

Improve Your Communication and Speaking Skills



Association for
Talent Development

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Improving Speaker Skills

You've been there. You are about to deliver a presentation to a group of people. As you arrange your notes, your knees suddenly begin shaking. Your voice starts to quiver, your head aches, and the only dry place on your body is the inside of your mouth. Then the strange muscle spasms begin. One eyelid twitches uncontrollably. Your legs wobble like melting rubber. And then the worst happens: The presentation you spent hours memorizing vanishes from your head. It's gone. Kaput. At that point, you are sure of one thing and one thing only—you will never get yourself into a situation like this again!

That's unfortunate. Oral expression—together with its nonverbal components—is the most important communication skill you can have. Think about it. In school, at home, at work, you probably speak hundreds of times each day, relaying thousands of ideas. And every time you speak, you convey something of who you are and what you think. Your vocabulary, grammar, phrasing, tone, eye contact, body movement, and gestures all make impressions on your listeners. If this impression is negative or poor, no matter how great the ideas in your head are, your message will suffer. How many good ideas are ignored or misunderstood because their presenter simply could not communicate these ideas well?

So what is the “right stuff” for a public speaker? A good one demonstrates the following qualities:

- honesty, including reasonable objectivity
- a sense of humor
- adequate thought and preparation
- a balance of confidence and modesty
- verbal, vocal, and physical communication skills
- appropriate appearance

This *Info-line* provides pointers and techniques on how to overcome fear of speaking by improving verbal skills, how to interpret and use nonverbal cues, and finally, how to avoid common presentation pitfalls. Using these guidelines, the climb to the lectern or stage will seem more like a path to success and less like a walk to the electric chair. It will also enhance your everyday small-group presentations and meetings.

Verbal Skills

A good voice is the primary means by which information can be imparted from one person to another or to a group. It has three important characteristics: quality, intelligibility, and variability.

Voice Quality

Voice quality is the overall impression your voice makes on its listeners. Some voices have a full, rich quality, while others may be shrill and nasal or breathy and muffled. Although the basic quality of your voice may be difficult to change, it can be subtly altered for rhetorical effect, becoming breathy when you are excited, tense when nervous, and resonant when solemn. Often, listeners can read such emotions from the sound of your voice alone. Although some speakers focus too heavily on the basic quality of their voices, it makes more sense to pay attention to something you can change—your voice's amazing ability to display emotion and attitude. If you still think your speaking voice is horrible, just remember that most people—no matter what they think of themselves—have perfectly fine voices for speaking.

Voice Intelligibility

Voice intelligibility, or understandability, depends on several factors:

■ **Articulation**

Articulation or enunciation is the precision and clarity with which you utter the sounds of speech. Articulation is chiefly the job of the jaw, tongue, and lips; most articulation problems come from simple laziness on the parts of these organs. When speaking, don't be afraid to move your lips and tongue or open your mouth. Overarticulate rather than underarticulate your speech sounds. What seems overdone to you will be crisp, understandable words to your listeners.

■ **Pronunciation**

This refers to the traditional or customary utterance of words. You may have difficulty figuring out just what is traditional and customary, since standards differ from place to place and from time to time. Dictionaries may be useful, but they become outdated and should not be followed compulsively.

Generally, educated people in your community, as well as national radio and television announcers, provide good standards for pronunciation. Common pronunciation faults are misplacement of the accent, omitting sounds, adding sounds, and verbalizing silent letters. Do not overcompensate to the point of calling attention to your speech, but also remember that pronunciation acceptable in informal conversation may be considered substandard in a public presentation.

■ **Vocalized Pauses**

This is the name we give to the syllables “uh,” “um,” and “ah” often found at the beginning of a spoken sentence. While a few vocalized pauses are natural and do not distract, too many can impede the communication process. Knowing your subject and what you plan to say is one way to minimize this problem.

Sez Who?

Everyone has an accent, but one usually isn't aware of it—until one speaks in another region of one's country or abroad. Unless public speaking is going to become a major part of your professional life, you don't need to think in terms of diction and elocution lessons to eradicate local color from your speech. Do, however, use the pronunciation guides in dictionaries. They, for instance, may tell you that the “I” in a word sounds like the “I” in “pie.” That can lead people from New York and Georgia to different, equally correct conclusions.

By you do need to consider the effect your accent has on the clarity of your pronunciation. Microphones, amplifiers, and room echo all distort your projected voice.

If you habitually drop final sounds (“goin” for “going” or “furthuh” for “further”) or run words together, it's harder for audiences to understand you. If you hear a tape of yourself and notice that your speech is slurred in spots, try to analyze what sounds or sound combinations give you trouble. Practice saying these more distinctly when you rehearse, but don't become so self-conscious that you begin to hesitate, hem, and haw.

Mispronouncing words is different from simply having an accent. Audiences have various prejudices about accents, but usually overcome them as they adjust to a speaker's sounds and cadence, and turn their concentration to a speech's contents. But mispronunciation has the universal effect of undercutting a speaker's credibility.

■ **Overuse of Stock Expressions**

This includes things such as “OK,” “like,” and “you know”; avoid these as much as possible. These expressions serve no positive communication function and convey callowness and a lack of originality.

■ **Substandard Grammar**

Using incorrect grammar is almost always unacceptable in public speaking. Using it reduces your credibility with some listeners, clouds your meaning, and distracts listeners from what you are really trying to say. If your grammar isn't up to par, look into one of the many grammar self-help books on the market. Research has shown that even those who have used substandard grammar their entire lives can, with diligent practice, improve their skills significantly in a relatively short time.

Voice Variability

Voice variability expresses differences in meaning. Like salt and pepper on food, variety spices up your speech. A speaker's voice that has good quality and is intelligible still may not appeal to listeners if that voice is used in a boring or monotonous way. Listeners rapidly tire of a voice that doesn't vary its delivery style. Vocal fundamentals such as rate, volume, force, pitch, and emphasis will vary your voice and, thus, improve communication.

■ **Rate of Speech**

This measures words spoken per minute. In a typical presentation, most people speak from 120 to 180 words per minute. Even within these averages, however, speakers vary their rates of speech to emphasize specific ideas and feelings. For example, a slower rate may be appropriate for presenting main points or serious topics, while a more rapid pace may lend itself to support more lighthearted material. The experienced speaker also knows that an occasional pause in the flow of speech punctuates thoughts and emphasizes ideas. A dramatic pause at the proper time may express feelings and ideas even more effectively than words.

Impression Management: All the World's a Stage

All personal interactions can be considered dramas. Consciously or not, we “perform” for others every day—in meetings, over the phone, even during chance encounters in the halls. And like any performance, we elicit either positive or negative reactions from our audiences. For some individuals, these conscious “good” performances (also known as impression management) come as naturally as breathing. For them, projecting an assured and professional attitude seems effortless. For those without this skill, don't despair. It can be learned.

First, we must realize exactly how our daily encounters resemble drama.

The actor is you, in all your various roles: supervisor, salesperson, writer, and so forth. The ability to change these roles depends on your physical attributes, skills, abilities, and psychological makeup. These qualities help determine the images you want and those you can effectively project.

The audience is who you communicate with. The audience's status, power, and familiarity will affect the ways you present yourself.

The stage is the situation in which you perform. Changing the setting can change the audience's reaction to the actor. For example, circular tables in a meeting may suggest equality; long tables tend to place higher status on those at the head.

The script is the sequence of events, including spoken phrases, that we experience and expect in any given situation. Some scripts—such as family holidays—we know very well. Other scripts—such as performance evaluations with a new supervisor—may require practice and imagination.

The performance consists of a combination of verbal, nonverbal, and artifactual (setting decor, dress) actions. The nature of the actual performance, of course, depends upon our motivations.

The reviews are the audience's reactions. Success means we made the desired impression and got what we wanted. Failure means we didn't achieve those ends and may have even created a worse impression.

The use of these theater-based behaviors can be especially handy for individuals giving presentations. Techniques used for everyday impression management are even easier to use in formal communications because the performance time is limited and because the script is known and rehearsable.

As an actor, you can:

- Know the techniques and how they can alter the image you project.
- Size up your audience and the situation.
- Choose a desired image and present yourself accordingly.
- Recognize the dangers of the strategy you have chosen.
- Perform your job.
- Be yourself and put your best foot forward.

Adapted from The Art of Impression Management, Organizational Dynamics. Copyright 1992.

■ **Volume**

How easily your voice is heard is crucial to any presentation. Every member of your audience must be able to hear you if you want any of them to get anything from your speech. How do you know if you can be heard? Simply ask someone in the back row. You'll have your answer, and the audience will appreciate your conscientiousness. In addition, if you know your voice tends to be soft or will continually "quiet down," write yourself messages in the margin of your notes to speak louder, check on back-row hearing, or speak up! On the other hand, do not yell, especially in a small room. Bombastic or overly loud speakers will tire out listeners as quickly as those who whisper.

■ **Force**

This is also referred to as variability of volume and is needed at times to emphasize or dramatize ideas and improve communication. Of course, using force doesn't always mean getting louder. A sudden reduction in force may be as effective as a rapid increase. In either situation, a drowsy audience will snap to attention quickly if you use force effectively.

■ **Pitch or Tone**

This is the "highness" or "lowness" of your voice. All other things being equal, a higher-pitched voice carries better than a lower-pitched one. Listeners, however, tend to tire more quickly when listening to a higher pitched voice. If your voice is within normal limits—neither too high nor too low—strive for variety within that range.

■ **Emphasis**

Stressing certain phrases or sections obviously stems from all forms of vocal variety, and any change in rate, force, or pitch will influence the emphasis. The greater or more sudden the change, the greater the emphasis will be. As a speaker you will want to use emphasis wisely. Two strategies to avoid are over emphasis and continual emphasis. Emphasizing a point beyond its real value may cost you credibility with your listeners. And continual emphasis is as deadly boring and self-defeating as no emphasis at all. Be judicious.

Speaking vs. Writing

Although speaking and writing are both forms of communication, the two differ in several important ways.

Level of diction. In speaking, simple vocabulary and short sentences are more quickly understood by your audience. Remember, audience members don't have the time or the mechanisms to "reread" what you've said without potentially missing what follows.

Amount of repetition. Aside from voice variability, speech has no italics or boldface print. You have to tell your listeners what to pay particular attention to. The best way to do this is to repeat key phrases and words to emphasize or summarize these important points.

Kinds of transitions. Transitions from one idea to another must be explicit in verbal communication. Speeches don't have headers and paragraphs to let their audiences know where the narrative breaks are. Voice variability is one way to show these breaks; a better way is to say where in the text you are—for example, "The second most serious issue is...."

Kinds of visuals. Public speaking readily lends itself to the use of graphics, maybe even more than the printed page. Complex images can be explained at length. Pieces of the material can be easily highlighted or emphasized. And graphics can be modified or can incorporate motion during the explanation. If you do use graphics, don't forget that charts, models, slides, and any other images you wish to display must be built or shown on a large scale so every audience member can see them clearly.

For more information on how to prepare and present visual aids, see *Info-line* No. 8410, "How to Prepare and Use Effective Visual Aids."

Nonverbal Communication Skills

Communication experts say that more than half of all communication may be nonverbal. As mentioned earlier, vocal clues communicate much of this nonverbal meaning. However, a great deal of meaning is also transmitted by your physical appearance, including such behaviors as eye contact, body movement, and gestures. Knowing how these behaviors affect an audience will help you beef up your speaking skills.

Appearance

The way you look not only affects how the audience perceives you, but can also influence your presentation style. You may look great in blue jeans or evening gowns, but if these clothes are inappropriate for the situation or very uncomfortable, your presentation may suffer.

A good rule of thumb is to wear the most formal outfit you expect to see in your audience, make sure it is comfortable, practical, and predictable—for example, it won't suddenly develop static cling or show perspiration. Solid colors or small patterns will be less obtrusive. Find out the colors of the stage area from which you will speak; you don't want to clash with or disappear into the background. Also, wear something bright, like a red tie or scarf, near your face to draw attention to your mouth and eyes—your two most expressive attributes. Remember, if audience members are to believe and respect what you say, you must convince them you know what you are talking about. Look the part, and the first step is done.

Movement and Language

Static speakers are boring. Moving around the stage or platform effectively catches the eye of the listener. Movement helps hold the audience's attention, and it can show a marked departure or change in your delivery that punctuates and paragraphs your message. This helps listeners know when you have completed one idea and are ready to move to the next. Finally, body movement helps you as a lecturer, allowing you to work off any excess energy that may otherwise create nervousness.

How much movement is desirable? Although some effective speakers never move, this situation is rare. You should probably plan on moving frequently. In fact, the only reasons not to move are speaking in a highly formal situation or one in which you need to use a fixed microphone.

Of course, some speakers move too much, either racing pointlessly to and fro, or pacing back and forth in front of their audience. Still others have awkward movements that do not aid communication. For example, some leave their notes on the lectern, then move in and out from behind it like a child playing hide and seek; others plant their feet firmly in one place, then rock from one side to the other in regular cadence. These bad habits are easy to learn and just as easy to break. Simply knowing that they make the audience uncomfortable, no matter how comfortable such movements feel to you, should be enough to stop you in your tracks.

Body Language No-No's

Body language—how you look and move—can either enhance or undermine your message. Good body language will help you appear confident and knowledgeable. But poor body language will do nothing but interfere with your message. For more effective body language communication, fight the urge to do any of the following:

- lean on or grip the lectern
- rock or sway in place
- stand poker straight or immobile
- use a single gesture repeatedly
- cross your arms in front of your chest
- use obviously practiced or stilted gestures
- chew gum or eat candy
- click or tap your pen, pencil, or pointer
- lean into the microphone
- shuffle your notes unnecessarily
- tighten your tie or otherwise play with your clothing
- crack your knuckles
- examine or bite your fingernails
- jangle change or keys in your pockets

Effective body movement is free and purposeful. Feel free to move around in front of your audience; do not constrain yourself behind the lectern or in front of the chalkboard. Roam around—but with a purpose. Use body movement to punctuate a thought, direct attention to an idea or a graphic, and keep your audience alert and focused on you.

Gestures

Gesturing is the purposeful use of your hands, arms, shoulders, and head to reinforce what you are saying. Used well, gestures can clarify or emphasize pieces of your presentation. Fidgeting with a paper clip, rearranging and shuffling papers, and scratching your ear are mannerisms, not gestures; they only distract from the verbal message.

Effective gestures are complete and vigorous. Many speakers begin to gesture but then stop suddenly, perhaps fearing they look ridiculous. Ironically, the audience will notice the aborted gesture. Aborted gestures convey nervousness and a lack of confidence. Naturally effective gestures come simultaneously or slightly before their verbal cues. Poor timing results from “canned” or preplanned gestures, the effect of which can best be described as unfortunately comic.

Finally, good gestures are versatile. A stereotyped gesture will not fit all subjects and situations. And the larger the audience, the more pronounced the gestures will need to be. Although gestures can be perfected through practice, they will be most effective if you make a conscious effort to relax your muscles before you speak, perhaps by taking a few short steps or unobtrusively arranging your notes. Remember to keep your hands free for movement. Placing both hands in your pockets, behind your back, or as a fig leaf in front of you will understandably limit your hands’ usefulness. Holding your shoulders and head in one position during the talk will also rob you of an effective way to gesture.

Despite these recommendations, you should not adopt a dynamic, forceful mode of delivery if by nature you are quiet and reserved. As with body movement, gestures should spring from within and at least appear both natural and spontaneous. Modeling is a good way to learn this: Watch how others speak and try to approximate that same degree of spontaneity when you speak.

Eye Contact

The eyes definitely have it! Eye contact is a crucial factor in good nonverbal communication. Little else enhances your delivery more than effective eye contact with your audience.

- A majority of listeners want a speaker to look at them at least part of the presentation time. Direct eye contact lets the listeners know that you are interested in them. It also establishes rapport in an otherwise one-sided exchange.
- Effective eye contact allows you to receive nonverbal feedback from your audience. You can gauge the effects of your remarks, determine whether you are being understood, discover which points are making an impact, and detect signs that your listeners are losing interest. Such feedback gives you a chance to adjust your delivery appropriately and possibly improve the presentation.
- Effective eye contact also enhances your credibility. Speakers who demonstrate better eye contact with their audiences usually strike these listeners as more competent and more “in control.”

Genuine eye contact means more than merely looking in the direction of your listeners. Old advice, such as looking over the tops of your listeners’ heads or systematically glancing at parts of the audience, simply is not effective eye contact. Furthermore, directly looking at only one part of the audience—especially only those listeners who give you reinforcing feedback—will cause you to ignore the other parts of the audience. You have to make it clear to every person in a small group and each part of a larger audience that you are interested in them and their desires to learn.

Body Language Examples

These examples reflect actions taken by the speaker or members of his or her audience in (some) instructional settings. Knowledge of these cues can help you to read your audience members better and, thus, modify your presentation for better communication.

If They . . .	That Means . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rub their hands together • Lean their heads or bodies forward • Rest their chins on the palms of their hands 	Willingness to listen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smile frequently • Unbutton their jackets or shirts • Maintain good eye contact • Keep their hands and fingers still • Uncross their legs or arms 	Friendly feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pat someone's hair • Touch someone's shoulder 	Approval
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pinch the bridges of their noses 	Deep thought
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tug their ears • Raise their index fingers to their lips • Flick their hands upward a few inches • Place their hands on the speaker's arm 	Desire to interrupt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give a karate-like chop to their other hand • Pound their clenched fists on the table 	Frustration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rub or touch their noses with a finger • Button their jackets or shirts 	Disapproval or rejection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross their arms across their chests • Cross their legs 	Defensive feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steeple their fingers • Hold both coat lapels • Point to a person with their fingers • Cross one leg over the arm of a chair 	Superiority
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idly chew on a pencil or pen • Clean their eyeglasses 	Procrastination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place their hands on their brows • Lower their heads • Place their feet on their desks or tables 	Stay away; don't bother me
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift posture so they no longer face the person • Raise their heads • Stand up with papers or personal belongings 	Interaction is finished

Chart taken from Instructional Technique by Ivor Davies. Copyright 1981 by McGraw-Hill Inc. Used with permission.

The most effective eye contact can be described as direct and impartial. Look directly into the eyes of your listeners; look impartially at all parts of the audience. Simply having an earnest desire to communicate with them is the best way to accomplish this.

Effective Public Speaking

Speaking in public can be daunting. The following presentation advice can help put you at ease and smooth over any rough places you may still have.

Nervousness

Noticeable stage fright can make your audience equally uncomfortable. On the other hand, a little nervousness is not only natural, but desirable. It can energize your presentation style and add excitement to your material. The trick is to direct this energy away from knocking knees and into great communication. In other words, take those butterflies in your stomach and get them flying in formation. Consider the following suggestions for coping with nervousness:

Don't be intimidated by your audience. The people in front of you are the same people you'd speak to individually at a party or picnic. Most audiences are made up of warm human beings, like yourself, who have an interest in what you have to say. They probably won't boo or throw rotten vegetables at you. They probably won't stampede for the exits when you open your mouth. In fact, most listeners have great empathy for public speakers and want them to do a good job. Remember, they're human, too.

Don't rush to begin your speech. Many speakers are so anxious to get started and get the ordeal over with that they begin before they are really ready. This can lead to disorganization and even more nervousness later in the presentation. Slow down. Take a few moments to get your notes in order. When you are truly ready to start, look at your audience, take a deep breath, and begin to speak.

Nervous energy is a "natural high" that can energize speakers who don't worry about it. If your excitement threatens to turn to jitters, use up excess energy with a few small exercises. For example, pull your shoulders up toward your ears, then push them down again. Or shake out cold or trembling hands to stimulate your circulation. If you're seated in view of the audience and can't perform these mini-aerobics, just take a single deep breath before you approach the microphone.

Rehearsing Your Speech

The best way to allay your fear is practice, practice, practice. Rehearsing reminds you to look up the pronunciation of a word that is new or check an additional piece of information on an important point. You don't want to sound preprogrammed, but you do want to know your material and be familiar with your own presentation style. You may find the following techniques for rehearsing your speech are helpful.

■ **A Mirror**

Although some people may find this technique useful, it may subtly reinforce the notion that you're talking to and for yourself rather than an audience.

■ **A Tape Recorder**

This tool can be a good way to check out your voice and diction. But if you are self-conscious about your taped voice, don't use a recorder. You might overreact to minor problems and undermine your confidence.

■ **A Video Camera**

This tool gives you an opportunity to observe your body language as well as hear yourself, but like a tape recorder, it can unduly discourage some people.

■ **A Friendly Critic**

This technique puts the emphasis on projecting to an audience. The critic, of course, will need to understand what you're trying to do. For example, if you have determined that your audience prefers a casual tone, your pretend audience shouldn't waste time criticizing your informality.

■ **A Professional Speech Consultant**

The help of a professional is worthwhile if you have an extreme case of stage fright (i.e., terror, as opposed to normal nerves); a strong accent that an audience outside your language community cannot understand, even after listening for several minutes; or a concern that poor speaking skills are limiting your career potential.

■ **A Real Audience**

Consider enrolling in your local branch of Toastmasters International. You will learn their speech crafting advice and hone your skills in the company of other developing speakers. This route takes time, but it will show you a range of audience responses to your speeches and a variety of other presentation styles.

■ **The Actual Speech Venue**

Just as a visiting athletic team practices on the home team's field before a game, it may be helpful for you to dry run your talk at the speech site. This will give you a chance to feel comfortable in the room and to discover potential problems with the venue.

Enthusiasm

Another way to improve your presentation is to be enthusiastic—for your subject and for telling your audience about it. Unfortunately, enthusiasm cannot be learned. It must come from within to be genuine, and it must be sincere for the audience to feel it.

The enthusiasm mentioned here is not necessarily the outgoing, bubbly type. It is the genuine enthusiasm generated by the speaker's sincere interest in conveying the message to the audience. There's nothing mysterious about it. The enthusiastic speaker gets involved with the subject and with the audience, and the enthusiasm is infectious. Often, such enthusiasm can make up for other deficiencies the speaker may have.

Humor

Most listeners admire a speaker who uses humor effectively, yet few speakers are able to do so. When they do use humor, speakers usually stick it in the beginning of their presentation to gain their audience's attention. However, humor can deliver good results from within the body of a talk, as well.

Used in the speech's body, humor can recapture the audience's attention. Most people have an attention span of only a few minutes. Unless the material is tremendously engaging, an audience's attention will wander. Humor brings listeners back.

Humor also can emphasize an important point. Although rarely suitable for real proof, a story or anecdote may reinforce your audience's ability to remember its point, after the speech ends. Humor and laughter help improve, maintain, and enhance participant interest. When a presenter and participants share puns, stories, or other common experiences, they develop camaraderie and a team atmosphere. This in turn makes the presentation a positive learning experience.

Of course, humor is risky. There's no better way to make yourself seem warm and friendly—or rude, foolish, small minded, or even stupid. It must be used properly to be effective. Here are six essential rules for using humor:

1. Know the item thoroughly. We have all heard speakers stumble uncomfortably through a potentially humorous bit, or make it through in fine shape only to forget the punch line. This defeats the story's whole purpose. If you plan on being funny, know the story well. A good rule is not to use a story or other humorous item of any kind in a speech unless you've told it several times in informal situations. This lets you both practice the piece and gauge the reactions of others.

2. Don't use inappropriate humor. Some speakers consider off-color stories or ethnic humor a cheap way to get a laugh. But even people who laugh at such stories in private will lose some measure of respect for a speaker who uses them in public. If there is doubt that a story or joke is appropriate, it isn't.
3. Vitalize humor. Stories should always be personalized. Make them believable enough to sound as if they really happened. Instead of mentioning "this guy I heard about" or "this truck driver," give the characters names. Use specific and concrete detail to make your stories visual: You didn't just "lose your way" to the hotel; you were delayed because you'd "just returned from an exhausting but lovely world tour, care of XYZ Taxi Company."
4. Don't laugh before the audience does. Some comedians may get away with laughing first, but a good speaker never laughs before the audience. The simple reason is that if the joke fails, you'll end up laughing alone in a room full of silent people. If a joke does fail, leave it and go on. Making excuses will do little to fix the situation and may make it worse.
5. Capitalize on the unexpected. People laugh when they are surprised. This is a primary element of all humor. The following are types of humor that depend on the unexpected:

Quips. Of course, men aren't what they used to be. They used to be boys.

Puns. Try our bread; we knead the dough.

Exaggeration. The heat was so terrific last week that I saw a hound dog chasing a rabbit. They were both walking.

Understatement. If at first you don't succeed, well, so much for skydiving.

6. See humor in the situation. The best opportunity for finding humor for your speech may come from the presentation itself. Perhaps you could capitalize on the comments of those who preceded you, the malfunction of your visual aids, getting tangled in the microphone cord, or a person sneezing in your audience. Although this situational humor may not directly support any point you are trying to make, it can nevertheless help you win over the audience.

Being witty and humorous is not easy. It helps to have an agile and sophisticated mind—one that adapts skillfully to the audience. Yet many more speakers could use humor effectively if they were willing to try and willing to practice. The following specific suggestions will help you fine-tune and practice your funny bone:

- Use topic-related cartoons, stories, puns, and anecdotes to emphasize and reinforce points throughout your presentations.
- Maintain a file of humorous stories, pictures, drawings, and related materials suitable for use in your speeches.
- Read about humor and how to integrate it effectively into your presentations.
- Avoid humor that might offend or alienate your participants.
- Laugh with—not at—others.
- Laugh at yourself.

The Lectern

Such a simple thing; such a big problem. Inanimate though it may be, the lectern has single-handedly ruined many potentially great speakers. The device's major fault can be summed up in a single word—rest. Paper, notes, and scripts rest there. Hands, arms, and elbows rest there. And in many cases, the speaker's enervated body rests there. In a room that should hum with motion and energy, the lectern can become a presentation's final resting place.

Other speakers use the stand as a “security fence” between themselves and the audience. Perhaps unsure of themselves, perhaps suffering from stage fright, this type of speaker finds some comfort in remaining behind the stand and grasping it tightly with both hands. Whether he or she feels a sense of domination over the audience by being above it or feels protected behind the stand, he or she is likely to use the stand as often as possible. Once again, good communication suffers.

Used correctly, however, the lectern can keep an audience's attention focused at the front of the room. Speakers should visit it only occasionally, to refresh their memory, to verify their presentation's order, and perhaps to measure their timing.

Movement from behind the lectern can reduce the psychological distance between you and your listeners and place them more at ease. Some speakers feel that they need the lectern to hold their notes. Carrying your notes is actually more effective than looking down at the lectern. In any case, when you do look at your notes, remember to drop your eyes, not your head. And keep your notes high enough to see them.

Good speakers are no more dependent on the stand than they are on long lecture notes. They feel at ease in front of the group, at the easel, at the chalkboard, or behind the speaker's stand. They need no crutch or resting place. They place their hands or arms on the stand not for rest or support, but because it is a natural movement appropriate for that time.

Once again, practice is the best way to avoid mistakes and bad habits. Try rehearsing behind a chair or a music stand. If you will be using a hand mike, practice by either using a real one or a wire whisk or spoon, holding it a few inches from your mouth. If the real microphone you'll use has a long cord, consider tying a rope to your makeshift mike. Practice pulling the cord behind you and backtracking without tripping over it.

Final Tips and Pointers

When you've done everything else, remember these final tips:

1. If you're shorter than 5'6", check on the height of the lectern you'll be using; you may need to bring a platform to stand on.
2. In the hours before you speak, avoid:
 - excessive amounts of food
 - caffeinated beverages
 - alcohol
 - over-the-counter medicines that may make you either drowsy or nervous
3. Remember to bring the following with you:
 - your note cards or pages, in duplicate
 - several handkerchiefs
 - a small tape recorder if the event's sponsor hasn't arranged for other audio- or video-taping
 - an emergency telephone number to call before you arrive, in case you're delayed or need directions to the meeting place

4. If possible, take time before the presentation to greet and talk with participants as they gather. This will help put you and the audience at ease.
5. Walk toward participants as they respond to your questions. This encourages them to continue.
6. As participants respond, nod your head slowly to show you understand what they're saying, approve of their comments, and invite them to continue.

In Case of an Emergency

Always expect the unexpected, and always be prepared. Here's what to do if the following occurs:

You perspire profusely. Wipe your face with a handkerchief. Do it firmly; don't dab. Avoid using tissues. They may shred and stick to your face.

Your hands shake. Rest them on the lectern, but don't grip it.

Your knees wobble. If you're behind the lectern, no one can see. If you're at the head of a runway, walk around a bit; the shaking will stop.

You cough, sneeze, or clear your throat. Excuse yourself, turn away from the mike, and do it. If necessary, take a sip of water before you begin again. Say, "As I was saying..."

Your nose starts to run. Excuse yourself, turn from the mike, and blow your nose. Don't be dainty or you'll just have to do it again. Turn back to the mike and continue your speech. Bring two or three handkerchiefs with you, just in case.

The chairs aren't facing the lectern. If the chairs aren't bolted down, start by saying, "I think you'll be more comfortable if your chairs are facing the speaker's stand. So, before I get started, why don't you turn them around?" Wait until the hubbub dies down, then start as you had planned.

The room is extremely hot, cold, or stuffy. Before you begin, privately ask the event's sponsor if the problem can be solved or lessened. If the problem persists, give a shortened version of your lecture.

Some Comforting Thoughts

After everything else, remember that no matter how many people are in your audience, you're always speaking to individuals. If a few people in the audience look pained or grumpy, remember that audience members have different backgrounds, and some of them may have private problems you know nothing about. Their attitudes probably have nothing to do with the quality of your speech.

If people have made the effort to come hear you, chances are they want you to succeed. Finally, you've done your homework; you know what you're talking about. So relax and—most important of all—enjoy yourself.

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Speaker's Assessment Instrument

Use this checklist for self-assessment of audio- and videotapes made of your practice sessions and actual performances (or, if you use a "friendly critic" to help you practice, ask that person to fill in the boxes). Put a check mark in a box to indicate that you did what is written after that box. Put an "x" to indicate that you did not. If a particular item does not apply, leave the corresponding box blank. Finally, add any comment or directions that will remind you of changes to make to improve your next speech.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chose a title that tied audience interests to topic. | <input type="checkbox"/> Used gestures that supported (rather than detracted from) words. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Used attention-getting opening. | <input type="checkbox"/> Used pertinent, inoffensive humor. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Presented body of speech in organized logical sequence. | <input type="checkbox"/> Spoke loud enough. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Used a conversational tone. | <input type="checkbox"/> Varied the pace of speaking. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrated appropriate degree of formality. | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoided speaking too fast or slow, used emphasis appropriately. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Used personal pronouns (you, we, I). | <input type="checkbox"/> Paused for audience reactions. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoided jargon. | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoided pause fillers (um, er, uh, right, ok?). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Explained technical terms. | <input type="checkbox"/> Varied pitch of voice. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handled notes unobtrusively. | <input type="checkbox"/> Spoke clearly. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handled microphone professionally. | <input type="checkbox"/> Pronounced words and initialisms correctly. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoided nervous gestures or posture. | <input type="checkbox"/> Dressed appropriately. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Made eye contact with individuals in the audience. | <input type="checkbox"/> Met (within five minutes) time requirements. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoided staring at one section or person in the audience. | <input type="checkbox"/> Presented memorable conclusion. |

Comments: _____

