need to test, for I assure you that if they paid to attend, or they are actually sitting there, it is because they want to hear you. It is that simple.

So GIVE them something important to hear and think about. Jump right in and use every precious minute you have together. When I first started, I was so eager to GIVE so much that I often spoke too fast - that is a mistake also. Just give what you can, make it clear, be honest, and be sure to look at the audience as you speak. Slowly move your attention and eyes around the room and speak to the audience exactly as

you would to a friend or a group of friends.

If you come to a point where you wonder what to say next, take a small pause; that pause gives everyone a breather. Better still, as we pointed out above, ask the audience for questions. If you have a large group, be certain to repeat the question so that everyone can hear it. To me, questions and answers are the very best part of any talk. This interchange allows you to lighten up and reveal your humanity. If you have a good answer, share it. If you do not, be willing to admit you don't, and offer to find it. Keep answers brief and THANK the questioner (for it takes courage on their part to ask). Above all, be courteous and polite, no matter how irrelevant the question.

MOST OF ALL, if your presentation continues for several hours, remember to take breaks! People cannot concentrate with full bladders!! It's hard for them to pay much attention to the speaker when they are squirming in their seats. For me, I usually break about every hour-and-a-half. Before they leave, announce a definite time for them to return.

When you speak, you give of yourself fully. It is also wise to give something tangible, like handouts. In an age of photocopy and rapid printing, it is easy and inexpensive to give copies of articles, data, charts, or even an appropriate cartoon. BE SURE to have your name, address and telephone number on all handouts, so people can contact you later on. I also usually pass around a pad of paper for people who want to be on my mailing list. Ask them to PRINT the information and to put in their ZIP codes. Some of your audience may write to you. If so, by all means respond. Your correspondent will appreciate and remember it, and you may find someone with whom you have much in common. I have made many friends and received much help from people who have written after one of my presentations.

I always allow people to tape record all my presentations. The tape will continue to teach and reach people long after the actual event. I also avoid lecterns or podiums, as that becomes a barrier between me and the people in the audience. A good microphone is important and I prefer the clip-on type to the hand-held variety (this leaves your hands free to write on a board or to gesture).

End every presentation with a time for questions and answers. If you have books or tapes for sale this is a good time to hold them up for people to see, and to tell them where in the room they will be available.

Speaking to any group is an honor and a gift - it's not a punishment. Every speaker has a great responsibility - not just in what you teach, but in how you live. Counsel may sometimes be confusing, but your example is always clear. Demonstrate your truth. Speak your ancient wisdom, reveal your vision for the future. Encourage and inspire others to help build a better future for ALL humanity. Love your audience, and they will multiply that love a thousand-fold and return it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: *In the article I recommended that you respond to any correspondence from members of your audience, and stated that you might make friends and receive help through such correspondence. I have acquired such a friend in this very manner, by responding to a letter from him. Our correspondence has resulted in his assisting me in editing and revising many articles, including this one, to which he contributed substantially. Therefore, I would like to acknowledge the help given to me on this article by my friend, Mr. Baldwin L. Troutman, who continues to collaborate with me in writing other articles. Mr. Troutman is a retired nuclear physicist who is spending his retirement years sharing his experiences and expertise by helping others.*