

# The Fear of Public Speaking: 20 Ways to Get Over It

## How to get those butterflies to fly in formation.

The fear of public speaking affects many people, gluing them to their chairs and hog-tying them to the status quo, no matter how unfulfilling their jobs or present situation may be. Actor George Jessel said, "The human brain starts working the moment you're born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public." Though you might think you could never do what those clever, inspirational speakers do, you can teach yourself enough about public speaking to untie the tethers that hold you back.

Public speaking is a learned skill, developed much like other skills, such as playing the piano or painting: over time, with practice and some guidance. However, because of fear, we often avoid learning opportunities, choosing to flee rather than confront the challenge.

I understand this. Avoidance was my modus operandi. When I was in college, I manipulated my class schedule to avoid public speaking encounters. The one mandatory speech class became an exercise in rote memorization. I practiced my first speech so much I could say the words automaton-like, as if I had turned into a robot while walking to the front of the classroom. I was so nervous giving that first speech that when I finished, I did not remember actually saying the words. As they spilled from my mouth, it was as close to an out-of-body experience I hope to ever have. I survived that speech – you will too – graduated and started my career, a promising job in finance. Still, I avoided public speaking. As a management trainee in a large company, I often found myself around the conference table among a group of unfamiliar faces. When it came time to simply introduce ourselves around the room, I would start to sweat. It sounds so straightforward, so simple: "I'm so and so." Why was it so hard to speak up?

As it turns out, I was not the only one around that table sweating. A Gallup Poll survey showed that 40 percent of U.S. respondents fear speaking in front of an audience. Specific physiological symptoms accompany this feeling of anxiety: sweating, shaking knees and hands, quivering voice, flushing, rapid heartbeat and nausea.

Though I didn't feel so at the time, I was lucky when, as part of my job training, I was "strongly encouraged" to join a Toastmasters club, something I would never have done on my own. My first speech served to open my mouth and, more important, it helped to open my eyes. In what seemed to be a lifetime of a five-minute speech, I said "ah" or "um" 33 times. You may find that hard to believe, as I did, but the most astonishing part was that I myself had not heard a single one of them.

Today, many years and speeches later, seldom uttering an "er" or "ah," I can laugh while I still cringe at that long-ago memory. Although I still get nervous – yes, every time – I have learned to control those

butterflies, just as you can. As Walter Cronkite said, "It's natural to have butterflies. The secret is to get them to fly in formation." Here's how:

## Before Speech Day

Preparation goes a long way to ease those pre-speech jitters. Just as you would not expect a large wedding to happen without proper planning and organizing, a good speech needs attention far ahead of the day of the event.

- **Start early.** As soon as you know you have to give a presentation, start working on it. This is no time for procrastination. Think about your message. Get ideas down on paper, even if it is only a rough draft. If it's easier, start with an outline.
- **Always look for subject matter** – major ideas that you can develop into a speech and minor ones that fit into a larger theme. Notice details. Notice life and circumstances around you. For example, photographer Ron Tarver was covering New York's African-American Day Parade. He wrote about how, while he was stuck in traffic, a woman turned to him and simply asked, "Are there really black cowboys?" Tarver wrote, "From that point on, I had a story to tell."
- **Choose a subject you care about** that is personal to you but has a universal theme. Personal stories can carry a powerful but common message. A breast cancer survivor told of her experience in a speech to co-workers. She emphasized not only the medical aspects of the disease but, more helpful to the audience, what friends and family could do to help, such as cook a meal or offer a ride to someone recently diagnosed with cancer.

Even if you cannot choose the topic, personalize it. Make your speech interesting to you and chances are it will be interesting to your audience as well. Say you are giving a financial report; compare the net income to how many Hawaii vacations you could buy with the money earned.

- **Organize your speech in a logical sequence**, such as following a time line. Not only will you be able to remember it better, the audience will be able to follow it easier. Having a logical path to follow will help alleviate the fear of forgetting your speech. Researchers at the University of Manitoba found that of respondents who reported excessive anxiety when speaking to crowds, 74 percent shared the fear of "going blank."
- **Write your speech like every great speech, with a beginning, middle and an end.** Grab attention with the opening: a thoughtful question, a relevant anecdote, an appropriate quotation or a challenging statement. Transition smoothly into the meat of your subject, giving information in a clear, understandable format. End your speech with a powerful closing: a summary and conclusion, an appeal for action, or a relevant question, story or quote.
- **Rehearse.** Once you have that great speech written, the three Ps are invaluable: practice, practice, practice. There is no substitute for hearing your own voice say the words out loud. Do it often: in the shower, in front of the mirror, in the car stopped at a red light. In her lighthearted article, "Blinking in the Spotlight," Rachel Brem, a postdoctoral fellow at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, writes about how many times she practiced a presentation she gave to colleagues at a

symposium. She practiced at home, she practiced at work in front of her boss, she practiced at the hotel the night before the talk, making "eye contact with the empty sofa."

- **Visualize success.** You can use low-tech means of visualization by simply closing your eyes. Picture yourself in front of your audience giving your speech to resounding applause. Or go high-tech with the latest sophisticated virtual reality (VR) computer programs. Some VR software is specifically designed for anyone who struggles with public speaking – even those who stutter. At George Washington University's Speech and Hearing Science Department, assistant professor Shelley Brundage, using software designed by Virtually Better, Inc. in Decatur, Georgia, researches the benefits of using VR. She explains, "A computer is connected by a video cable to a headset – currently about the size of a football helmet. Newer headsets are smaller, about the size of a camping-style headlamp – which allows images to be seen."

These 3-D images, complete with realistic sounds, can be programmed to be a "nice" audience – heads nodding, paying attention, making eye contact – or a more challenging audience – inattentive, cell phones ringing, people walking out. Participants see a virtual lectern in front of them, complete with their own notes. Looking around behind them, they can refer to their own PowerPoint presentation. Dr. Brundage says the main benefit of VR software is that "it allows for practice in a controlled and safe environment. A virtual audience tells no tales. You can turn it off and it's done."

- **Discuss equipment needs with the event organizer** and make sure any necessary equipment is available. Reconfirm. If you rely on slides or computer-generated images, have a back-up plan. Know beforehand what you will do if equipment fails.

- **Familiarize yourself with the setting.** If you can, physically visit the site beforehand. This will help you visualize your success. Know the layout of the room, stand on the podium, test the microphone. The more familiar the environment is the day of your speech, the better.

## The Big Day

- **Wear clothes that help.** Choose clothing that is comfortable and professional-looking. In *Interpersonal Communication: Survey and Studies*, D.C. Barnlund says, "Personal apparel is a major source of information about the identity and character of others." He continues, "It seems plausible that clothing may affect self-attitudes as much or more than observer attitudes." Feel good about how you look so when those eyes are on you, you can be sure that nothing takes away from your message.

- **Arrive early.** Build in leeway for delays. Assume there will be road construction, transportation delays, parking problems.

- **Look outward, not inward.** Concentrate on the message. Remember how important it is for this audience to hear what you have to say. Replace every negative thought with a positive one. For instance, when you tell yourself you cannot do this, replace it with, "I can try my best. This is an opportunity for me to learn something new."

- **If appropriate, prepare an introduction** for the emcee to introduce you. Give your pertinent biographical information to ensure the introduction gives a good lead-in to the content and tone of your

speech. The introduction should give at least four pieces of information: what is the topic, why this subject, who is speaking, and why this speaker. For example, "Public speaking is an important topic in today's business world. Today, we have a long-time believer in the fact that everyone can learn to speak well in public. She has a Master's degree in communication from the University of Hawaii and has given numerous seminars on public speaking. She is here today to give us some pointers on our own presentation skills. Please welcome, Cheri Orator."

- **Relieve tension.** When you get to the location, after checking the room, find a quiet place to gather your thoughts and relax. The less outside stimuli, the easier it is for you to focus on your message. If it is not possible to isolate yourself for a few minutes, regroup mentally wherever you are, even in a crowd, and gather your energy. While you wait to give your speech, do these simple exercises. Clench your fists and hold for 3-5 seconds, then release. Notice how releasing your hands relaxes your shoulders and jaw. Repeat three times. Before the introduction, breathe deeply, inhaling slowly and exhaling completely. Do this three times.
- **No matter how nervous you are feeling, do not tell the audience.** Believe me, chances are people will not notice and, even if they do, they will probably empathize and listen more closely. Just start your speech with that attention-grabber the way you planned it, no apologies necessary.
- **Use visual aids relevant to your topic.** Research has found that when knowledge is shared by telling alone, message retention after three days is only 10 percent but increases to 65 percent when both telling and showing are used. Visual aids will help your audience remember your message longer, which means they will remember you longer, which is better for promotion and future opportunities for you.
- **Speak clearly and audibly.** No aahs or ums. Know when and how you are going to stop. Some speakers concentrate so much on the beginning of the speech, they forget the end is every bit as important and the last thing that you will leave with your audience. Practice the ending just as much as you do the beginning.

## After Surviving (Whew!)

- **Seek constructive feedback for future speeches.** Toastmasters offers many different ways to give a helpful evaluation. One of the best is the WIN formula: Tell the speaker something about the speech that was Wonderful. Offer a suggestion for Improvement. End on a Nice note – a word of encouragement or a point of strength the speaker possesses. For example, "Mary, your opening anecdote was relevant and powerful. It made me want to listen to what else you had to say. I would have liked more elaboration on how to relax on the day of the speech, but I found the preparation suggestions most helpful."
- **Think about what you liked about your experience and what you could improve on.** If possible, make a video of your speech. Review the video to learn areas of strength and those needing improvement.

• **Stick with Toastmasters International** to continue to improve your speaking and leadership skills. Linda Lingle, former governor of Hawaii, credits Toastmasters for helping her develop her speaking skills early in her political career, giving her a chance to practice in front of a group whose members were all there for the same reason, to improve their speaking and leading abilities. Governor Lingle says, "I felt communicating with people is so important. Toastmasters gave me the chance every week to speak in front of people who were very supportive. Everyone who is in Toastmasters is there because they want to get better."

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Speech is power, speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel." The ability to speak well in public is something we can learn. Just as we learned to ride a bike – perhaps after a few hard-knock spills – we got back on, found our balance and, with a little momentum, found we loved the feel of the breeze through our hair. Maybe we even put playing cards on our wheel spokes for a little pizzazz. Soon, you will be dressing up your speeches with expressive body language, vocal variety and interesting anecdotes to make the ride a pleasant one for you and your audience. Who knows? That next promotion might be just around the corner.

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