

Public speaking

Making a success of public speaking

Talks, speeches as well as presentations fall under the category of public speaking, and have core elements that can make or break them:

- *Audience expectations:* A general audience listening to a speaker expects to be entertained, informed or persuaded. They enjoy the unexpected. A specific audience listening to a speaker expects explicit information, intelligent persuasion and credible content.
- *Attitude:* If you start a talk or presentation with the attitude that people will resist your idea, the audience might react on your feelings and respond with the stubbornness you feared.
- *Core statement:* Every talk or presentation has a core statement, which identifies the audience, the purpose and the expected outcome.
- *Support material:* It is important to have adequate support or evidence for the facts in your talk or presentation. The support material must be accurate, honest and factual.

Setting the scene – Preparing to prepare

Before you start preparing, you have to investigate two important factors:

- *The audience:* What are the needs and values of your audience?
- *The topic and purpose of your talk or presentation:* Know the topic on which you are going to speak and stick to it. In your communities, it will mostly be to inform (give information) and to persuade (change or adjust the attitude and opinion of the audience).

Putting together the talk or presentation

One of the main reasons why people give poor speeches or presentations is because of their inability to organise their thoughts. An effective way of doing this is to see the talk or presentation as a three-course meal: an appetiser, a main course and dessert.

The appetiser

The appetiser is your introduction. It must be brief and it must capture the attention of the audience immediately – this will determine whether you can persuade them to listen to you.

There are various options for an introduction:

- A dramatic statement that arouses curiosity: “I am here today to talk to about a problem that, unless we solve it, will have a direct and serious impact on every person in this room.”
- A suitable quotation from a famous person. Remember to acknowledge the source.
- A brief and relevant story about personal experiences or something that was made up.
- A lead-in question is one that you are prepared to answer yourself in detail. This is an effective way to hold the audience’s attention, because they want to know the answer.
- A visual introduction involves using an interesting picture to capture the attention of the audience. If you have a really striking image, you can simply point to it and say: “This is what I’m going to talk to about today.”

The main course

This is the core content of the talk or presentation and requires that you have a sound knowledge of the subject.

The content can be compiled as follows:

- State the problem or issue in general. This can be only a sentence or two.
- Tell the audience about the components of the problem or issue, i.e. why it is a problem. You want the audience to understand the problem. Do not argue – explain.
- Supply the audience with a solution or alternative solutions to the problem. Say why your idea is such a good idea and expand on it.



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The dessert

The dessert, or conclusion, is simply telling the audience exactly what you want them to do with the information you have given them. It is important to make an impact with your conclusion, because it is the last chance you have to convey your message. It must be short and may be a summary of the issues that were discussed.

Some people are more scared of public speaking than of death... How about you?

Stage fright is more common than McDonalds branches. It doesn't happen only when you first begin speaking. It also happens to veterans every time they decide to make a change of any kind. What is the cure? Is there any cure?



Reality check: What do the statistics say?

This might not be what you want to hear, but simple preparation and rehearsal of your presentation or speech can reduce stage fright by 75%! Deep breathing will reduce the fright by another 15%. And as far as the last 10% goes, it can be conquered by mental preparation. Seems like you've got work to do!

Preparation and rehearsal

The most dynamic entertainers and some of the highest paid speakers of our era always seem to come up with great one-liners by improvising. Or that is what we think. One of Britain's best known prime ministers, sir Winston Churchill (who was famous for his speeches), estimated it took him six to eight hours to prepare a 45-minute speech. The American writer and speaker Mark Twain took at least three weeks to prepare a speech.

Remember: Practice does not necessarily make perfect. Bur perfect practice makes perfect.

This means:

- Read the talk or presentation over several times, silently.
- Then read it aloud, several times.
- Practise the talk or presentation in front of a mirror. This gives you the opportunity to observe your general attitude, your posture and your facial expressions.
- Practice your talk or presentation, especially the opening, to a spot on the wall.
- Memorise the opening word for word and practise it while you are staring at a spot on the wall. In this way you will develop fantastic confidence that will carry you through the rest of the presentation.
- Try your material at home with your family or with friends. Don't welcome only compliments – listen to messages that are critical or analytical as well.
- Become comfortable with your material – if you are not comfortable with your talk or presentation it will be projected in your image.

Deep breathing

When people get nervous, we forget to breathe normally. This leads to more stress, which makes us breathe even less, which makes us more nervous... it's a vicious cycle. Control your breathing. Take deep breaths and try to hold it for approximately 5 seconds.

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Something to think about: It's all in the mind...

According to Zig Ziglar (an American author, salesperson and motivational speaker), fear is an acronym for:

F = false

E = evidence

A = appearing

R = real

What kind of false evidence are you convincing yourself of before your talk or presentation? What do you say to yourself that makes you so frightened?

Examples include: "They're going to hate me", "It's going to be awful", "I'm going to look like a fool" or even something like "I'll look fat".

The irony is that the audience wants you to perform well and they want to enjoy it. They are willing to make allowances for your mistakes. A few mistakes actually make you more human and therefore more lovable.

Control your mind

- *Control your thoughts:* The human mind can hold only one thought at a time. Therefore it is essential to think of success while you are doing your talk or presentation.
- *Imagination is more important than knowledge:* Imagine the audience with beaming faces and having been touched by your message. Instead of negative thoughts, think things such as "I'm glad I'm here" or "I can make a difference". These positive affirmations will give you power and confidence before and while you are speaking.
- *Wishful thinking:* Find out what you would like to be and then act that way. Acting as if you are a competent presenter or speaker, will eventually make you a competent one.

A last bit of practical advice: How to deal with a dry mouth

A dry mouth is a nervous reaction. You are not really thirsty – no matter how much water you drink, you'll still think you are thirsty.

Rather try some of these techniques:

- Imagine you're holding a juicy lemon. Imagine taking a knife and slicing it open. The juice rolls slowly over your hand. This should start you salivating, which will let the dry feeling disappear. What's even better is actually licking a slice of lemon before your talk or presentation.
- Press the top of your tongue into the top of your mouth until you salivate.
- Bite lightly (lightly!) on the inside of your cheek.
- Try a pinch of salt.

The real McCoy

Although good preparation is essential, there are still some important hints to remember for when you do the actual talk or presentation:

- *Handle your notes professionally:* Make your notes as short as possible, do not rustle the papers while speaking and make sure the pages are numbered in the correct order.
- *Speak loudly and clearly:* Speak loud enough for the person furthest away to hear you clearly, but don't shout. Your voice should be clear, melodious and well modulated, with a low tone.
- *Stand tall:* Your posture, gestures and body movement play an important role in your talk or presentation. Spread your weight evenly across your feet. Your arms should hang comfortably. Gestures should not be too dramatic.
- *Answer questions effectively:* It is important to know how to handle the audience when they are talking. The ability to handle questions openly, honestly and in a friendly manner will contribute to your credibility.



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Tips on handling questions

- Anticipate questions that might be asked and prepare answers beforehand.
- On the big day, ask clearly and in a friendly way if there are any questions.
- Listen attentively to a question – let the person finish speaking before you start answering.
- If you do not understand a question, politely ask the person to repeat it.
- Repeat or paraphrase the question to the entire audience – this will ensure that everyone hears what was asked and stays included in the conversation.
- If you do not know the answer, do not guess. Be honest that you don't know and, if possible or relevant, tell the audience that you will try to find an answer.
- Limit your answers to 10 seconds, unless the question raises an interesting point.

Using visual aids

- A visual aid is anything the audience can see that helps them to understand or believe the points you want to make.
- By combining visuals with the vocal, and letting people use more than just their hearing sense, you can have a much larger impact on your audience and increase the audience's enthusiasm.
- Visual aids create a more lasting impression – which is exactly what you want!



Something to think about: Research shows that it is essential to engage as many senses as possible when you speak in public. This is to accommodate people's different learning preferences, as some people remember better from hearing, others from seeing, etc. Visual aids are particularly important. As the Chinese proverb goes: *What I hear I forget. What I see remember. What I do I learn.*

Although visual aids are essential, they should not dominate your talk or presentation and be the major emphasis. Use them only when:

- It is difficult to visualise the idea or concept
- Statistical or numerical data is involved
- Structural details and relationships have to be shown
- You want to grip your audience with the specific idea or concept

Characteristics of good visual aids:

- *Visibility:* The audience must be able to see it clearly.
- *Accurate:* Check your facts and present them on scale – do not exaggerate.
- *Appropriate:* The aid should not confuse or detract from the presentation.
- *Clear:* Keep the aid simple and clean and use bright colours.
- *Neat:* Visual aids should be rounded off well and must look professional.
- *Efficient:* Prepare the visual aids in advance and test the equipment beforehand to make sure it displays correctly.



Something to think about: *Good visual aids amplify and clarify meaning. If they attract all the attention to themselves, they detract from the talk or presentation.*

How to use visual aids

A striking, professional visual aid is not always enough to get the message across thoroughly. You have to make sure your verbal presentation and body language do justice to your visual aids.

Techniques for effective use of visual aids:

- Always stand to the side of the aid – not in front of it.
- Don't let your head drop down or turn too far to the side when talking about the aid so that people cannot hear what you are saying.
- Don't turn your back to the audience.
- Don't talk to your visual aid. You must look at your aid no more than a quarter of the time – the rest of the time you should be looking at your audience.
- Use the hand nearest the visual aid for pointing.

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Making and designing slides

- Slides allow you to extend the descriptive power of your words by visual examples.
- Remember that less is more: Your slides should not have elaborate, decorative use of line and colour. They should communicate information about your topic, not demonstrate your capabilities on the computer.

Tips for creating effective slides:

- Determine if the audience can understand and absorb the information from the slide in the time they have to see it. One slide, one idea, one minute.
- Check all spelling, grammar, terminology and figures before finalising your slides. Get someone else to proofread it as well.
- Check your visual aids with your notes. Be sure they agree on terminology and numbers.
- Use a clear typeface (font) and use only the one typeface throughout the talk or presentation.
- Text that is flushed left is simpler and easier to read than centered text.
- Use lower-case letters as far as possible, except for proper nouns and the first letter of headings (using only capital letters makes it difficult to read).
- Red, blue, magenta and green type can be very difficult to read under certain light conditions.
- Royal blue however makes an excellent background.
- Do not use more than three colours. Use primary colours and hues (red-orange, bright blue, bright green and yellow-green) and do not use pastels.

The essentials of presentations

- Know exactly how you want to change the audience's action and attitudes when they leave you. Develop a mission.
- Realise they won't remember more than a few points anyway, so decide which three or four points must be remembered.
- Speak with passion about your topic and compassion for your audience and the rest will just fall in line!

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Sources

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