

Ten Tips for Presentation Confidence and Reducing Nervousness



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Ten Tips for Presentation Confidence and Reducing Nervousness

“There are two types of speakers. Those who get nervous and those who are liars.”

-Mark Twain

Did you know that according to the Wall Street Journal, public speaking is the number one fear in America? The fear of death is ranked number two! That's right - we seem more afraid of public speaking than we are of physical demise, heights, jumping out of a plane, or dreaded in-laws.

If you think about it, fear of public speaking is also a fear of death - an emotional death. We feel naked and exposed in front of an audience. We think people are going to scrutinize everything we say and do. We pressure ourselves to be perfect, or else our self-worth suffers. We dread confronting the possibility of rejection.

Now for the good news, most of us can reduce our anxiety of public speaking and increase our confidence by avoiding a few poor habits, while incorporating some helpful tips. The following is a list of six poor speaking habits to avoid, followed by ten tips for presentation confidence and reducing nervousness.

Six Poor Public Speaking Habits to Avoid:

1. Don't expect perfection from yourself.

None of us are perfect. We all know that. Yet when it comes to public speaking, some of us tend to kick ourselves over every little perceived mistake we make. We magnify our imperfections, while ignoring all that's good and well. The truth is, even the best, most experienced speakers make many mistakes. When they do, they recover, keep going gracefully, and all is well. This is one of the keys to public speaking success: to keep going gracefully. The audience will never know most of your mistakes, unless you halt your speech, break down, and confess them. Carry on with poise. Give yourself permission not to be perfect.

2. Avoid equating public speaking to your self-worth.

If you're reading this article, you're probably a successful professional who has worked hard to get to where you are today. Public speaking is only a small part of your overall professional ability. If you're not confident at it, there are many ways to help you improve. I've seen otherwise intelligent and capable professionals shrivel up on stage, as if suddenly nothing about them is right. Whether you're good at public speaking or not has nothing to do with your value as a person. It's simply a skill that you can learn and become better at with practice.

3. Avoid being nervous about your nervousness.

Singer-songwriter Bruce Springsteen, legendary for his live concert performances, once observed that if he felt completely relaxed before a show, he wouldn't perform as well as if he had felt nervous. Springsteen knows how to channel his nervousness into excitement and power on stage.

Speakers who lack confidence often feel nervous, and then on top of that feel anxious about the fact that they're nervous, which compounds the anxiety. That's a lot of stress to bear.

Nervousness is our adrenaline flowing, that's all. It's a form of energy. Successful speakers know how to make this energy work for them, and turn nervousness into enthusiasm, engagement, and charisma. They have fun with it (see confidence tips #8 and #10 below). It's okay to be nervous. Make the energy work for you.

4. Avoid trying to memorize every word.

Unless you're reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or your marriage vows, there's no need to memorize every word of any speech. Attempting to do so will simply increase stress, and cause greater nervousness if the sequence of the words you're trying to memorize goes amiss.

5. Avoid reading word for word.

Avoid reading your presentation word for word from a script. There's a big difference between reading and speaking. Dry reading disseminates information, often at the risk of the audience tuning out. Speaking is creating an impact with your content and personality, so that not only is your message understood, your professional profile rises. People who read excessively from a script in the U.S. effectively reduce their chances of upward advancement.

6. Avoid speaking without any gestures. Avoid poor gestures.

Many Americans are highly visual. To speak without proper body language (see confidence tip #10 below) is to greatly reduce the impression you could make on the audience. I had a private client once who was turned down several times for a promotion because she was deemed as not having enough “leadership qualities”. Within a month after she learned to gesture assertively, she won her promotion.

On the other hand, there are some highly unattractive gestures to avoid when speaking in public:

Hands on hips (Who made you mad?)

Arms across chest (Why so defensive?)

Hands behind your back excessively (Hiding something? In the military?)

Hands in pockets (Insecure?)

Clasping hands in front of stomach (Too conservative; less likely to be promoted.)

Playing with hands, ring, or object (Distracting; reveals nervousness.)

Ten Tips for Presentation Confidence and Reducing Nervousness:

1. Develop your presentation around a simple outline.

A simple outline serves as the blueprint of your presentation. Before putting down all the details, write an outline first. A simple outline consists of:

- A. Ice breaker or attention getter (see tip #7)
- B. A one sentence purpose statement.
- C. Equally weighted main points.
- D. Summary.

For example:

- A. Quote from Martin Luther King Jr.
- B. Today I would like to discuss the importance of diversity and inclusion at the workplace.
 - C1. Definition and meaning of diversity
 - C2. How diversity strengthens the organization
 - C3. Best practice to celebrate inclusiveness
- D. Celebrate Diversity and inclusiveness. It's good business.

Having a simple outline can help you prepare a more organized presentation, and keep better track of the information as you present it. On your presentation day, have your outline laid out on a note card or PowerPoint, and just follow through the points.

2. Know your material well, but don't try to memorize every word.

As mentioned earlier, trying to memorize every word will only intensify nervousness, while increasing the possibility of stumbling over the words during your presentation. Know your material well enough to be able to talk about the ideas naturally. Use your outline and visuals (see tip #9) to guide you through your presentation step by step.

3. Visualize success.

I believe that mental preparation is one of the most important keys to any type of success. If you can see a successful outcome in your mind's eye, then you maximize the possibility of replicating the results in real life. NASA astronauts are trained to visualize certain difficult tasks before execution. Olympic athletes are coached to visualize peak performance before competition. Speakers can do the same by visualizing positive outcomes before a presentation. It's perfectly okay to be a little dramatic in your visualization: Close your eyes; feel yourself confident and excited about the presentation; picture the audience hanging on to your every word; sense your growing confidence as you move from point to point; hear your audience giving you a rousing standing ovation when you're done. *Bravo!*

The mind often cannot distinguish the difference between what is real and what is imagined. When you visualize success, your mind will program itself to help make it real.

4. Eat "presentation food".

On the day of an important presentation, eat only a light meal. Fresh fruits and vegetables are ideal. I consider a couple of bananas an hour before a talk the perfect "presentation food". Bananas give me energy, digest easily, and keep me from going hungry. They're nature's perfect energy bars!

Avoid taking foods and beverages with much caffeine or processed sugar, such as coffee, tea, sodas, and desserts. They may make you more agitated and nervous. Additionally, avoid eating a heavy meal before speaking. You don't want to become lethargic, in energy as well as in thinking, midway through your repertoire.

5. Exercise, air and water.

Before you speak, if you find yourself with a lot of excess, nervous energy, do something physical. Run in place, shake your body loose, or do a few jumping jacks. Shake off the excess energy. Athletes do this to keep themselves “loose” before competition, and so could speakers before a speech. Other ways to help reduce nervousness include putting some cold water on your face, and going outside to take in some fresh air.

6. Take deep breaths.

A minute or so before you go up to speak, take several long, deep breaths, including one right before you begin. You can do this very inconspicuously. When we're nervous, there's a natural tendency for us to breathe shallower breaths (some people forget to breathe all together), which can make us more nervous. Taking deep breaths helps us to relax by loosening up our muscles; to feel more confident by inhaling into our lungs and diaphragms; and to think sharper by allowing more oxygen into our brain. Deep breathing helps us collect and ground ourselves, so we can begin our presentation strong.

7. Open with an ice-breaker or attention getter.

To help start your presentation on a good note, begin with an ice breaker or an attention getter.

An ice breaker is a brief comment you make to help start your talk on a lighter note:

“I'm glad to see all of you here, instead of at the afternoon Giants' game.”

“I see the company's providing pizza for this lunch time talk. I hope you saved a couple of slices for me!”

“The traffic was so bad this morning, I wasn't sure if I was going to make it.”

An attention getter is a piece of information or an action that can generate immediate interest from your audience. A good attention getter can be a quote (like the one from Mark Twain at the beginning of this article), a statistic, a visual, a question, or a dramatic gesture.

A good ice-breaker or attention getter helps set the tone for the rest of your presentation. They can also help relax both you and your audience.

8. Admit nervousness early.

One very useful strategy to help reduce nervousness is to simply admit to the audience that you're nervous. That's right - just say it! Tell them, with some humor, that you're sweating over having to give this talk. Say this at the very beginning of your presentation (as an ice-breaker), and exaggerate a bit as in the following:

"I was so nervous about this presentation that I had to read a tip sheet from a communication coach last night on how not to be so nervous..."

"Someone told me to picture the audience in their underwear as I speak, but I don't think I want to do that with this group..."

"I'm feeling a bit nervous, so if you can't hear me, just waive your hands wildly and jump up and down, okay?"

Admitting nervousness takes the pressure off of yourself as you realize that you don't have to be perfect – the audience doesn't expect you to be so. It sets the bar a little lower for allowing mistakes, and puts the audience at ease if you do occasionally stumble. The key is to admit your nervousness early and with some humor, so you can help make yourself and the audience comfortable throughout the rest of the presentation.

9. Follow your outline and use visuals.

Earlier we covered why a simple outline is important in preparing for a successful presentation. Again, have your outline on a note card or PowerPoint. During the presentation, simply follow the main points to stay on top of what you want to say.

Properly designed and placement of well illustrated visuals can make your task easier as a speaker. This helps to raise the interest level of your audience. We tend to be much more spontaneous when speaking in reference to visuals. Using attractive visuals such as outlines, charts, graphs, pictures, or objects, not only helps to increase the attention level of your audience, but also helps them to remember more of your content.

Keys to a good visual: Be sure the words and details on the visual are large enough for everyone to see, and the contents are simple to follow. Avoid cramming your visuals with excessive information. Consider placing highly detailed or complex information in handouts or in follow-up e-files. As a general rule, a good visual should be seen and understood in no more than six seconds, ten if you're in a highly technical or scientific industry. Any longer and the audience may stop paying attention to you while trying to decipher the visual.

10. Tell stories and anecdotes. Use body language.

The final tip on presentation confidence is simply to *have fun!* One of the easiest ways to do so is to tell stories and give anecdotes during your presentation to get a point across. Give interesting examples. As you do so, use dramatic facial expressions and open, chest level gestures to help drive your point home. Most of us love a good story - it's something ingrained from childhood. Tell a good story, and not only will you enjoy the moment, so will your audience!

In conclusion, good public speakers are made, not born. Many well-known speakers, including Ronald Reagan, Garrison Keillor, and Barbara Streisand, have admitted to nervousness before speaking. The key is that good speakers know what to do with their nervousness. They use the energy to their advantage and channel it positively.

If you've found this article helpful, and would like to continue your development as a successful speaker and presenter, I highly recommend that you join a local chapter of Toastmasters (www.toastmasters.org), the world's largest organization devoted to public speaking excellence. You may also want to consider signing up for a public speaking course at a local college. Who knows, maybe I'll have the pleasure of having you in my class!

Contact Prof. Preston Ni at commsuccess@nipreston.com, or visit www.nipreston.com.

Additional Resources

Fujishin, Randy. *The Natural Speaker*. 5th Ed. Allyn & Bacon. 2005.

Tracy, Brian. *Speak to Win*. AMACOM. 2008.

www.toastmasters.org