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6 Steps to Stress-Free Speaking

By Larina Kase

If you're like many people, the very thought of getting up in front of a large group of people and speaking, makes you want to run and hide. Public speaking is the #1 fear in adult Americans. It ranks over the fear of death. You may have heard the joke, "If you attend a funeral, you'd rather be in the coffin than giving the eulogy"!

Speaking public causes stress at work, at parties, and in school. As you know, it can create discomfort, embarrassment, fear, apprehension, sadness. Public speaking stress can hold you back from career success and social comfort.

The best thing to help you overcome nervousness about public speaking is to do it a lot.

Here are six simple steps to help take the stress out of public speaking.

Step #1: It's in the preparation

One of the critical aspects in preparing a speech is knowing as much as possible about your audience. This is a version of the marketing concept of “what’s in it for me?” about your prospect.

Prepare well by asking yourself:

Why are they attending your talk?

What interests and motivates them?

What will hold their attention?

What difficulties can you help them with?

How can you involve them in a way that would be enjoyable for them?

You can learn about your audience by putting together a brief (5 questions or less) email survey for them to answer and send back to you. You can use <http://www.SurveyMonkey.com> to help you.

Or you can learn about your audience by interviewing a couple people who will be in the audience, and by talking with your contact person about who will be attending

There’s always Google- definitely Google your audience! A little research can teach you tons.

Really knowing your audience will reduce a good deal of your nervousness about getting up in front of them.

Why?

First, you feel a connection with them and they will feel less like a faceless mass in front of you.

Second, you will know that you are talking about things they are interested in, which eliminates the fear about boring them.

Third, you will present things in their language and they will become more engaged. They will participate and want to be involved. Finally, you will learn how to structure your presentation (i.e., workshop, lecture, AV materials, etc).

Step #2: Picking Your Topic is Key

As discussed in the last step, preparing for your specific audience is critical for public-speaking success. You also need to choose the right topic for YOU. There is a large amount of research data which shows that the top three characteristics that audiences rate as making a strong speech or presentation include the speaker's enthusiasm, the topic, and the speaker's knowledge.

Don't you want to be called a "dynamic" "interesting" and "engaging" speaker? One of the best ways to insure that this is how people describe you is by talking about something you know, love, and can easily talk about. Your passion and enthusiasm will come across to the audience and they will respond.

What about when you are assigned a topic? There are several things you can do:

1. Tie the assigned topic to the topic you know, love, and can easily talk about. Make sure it isn't too big of a stretch, but get those pieces in there.
2. Find a way to become interested in the topic. Talk to different people. Research some interesting angles to pursue, etc. If you are not interested in the topic, no one else will be.
3. Engage your curiosity. Ask yourself questions. Ask the audience questions. Use the experience to learn.
4. Tell a story that is meaningful to you. Storytelling is also a great way to engage your audience.
5. Smile and gesture during your talk to convey interest.
6. Partner up with someone who knows about a different angle of your topic and talk about the area that you know.

Step #3: Reduce Self-Consciousness

One of the reasons you may get nervous before speaking is because you become very self conscious. Have you noticed yourself mentally inventorying everything about yourself: your hair, outfit, plan for what to say, etc?

Becoming self conscious of course will make you feel more anxious. The solution to changing your self consciousness is changing your attention. What you focus on expands. If you focus on your nervousness and awkwardness, you will feel more nervous and appear more awkward.

One of the keys to decreasing your self focus is to focus on something external and get your focus off of yourself!

Pay attention to what others are saying, what the room looks like, what people are wearing, as long as you focus on an something external, your self consciousness will decrease.

Practice doing this in other conversations and situations outside of public speaking so you can get good at it before the nerve-wracking speaking.

Step #4: Get physically and mentally ready beforehand.

Get yourself in the right mindset and physical-set for your talk *before* you get up there.

If you are someone who tends to get anxious and have physical symptoms such as racing heart, sweatiness, and shakiness, get your body ready ahead of time by first exercising and then relaxing.

About two to three hours before your talk, get 30-45 minutes of brisk cardiovascular exercise. This helps your body to habituate to the physiological sensations and release built up muscle tension. About 20-30 minutes before the talk, do some calming exercises like stretching, deep breathing, and muscle relaxation (by first tensing and then releasing all the major muscle groups).

Get mentally ready pre-talk by going through your presentation in your mind in a calm, confident manner. Get an image in your head of yourself delivering the presentation exactly as you would like to, the audience reacting very well, and you feeling great at the end. Do not use this to over-rehearse the presentation, instead use it to get in the right mind-set for a great delivery. When you get up there, take a minute to focus all of your energy and then release it during your talk

Step #5: Conquer your fearful thoughts

Ask yourself:

What exactly am I afraid of?

Is it that I will make a fool of myself?

Stammer over my words?

Not be able to answer questions?

Sweat?

Shake?

Lose my breath?

Will people think I am not intelligent?

Will they lose respect for me because I appeared nervous?

Figuring out exactly what you are afraid of is the key to conquering your fear. Once you know what it is, you can start to gather and weigh the evidence regarding the likelihood of that happening. So, for example, if you are most afraid of tripping or stuttering, you can calculate how many times you spoke and how many times that actually happened.

Then, you can start trying out a bit of speaking to test out your predictions. Each time you make it through without the fear happening, take note! And if the fear DID happen (you did shake like a leaf), ask yourself how bad that really was- did it ruin the whole talk or did things still turn out okay?

Get some feedback from others. Video tape if possible and watch the tape later. A common mistake that people make is thinking that because they felt nervous, the performance was horrible. How you felt is *not* the best measure of how things actually went.

Step #6: Connect with your audience

This is the number one cardinal rule of speaking in public. We all know what it is like to be in an audience and have someone speaking *at* us or about something that is totally *not* interesting to us. Use these experiences as an audience member to give audiences what they want.

The first step is to choose a topic that is relevant and interesting to the audience. Then, establish credibility and respect. Do this ahead of time by asking for feedback and input, at the beginning or your talk by being introduced in an upbeat and credibility-building way, and as you go along, by constantly remembering to CONNECT.

Call audience members by name when you know their names. Smile and show your personality to help people connect with you. Remember to look at individuals for at least 3 seconds each, use animated facial expressions, do not hide behind a lectern or other prop, and use "you" so you are really talking *to* or even better *with* the audience.

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