

Public Speaking — Principles and Tips

While speaking in public is something we do all the time, “public speaking” is a skill, not an innate talent. People often label themselves as “bad at” public speaking, as if this status is fixed for life. Not true! Although public speaking skills are rarely practiced, they are highly learnable. With some attention, awareness, and commitment, anyone can incrementally gain confidence and ability in public speaking.

We recommend reading through the following principles and strategies, picking one or two key ideas or methods that resonate most with you, and trying them out next time you speak. Soon, those skills will become second nature, and you can add a few more.

The Psychological: How to Stay Calm and Positive

Many of us had our formative experiences of public speaking in high school, at an age of extreme self-consciousness and criticality—negative associations abound. As an adult, more often than not, you will be speaking to a receptive audience full of people who are willing you to succeed. Embrace this and work with your audience.

Arrive at your venue early to give yourself time to check the equipment, find the bathroom, ask for a glass of water, etc. Giving yourself time to get situated will help your body stay physically calm.

As the speaker, **you are responsible to your story and to the audience**, not to yourself. Taking that responsibility to heart can help divert self-consciousness.

When you speak in public, you are performing a role, much like an actor. Your audience isn't looking at the “real you” but rather at a constructed, “performed” version of you. This **“performativity of the self”** offers you protection by creating a separation between your core identity and the person the audience sees.

That said, **always “be yourself”**— there are many styles of public speaking and you'll succeed best when you're speaking in your own voice and style.

Prepare your material well and rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. You'll feel more confident when you're more knowledgeable and more able to handle unanticipated questions when you have the core story down.

That said, **be relaxed and impromptu** — react to the room and be prepared to improvise when the unexpected happens. (The audience won't blame you for mistakes and mishaps unless you invite them to do so.)

Your attitude is infectious. Mirror neurons in our brains encourage us to naturally reflect back the mood you put out. Model the energy you want to get back from your audience.

Exposing vulnerability builds empathy with an audience. **Share your uncertainties** about your subject matter and your doubts about your conclusions from a position of control and intellectual curiosity that you want to share with an audience of peers.

After your talk, let yourself **accept positive feedback** rather than being overly self-critical or modest. Give yourself the same benefit of the doubt that you would extend to others.

The Physical: How to Speak with Your Whole Body

What an audience retains from a talk is about 60% visual impression, 30% vocal, and only about 10% content. This means that a large part of your message is conveyed through your **body language and tone of voice**, and not through words alone. Your body is literally your physical support system. Let it work for you by giving it some attention.

Breathe. Your body needs oxygen to keep from freezing up. So breathe — before, during, and after speaking. This will also help your speech remain clear and audible.

Tapping your breastbone lightly 2-3 minutes before you begin will give you a shot of adrenalin and help lift your energy.

Adopt a “power stance,” with shoulders back, chin up, weight evenly balanced between your feet, and arms comfortably at your side. This position looks naturally confident and helps with breathing and stability.

Take up space. Use your hands naturally. Step out from behind the podium on occasion. Fill the room with your presence.

If you’re not using them to attract or direct attention, let your arms fall at your sides in a **neutral posture**. What’s a neutral posture? Hold your arms up in the air and let them fall with gravity. That’s it.

Articulate, especially when pronouncing your consonants, as these are the distinctive sounds the ear picks up to distinguish meaning in your speech. Try some vocal warm-ups that repeat different consonant sounds.

Project your voice. Speak from your diaphragm. The best speech in the world will be lost if people can’t hear you.

S-l-o-w d-o-w-n. A good pace for your audience may feel unnaturally slow to you.

Vary your tone, pitch, and pace to keep your audience interested and to avoid sounding monotonous.

Make eye contact with your audience, shifting your gaze from person to person. Try moving your eyes in a “W”-shape formation around the room.

When using written notes, remember the formula “**up-down-up**,” look at the audience and occasionally glance down at your notes, as opposed to “down-up-down,” staring at your notes and glancing up at your audience.

Smile. Not only does this project a positive outlook, build empathy, and model an encouraging response from your audience, it also lifts your palate and enables you to speak more clearly.

Drink water before and during your speech to ensure your mouth doesn’t dry up. A sip of water is a perfect activity to fill a short pause.

Eat properly and exercise before a big public speaking moment to facilitate a healthy chemical balance in your body. Avoid dairy products immediately before a talk as they can coat your vocal chords, making it harder to articulate clearly.

The Rhetorical: How to Craft Your Spoken Words

When preparing your talk, **sketch out your main ideas** and rough plan before you go anywhere near a slide deck. Making slides may feel like progress, but starting there can limit or even control your content. Visuals should support your ideas, rather than lead or replace them.

Make explicit decisions about what you want and need to communicate. An audience will not retain more than about 3-5 key points. Articulate these points early on and repeat them throughout your talk, and avoid tangents and extraneous detail.

Listening to speech requires different cognitive processes than reading. We can't turn back a page if we get lost. "Signpost" your talk: give **verbal and/or visual markers to indicate new points or sections**. Explain the structure at the start, mark each point as you go, then **restate the points**.

Begin by introducing yourself. Who are you and why should people listen to you? Your aim here is to connect with the audience.

Find your "hook." Pique the curiosity of your audience. Share the "sticky idea" they will hang on to throughout your talk. Create emotional investment: why does this matter? You might say why you're happy to talk with them in particular—this is gracious as well as connective.

State your thesis clearly. What is the message you want to get across? What can the audience expect to learn from your talk?

Give your audience context for your talk. What background information do they need to know to understand your argument or interests?

Show, don't tell: case studies, examples, and anecdotes that demonstrate your thesis will have more impact than a dry explanation. **Create images with your words** to actively engage the listener.

Use storytelling to engage the audience. A short story can make a great hook.

Use story structures to frame the whole talk. A simple beginning, middle, and end might be enough. Or consider other plot features like a complication, climax, and resolution.

If you must use jargon specific to your subject or discipline, **define these terms** for your audience the first time you use them.

Use short sentences and end your statements decisively, without trailing off. . .

Try a couple of rhetorical prompts to engage the audience. "I don't know about you, but I've always wondered. . ." "As you all know. . ." "Have you had this experience, too?"

Watch people absorb one idea before moving on to the next. You can even ask questions like "Are you with me?"

Silences and short pauses are very effective tools. Holding a silent moment implies strength and confidence. It also gives your listeners a moment to catch up with you.

Finish strong. Wrap up, end on a firm sentence, and allow for a moment of silence. Let the audience know you are done. A pause and a genuine "thank you" works well. Do this **before any Q&A session** begins.

