

Classic Guide to Public Speaking



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Speaking with Confidence: How to Overcome Your Nerves in Public Speaking

Whatever job you do, there are few areas where you can avoid public speaking entirely.

Whether it's giving a big or small presentation; feeding back in a staff meeting; doing a leaving speech; serving or advising customers in a public service role; making announcements; or the more obvious roles of teaching; training; interviewing/being interviewed; media work and management; public speaking is a lifelong tool that can empower you and your audience, wherever you are and whatever you do.

If the thought of public speaking terrifies you, your legs feel like jelly and you want to hide - you are not alone. How we appear to others and not looking or sounding stupid are important factors in our self-esteem and wellbeing. There is nothing worse than knowing your subject or what to say, but not being able to deliver on the day due to nerves and lack of self-confidence. Public speaking is considered one of the most stressful activities there is, whether socially or professionally, but it doesn't have to be this way. With proper preparation, practice and good posture, you can overcome your fears and deliver with passion and conviction on any platform and in any place.

Essential checklist for great public-speaking

1. **Prepare** your speech/talk/presentation thoroughly - this cannot be over-emphasised, because:
 - The more prepared you are, the more focused you will be.
 - The more prepared you are, the more comfortable you will be.
 - The more prepared you are, the more you will speak with conviction.
 - The more prepared you are, the less likely you'll be distracted, lose your place or rhythm.
2. **Content** is crucial whatever the topic. Any topic, no matter how unlikely, can be interesting if you know how to make it so.

Presentations have to have four key elements to provide a winning formula:

1. Passion and conviction - we respond to the emotional.
2. Facts /not errors - we don't like to be told lies or impossible/ridiculous data.
3. Stories - a short story or conversation style engages the audience quickly.
4. Be memorable (for the right reasons!) - the new, different or profound have impact.

Including humour it can be good, but also risky - unless you know your audience well, keep in mind that your humour may not be theirs, and if they don't laugh, you can lose confidence instantly.

3. **Practise** in front of a mirror and/or in front of/down the phone to another person. Having an audience makes a huge difference to how you hear yourself, and to how you want to present yourself. It gives you helpful and immediate feedback.

4. **Posture and appearance** are crucial while speaking to an audience.

Posture: when standing, make sure your shoulders are slightly back and lowered and your feet are apart - this enables your body to be supported more effectively, because your weight is distributed more evenly. When you stand with your shoulders closed in and your feet pressed together, you will feel that your balance changes or wobbles slightly. This increases tension, which in turn tightens your diaphragm, restricts your vocal chords and breathing and you sound higher, faster and quieter. If you continue in this position, your breathing gets even shorter and your performance weakens.

You can at any time change your breathing and position by pausing briefly during your speaking, then adjusting your position and getting your breath back under control. However, it's always more effective to begin with good posture so that you're more relaxed from the start.

If you prefer to stand in front of a lectern or have a table in front of you for notes/your laptop, etc., try and check out the venue/facilities beforehand if possible. There may be the use of a microphone, stage or platform and you may wish to see the size of the room and the seating style - knowing these factors can help you be more relaxed before you have begun.

Appearance: always wear comfortable but smart clothes when public speaking - you will feel much more in control. Never wear brand new very high shoes that you can't stand in the same position for, for very long, or dangling jewellery/scarves that will hit the microphone or lectern frequently and distract you and your audience from your words. It is wise to have back-up clothes and shoes if you are new to public speaking, are giving a long presentation (e.g. for more than 30 minutes) and have to travel a long way to get to the venue (especially if on public transport).

5. Go early to **the venue** to check out the space, test any electronic equipment, re-arrange the seating if not in a circle or accessible, and to find out where the toilets are. Set up your space if you have extra gadgets relevant to your talk(s), and ensure you have water available.
6. **Just before your speech** - practice your positioning of body and feet, slow and measured breathing and say a simple mantra to give yourself positive vibes. Even '*go for it*' or '*this will be great*' increase your positive adrenalin rather than terrify you and add to your nerves.
7. Always **speak slower** than you would like to or do in normal conversation. Take your time because the audience needs to hear every word and they always hear it slightly delayed from your delivery, especially in venues where the acoustics aren't that great. Mumbling, speaking too quickly and rushing to get to the end of sentences or Powerpoint slides mean that key content is lost on the way. Do not read your speech in a monotone voice without looking up once or varying your emphasis. This will bore you rigid, and the audience too.
8. Make **eye contact** with your audience occasionally and remember to **smile**. Smiling makes you and the audience feel positive, it keeps your energy levels up and maintains the audience's engagement and enthusiasm from start to finish.

9. Even if you are **speaking sitting down** in a smaller meeting, on Skype/webinars or without being given any warning, you can always remember your posture and breathing to help you relax. A boardroom table may hide your legs, but it will still expose your torso and voice. Keeping your shoulders back and your diaphragm open and relaxed helps enormously to ease your nerves, as do smiling, making eye contact across the room and speaking clearly and slowly.

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