



Tips for Effective Public Speaking and Engaging With the Public

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Speaking in public is often listed as the number one fear among most people. The fear and trepidation of public speaking is even rated higher than the *fear of death*! According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 75% of the people surveyed ranked fear of public speaking, or “glossophobia,” as their number one fear (LaDouceur, 2024). Glossophobia is a term derived from the Greek word “glossa,” or tongue, and “phobos,” fear or dread. Glossophobia is the anxiety or nervousness one feels at the thought of speaking in front of others (LaDouceur, 2024).



Well-known people also experience glossophobia. Carol Burnett, a famous comedian and actress, would often vomit before taking the stage. Warren Buffett, an American investor and philanthropist, is said to have dropped out of his college speech class out of his fear of public speaking. The fear of public speaking is more common than many people would expect.

The tips presented in this fact sheet may not alleviate all of the anxiety one experiences before public speaking. However with practice, preparation and patience, one can gain more confidence and become a better public speaker.

1. **Be prepared.** Know your material, know your message, and know your audience. You should be able to describe your key message in one sentence. The audience is giving you their time and attention, so be professional and respectful. Regardless if the setting is formal or informal, rehearse to be confident you will convey your message clearly. Remember, your audience wants you to be successful.
2. **Start strong/set the stage.** Begin your talk with a strong opening. “Set the stage” by connecting with your audience. You can begin with an interesting fact or a short story to connect with the audience and your message.

3. **Be conversational.** It's important to talk with your audience, not at your audience. Avoid reading your speech word for word. Instead, refer to notes or points from an outline to help you have a more free-flowing conversational tone.
4. **Speak from the heart.** If you care about the topic, it will help connect and resonate with the audience. Passion can't be taught; it can only be caught. If you speak from the heart, the audience will catch your passion for the topic.
5. **Patience, patience, patience.** Speaking in public is never easy, even for seasoned speakers. Be patient with yourself. Don't get frustrated if you make a mistake while speaking. Don't apologize; mistakes show you are human. Just pick up where you left off and move forward. Be kind to yourself. Practice patience with yourself and keep practicing to hone your skills.
6. **Be YOU.** If you are anxious, it may seem like a good strategy to try to emulate a more famous or seasoned public speaker, or to simply read your speech or cards. Don't do it. The audience will see your lack of authenticity and not connect with your topic or you. Embrace your own style and be conversational.
7. **Pace, not haste.** Pace refers to the speed at which you speak. If you talk too fast, the audience will not be able to understand or grasp the topic. If you talk too slow, the audience can quickly become bored and lose interest. Don't rush through your talk to get it over. The best way to retain the attention of your audience is to vary your pace. Include pauses or take a breath.
8. **Plan for the worst, hope for the best.** When someone is afraid of something, such as public speaking, one can overestimate how bad it can be. Think about the worst that could happen, then think about your best possible response. This thought process will minimize your fear and help increase your confidence and calm you down. After thinking about the worst-case scenario, envision your best-case scenario. Seeing yourself in a positive vision, after addressing the worst situation, can help you to feel less anxious.
9. **Engage and involve your audience.** Build an imaginary bridge with your audience and connect with them through engagement or involvement. You can ask for a show of hands if people identify with something, to shout out answers to a question, or to connect through a story. Ensure how you engage fits the topic, tone and time given for the talk. A genuine smile is an easy bridge that connects and builds rapport with an audience.



10. **Listen to your body.** When we experience anxiety and fear, our body tenses, and our breathing becomes shallow. Listen to your body. Take measured and deep breaths before speaking to help you relax. Walk or move to help release built-up anxiety. Movement while speaking can help to emphasize your points or stay rooted to demonstrate serious ideas. However, don't move around erratically, that will distract your audience. Do make eye contact. Move your eyes across the audience, stopping on individual people every so often. Get comfortable with pauses and silence. Silence can be a golden attention grabber.

Remember the audience wants you to succeed; they are in attendance because they want to hear what you have to say. Envision yourself speaking to an engaged audience. One of the best ways to improve your public speaking skills is to film yourself presenting and then replay it. While it might feel awkward, it is the best way to identify areas where you can improve your skills. Don't avoid opportunities to speak publicly simply out of fear. You have a voice, and you have something important to say. Once you identify your message, with practice and patience, and by following some common tips, you will begin to build your confidence and improve your ability to speak and engage with the public.

References

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