

# Public Speaking: A Critical Success Skill

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Leaders in every field share a key ability – they know how to present their ideas effectively. Presentation skills play a critical role in opening doors, influencing others, and in career advancement.

Why don't more people work on developing their presentation skills? Perhaps it has to do with fear. In the *Book of Lists*, public speaking is cited as the #1 fear for most people, while death is ranked # 7. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld suggests that at a funeral, more people would rather be in the box than giving the eulogy!

What's the fear all about? *You're in the spotlight and you're being judged.* It can be paralyzing! Mark Twain described it this way, "There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars." Realize that being nervous about public speaking is normal.

## ***How can you manage your nervousness?***

Start by understanding that public speaking is a skill which can be learned, just like driving a car, operating a computer, or developing a budget.

If your motivation is strong enough, there are techniques to learn and implement that enable your butterflies to "fly in formation."

- The first time you deliver a presentation will likely be the worst. *Don't allow that first time to be the actual presentation!*
- **Pay attention to what you do before the presentation.** Avoid caffeine, sugar, and milk products. Ingesting caffeine and sugar is equivalent to squirting lighter fluid on a nervousness fire. Milk products coat your throat and increase the likelihood that you'll have to clear it frequently.
- **Exercise prior to the presentation.** Whether you do isometric exercises (trying to push your feet through the floor or pushing your hands together) or walk up a few flights of stairs, exercise will dissipate the adrenaline in your system that makes you feel so jumpy.
- When waiting for your turn to speak, look down at the ground and **listen to yourself breathe.** Focusing on your breathing tends to regulate it back to normal and helps calm you down.
- **Finally, keep perspective.** Odds are that you know more about the subject matter than your audience. Let go of striving for perfection. People that seem perfect have little credibility; they seem overly planned and rehearsed, and not very real.
- **Practice your presentation.** Do so in the posture, either standing or sitting, in which you intend to deliver it.

## ***What does it take to deliver an excellent presentation?***

Lee Iococca said, “You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your brains won’t get you anywhere.”

*While most people focus primarily on their content, it’s actually **how you deliver** that content that most impacts your effectiveness.*

Your presentation begins the moment people in your audience have an opportunity to see you – in the parking lot, in the hallway, or while waiting for your turn to speak. Research studies suggest that as much as 90% of your effectiveness has to do with the non-verbal impression you make — even before you begin to speak.

## ***How do you non-verbally convey an air of confidence and poise?***

Start by dressing at least as well as the best dressed person in the audience.

John Malloy, author of *Dress for Success*, says that there are basic “uniforms” for men and for women.

- For the look of authority, men should wear either navy blue or dark gray suits, a long-sleeve white shirt, a tie with some shade of red in it, socks at least as dark as the hem of your pants, and black shoes.
- Women have more choices in their success attire. The order in which outfits create a sense of power are (1) a skirted suit, (2) a skirt with a non-matching jacket, (3) a dress with a jacket over it, (4) a pant suit, and (5) slacks with a non-matching jacket. Women can wear black, navy, royal blue, gray, tan, white, red, or turquoise.
- Women should not wear greens, browns, or pastels when giving presentations. Shoes should be closed

in front and back. In addition, women should wear some makeup. Why? The vast majority of women in our culture wear make-up. As a speaker, you definitely want to look normal!

- If you’re ever in doubt regarding what to wear, pay attention to what the executive management team members in your organization wear for important presentations.

Beyond clothing, there are lots of strategies to help you deliver your presentation with confidence and authority.

- **Stand with both feet flat on the floor**, shoulder width apart. Keep your weight evenly distributed. Avoid shifting weight up and back or side-to-side. Keep your chin parallel to the ground. If your chin is tilted up, you tend to look arrogant. When tilted down, you look timid.
- **Hold eye contact** with an individual for at least 3-5 seconds. Talk to one person for a phrase or a sentence before moving on to someone else; it helps develop rapport and creates a personal connection. Make sure to have eye contact with people in all areas of the audience.
- **Physically move**, taking one or more steps, to emphasize a point.
- **People pay more attention to a speaker who uses gestures** which are specific and consistent with the words, and delivered at face level. If people are paying attention to you, they’re looking at your face. If you gesture elsewhere, it distracts them from having eye contact with you.
- Finally, **keep your hands visible**. Unconsciously, the impression of trustworthiness is increased when people can see your hands.

## ***Use your voice to connect with the audience and convey your message.***

- **Use short sentences.** They're easy to deliver and easy for the audience to understand.
- **Avoid annoying speech habits.** Too many “um, uh, you know, okay, well, basically, so, now” words connecting sentences complicate the message.
- **Avoid using the word “and” to connect sentences.** Some people connect almost all of their sentences this way, making their presentation full of long, run-on sentences.
- **Make sure you have enough animation or energy.** Your voice is crucial in conveying a wide variety of emotions. Motivational speaker Tony Robbins said, “You don't have to be perfect to speak; it's your passion and energy that your audience will remember.”

## ***What else will your audience likely remember?***

Years ago, the directions for emergency procedures found in the seat pockets of commercial airplanes were 90% words. Today, they're 95% pictures. Why? Research showed that passengers quickly understand and retain messages which are delivered via pictures.

- A good visual aid is similar to a billboard on a highway that people can read while traveling at 65 miles an hour. The main point is expressed in the picture. There are few words.
- For effective slides, abide by the 7/7 rule, i.e. *No more than 7 words per line and no more than 7 lines per slide.* Use bullets to identify main points. They're easier to read and to understand.
- Finally, be imaginative: use illustrations, cartoons, graphs, maps and charts whenever possible. For inspiration notice those displayed on the front pages of every section in USA Today.

## ***How can you take your presentation skills to the next level?***

- Be observant of others and accept activities that will require you to practice public speaking. Learn from other speakers by paying attention to what they do that works well.
- Say yes when invited to participate on a panel discussion.
- Participate actively in professional meetings.
- Join Toastmasters to practice in a laboratory environment where it's safe to experiment, make mistakes, and learn. Charles Luce, former Chairman of the Board for Consolidated Edison said, “My five-year membership in Toastmasters was the most valuable club membership that I ever had. It gave me the unique opportunity to learn how to preside at meetings, to speak in public, and to think on my feet – and to do so in a setting where mistakes were not costly.”
- Finally, consider taking a course or hiring a professional speech coach. With practice and experience, you can improve your public-speaking skills, and fear will no longer block your way. Perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson had public speaking in mind when he said, “Knowledge is the antidote to fear.”

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