

## Public Speaking — Principles and Tips

Speaking in public is something we do all the time. Almost every time we speak, there is a live audience in front of us. “Public speaking” is differentiated by specific contexts and expectations for that speech. While those specific contexts and expectations can make us feel stressed, exposed, and nervous, it’s important and helpful to remember that talking to people is something we all do every day.

Another under-recognized fact about public speaking is that it is a skill, not an innate talent. People often label themselves as “bad at” public speaking, as if this status is fixed for life. To the contrary, although public speaking skills are rarely practiced, they are highly learnable. Understanding and practicing some key concepts and methods can make a big difference. With some attention, awareness, and commitment, anyone can incrementally gain confidence and ability in public speaking.

Here are some principles and strategies to consider as you practice your public speaking. We recommend reading through them all, 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.

### **Psychological Principles and Tips (Or, 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.

It is your responsibility to react to unanticipated events, but those events are not your fault. Control what you can, and if something unexpected happens remember that the audience may not even notice. Even if they do, they won’t blame you unless you invite them to do so.

**Your attitude is infectious.** Mirror neurons ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror\\_neuron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_neuron)) mean that people will naturally reflect back the mood you put out to them. Model the energy you want to get back from your audience.

Exposing vulnerability quickly builds empathy with an audience, who will see that you acknowledge yourself as human, just like them. **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. Learn to accept praise and give yourself the same benefit of the doubt that you would extend to everyone else.

#### **Physical Principles and Tips (Or, 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, tone of voice**, etc., 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 will naturally encourage your body to produce adrenaline and reduces anxiety within about 5 minutes.

**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 this vocal warm up, repeating several times with awareness of mouth and sound: “The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue.”

**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 will often feel unnaturally and painfully 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**” not “down-up-down.” Keep your eye line resting on the audience and occasionally glance down at your notes, as opposed to staring at your notes and only sporadically 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.

#### **Rhetorical Principles and Tips (Or, How to Craft Your Spoken Words)**

When preparing your talk, **sketch out your main ideas** and rough plan before you go anywhere near Powerpoint or Keynote. Making slides may feel like progress, but it can leave you beholden to the slides and not to your ideas. Visuals support your ideas, rather than lead or replace them.

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

Listening to speech requires different cognitive processes than reading. A listening audience cannot turn back a page if they get lost. “Signposting” your talk — giving **verbal and/or visual markers to indicate new points or sections** in your narrative — is thus an essential skill unique to public speaking. Explain the structure of your talk at the start, mark each point as you go, then **restate the points** (tell people what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you have just told them). This is the aural equivalent of chapters, sections, or paragraphs in a book.

A good speech is built on a balance of **ethos** (your credentials as a speaker), pathos (appeal to the emotions of your listener), **logos** (the rational logic behind your argument), and **cosmos** (the context for your topic). Draw on all of these elements to create a balanced and effective argument.

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

**Find your “hook.”** Pique the curiosity of your audience and draw them into your narrative early. Find the “sticky idea” that audiences will hang on to throughout your talk. Why should your audience emotionally invest in your talk? You might say why you’re happy to talk with them in particular—this is gracious as well as connective (pathos).

**State your thesis clearly** (logos). What is the message you want to get across? What is your basic logical argument? What can the audience expect to learn from your talk?

**Give your audience context** for your talk (cosmos). 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.

**Use storytelling** to engage the audience. A short story at the beginning can create a hook for your audience to engage with what you are about to say.

**Use story structures to frame the whole talk.** A simple beginning, middle, and end might be enough. Depending on the situation, you might also consider more sophisticated 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 . . .” “I imagine some of you have had this experience, too.”)

**Create images with your words** to actively engage the listener (“imagine this ...” or “picture that ...”).

**Avoid contemporary verbal ticks** like “HRT” (high rising terminals—where your voice goes up at the end of every sentence, making everything sound like a question?), or vocal fry (where your voice drops low and gravelly—making you sound like you just got out of bed and don’t really care about your own point).

**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 in public speaking. 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.

If you have a **Q&A session at the end** of your talk, still make sure to wrap up and finish strongly before the questions begin.