

When It's Your Turn To Speak

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You have earned a reputation as a knowledgeable, credible authority in your field. Others want to hear what you have to say. You're about to become a public speaker.

Yet, whether you are leading a seminar before a small group of your peers or delivering a keynote address to thousands of strangers, unless you have years of public speaking experience, you are likely to feel uncomfortable when the microphone is in your hand.

It's an extraordinarily common reaction-most people simply do not enjoy speaking in front of an audience. But your anxieties and apprehensions can be lessened if you remember these seven tips.

1. Do not think you can hide behind technology.

A common, and disastrous, mistake is to think "I'll put my presentation on Powerpoint. Then, nobody will focus on me." Wrong. A bad speaker with Powerpoint is still a bad speaker. Powerpoint, used with appropriate restraint, can be a good enhancement to your presentation. It is never, however, a substitute for preparation. It doesn't matter how many PowerPoint slides you have or how many bullet points you've squeezed on them, no one will ever leave a program saying "Wow! Those were great bullet points!" Instead, if they leave saying, "Wow! The presenter sure knew his stuff, and he illustrated his points well," then you have done your job and exceeded most people's expectations.

2. The audience is rarely your enemy.

When asked why people fear public speaking, a common response is "Because the audience will just be waiting for me to screw up." Rarely is this true. It is true that the audience may not always agree with your message, but they almost never will want you to fail. That is, virtually no one comes to a presentation saying "I hope the speaker is lousy--I hope he really screws up." Why not? Because if it's a bad experience for the speaker, it will be a bad experience for the audience. As a result, most people hope for a good performance; most people will want you to succeed. Therefore, even in an audience of strangers, most will be allies instead of adversaries. Take comfort in their support.

3. Choose one of four objectives.

Everyone knows that before you start any project you need to determine your objective. Yet many speakers skip this important step, preferring instead to "Just get up there and wing it." It always shows, and no one is ever happy with the result. Good speakers, however, know they always have a choice of four objectives: to inform, to persuade, to inspire, or to entertain. Those are your four choices; you can choose one, two, three, or all four, but you must choose at least one. And once you are clear as to exactly what you want to accomplish, your message will be so much easier to prepare and deliver.

4. Don't speak to your audience; speak with it.

Speaking styles, just like clothing styles, change over time. William Jennings Bryan, considered a great orator a century ago, would have a hard time finding an

audience today. That's because grand oratory is long gone. Today's audiences generally want short, practical presentations--more tightly focused and with an emphasis on "what's in it for me?" These days, lectures, especially long ones, are not well received. Today's best speakers know that a good speech is good conversation. Good speakers today solicit audience involvement, comments, and questions. And the best speakers do these things while keeping it brief.

5. Nothing can top a good story.

Bill Gove, a well-respected long-time professional speaker, says: "Public speaking is simply this-make a point, tell a story. Make another point, tell another story." He said people don't remember points. But they do remember stories. So where do you get good stories to make your points? Bad speakers turn to such books as the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. Why is this the mark of a bad speaker? The stories in those books aren't your stories. They happened to--and they belong to--other people. Instead, just pay attention to the little stories of the little things that happen to you on a daily basis. As soon as you start using your personal, real-life stories and anecdotes, you will never have to turn to someone else's material again. And as soon as you start anchoring your points with your personal stories, your audiences will start remembering you.

6. Write your speech word for word.

Yes, write your speech, but no, don't dare read it. You probably remember having been bored to tears by a speaker who stood motionless behind a lectern while he read his speech. If you are ever tempted to read a speech to an audience, why not just provide the text in written form and save everyone time? Reading a speech is simply bad. On the other hand, writing a speech is good. But if you are not going to read it, why would you take the effort to write it word for word? It's because writing a speech word for word encourages "economy of thought." Have you ever heard a speaker take ten minutes to make a point that could have been made in one or two? That's what happens when the speech is not well written and well edited. Good speakers pack the most information in the least time because they are good editors. Therefore, write your thoughts, word for word. Then edit aggressively. And then rehearse your tightly edited stories to the point you can deliver them by referring to no more than a few note cards. This will give you both economy of thought and a conversational style.

7. There is no substitute for practice and preparation.

Few people speak well extemporaneously. The greatest speakers you have ever heard are the ones who have expended the greatest effort. Speaking is skill that takes practice. And there is no better place to practice these skills than Toastmasters International, the world's largest organization to develop speaking, listening and leadership skills.

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