

Public Speaking for Success

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for

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SAMPLE:

PART 1 - MY FEARS



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Most people will have fears when required to speak in public – we understand that and we will try to show you how you can overcome them.

“There are only two types of speaker in the world:

1. The nervous

2. Liars”

(Mark Twain)

“The best way to conquer stage fright is to know what you’re talking about”

Chapter 1 - My Public Speaking Fears

They call it '*glossophobia*', but we know it as that black cloud that hangs over us when we first confront speaking in public. It is simply our fears about standing up in front of an audience and actually speaking to them. Standing up and speaking in front of a group of people is very different to talking to a few friends or colleagues, yet it is an important form of communication and is a vital skill in today's business world.

In fact, so many of us have fears of speaking in public – it is a sobering thought that as many as 75% of people fear speaking in public: statistically more than fear death or heights - so if you feel apprehensive, you're not on your own. It is often a terrifying thought, but remember that even the most proficient public speakers started off as nervous beginners, so we do understand these fears because we've been there ourselves.

So why do we do it? Some have to do it as part of their job or are facing a job interview; some might have to speak at an occasion like being a Best Man at a wedding; some do it to increase their confidence. Most frequently, though, it is because we are required to do it as part of our job or business.

But what are these fears? Where do they come from, and how can we deal with them?

What do they feel like?

Our fears can be both mentally and physically debilitating. We are right outside our comfort zone.

The event can take over our thoughts for days beforehand, it can play on our mind, we worry and visualise all the things that we think can happen to us and create all manner of negative scenarios. We feel that things are getting out of our control. This can lead to panic attacks and the wish to avoid the event - avoidance, however, is a temporary short term relief and can actually reinforce the fears.

Physically, both before and during the event, we can feel physically sick, have a pounding heart and come out in a cold sweat. Our legs tremble and feel as if they are going to give way, as does our voice, and we can feel choked and unable to breathe freely - and of course there is the 'butterflies in the stomach' feeling and needing to be close to a bathroom!

What are the fears?

Right at the start our biggest fear is often that we will make a fool of ourselves in front of other people - we are afraid that we will dry-up while we are speaking and wish the ground would open up and swallow us! Even the idea of standing up there with a lot of people looking at us can make us feel naked and vulnerable. It is very much about the fear of rejection because we feel that people are sitting there scrutinising everything we say and do.

This is always supposing that we can actually utter a word - we can fear that we will be tongue-tied or forget what we are going to say.

Our fears are partly about ourselves and partly about the reaction of our audience. We will look at how you deal with an audience later in the book but it is worth restating here how worried we can get about the audience and how they will react to us ... how can I keep their interest? ... will they be bored? ... will they know more than me? ... will they be aggressive? ... will they heckle? ... will they walk out?

Another very insidious fear in a corporate setting is the very real fear of letting our company down, especially if our boss is in the audience. We fear that we will not be up to the task, that we will not measure up, that we will slip up and face a dressing-down (or worse) from our boss. Maybe we fear that our job will depend on how we perform.

We can easily worry that our voice will not be up to the task - that we will be weak and croaky, that we will lose our voice completely or stutter halfway through, or maybe we think that our accent will put the audience off. We're afraid that someone will call out 'speak up' or 'slow down' or 'I can't understand you'.

It is all very much a fear of the unknown, because until we've actually done it for the first time we don't really know what it is like - we just pile on those fears.

To sum up what we've just described, you can experience:

- Fear of failure and looking foolish
- Fear of exposure
- Fear of 'drying-up'
- Fear of boring your audience
- Fear of a hostile audience
- Fear of letting your company down
- Fear that your voice is not up to the task
- Fear of the unknown

Which of these (or all of them) is YOUR enemy? They are perfectly natural reactions if you are unfamiliar with speaking in public and you should never feel ashamed - we have all had to come to terms with them.

Overcoming your fears

Once you know your enemy you can take measures to defeat him - just by knowing what your fears are you are halfway to overcoming them.

It's a comforting thought that, in real life, whatever you fear will happen in all probability will not happen at all.

In public speaking the antidote to fear is confidence. Confidence is all about trusting yourself to achieve: it can be built with preparation and experience and knowing your material. You will, with experience and knowledge of speaking techniques, build your self-belief – the best boost to confidence is a successful performance.

But those fears are still there, hanging over you - so how can you deal with them? Let us examine some of these fears and look at what you can do to overcome them.

Fear of failure and looking foolish

This is quite understandable and these are often the beginner's greatest fears. You can do a lot to help yourself by being well-prepared and rehearsed and having good notes that you know how to use. Again, experience will build confidence. Focus on your speech, not on yourself.

Remember that members of an audience don't want you to fail - they want to hear what you have to say and will be disappointed if you fail, so they are usually not the 'enemy' you fear they will be.

Fear of exposure

This is fear of being singled out, of being the centre of attention in an unknown environment, and is usually due to self-consciousness.

One way of coping with this is to talk to yourself! It is not as stupid as it might seem - write something, or find a passage in a book, and read it aloud when you are alone. Then do the same thing in front of a mirror. You might feel self-conscious at first, but you will soon get used to it - that's the point of the exercise: get used to speaking aloud and get some of the self-consciousness out of the way when you are on your own.

That's not the end of the exercise, though - carry on with longer and longer passages until you feel happy with what you are doing, and then begin speaking in front of one or two friends or colleagues. Ask them for feedback if you want to. Repeat this until you are comfortable with doing it in this environment.

An alternative to the mirror is to speak in front of a webcam on your computer and play it back a few times so that you can see what you're doing. Speak a pre-written text to your microphone and webcam – then play it back all through once to get a general impression, then play it back a few more times and note where you think it is good and where you think it needs improvement.

You will be ready to take your first steps in front of an audience, but looking at an audience can be daunting for the first few times. We will talk later on about the importance of eye contact, but what we say here is that you can make the experience more personal by thinking of yourself as speaking to one person at a time. Have eye contact with different members of the audience as you speak – but don't stare: no more than 3-5 seconds a person and then move on. This way you minimise the chance of feeling overwhelmed by your audience, whether it is large or small.

Fear of 'drying-up'

Again you can do a lot to help yourself by being well-prepared and rehearsed and having good notes that you know how to use.

You could try the strategy of having something planned that you could say or do if you find yourself drying-up to get over the moment

Fear of boring your audience

Don't worry – there are techniques for making your speech interesting – but for a start try to put yourself in the audience's place and wonder whether you would find yourself boring or interesting. Partly it is down to subject matter and how you arrange it, and partly down to delivery - but the good news is that these are things you can learn.

Fear of a hostile audience

Unless you're speaking at a political event or a contentious public meeting, this is very unlikely to happen. There are techniques for dealing with this and we cover these in the chapter on persuasive speaking later in the book. As with so much else, be prepared and know what you are going to say. As we have stressed above, audiences usually don't want you to fail - stand up there and smile before you start speaking.

You might find, or feel, that there is an 'expert' in the audience and you fear they will know more than you do about the subject. If you are well-prepared YOU are the expert and the audience is listening to you and not someone else. Should it come to questions you can 'bounce' awkward questions back to the audience members and turn an awkward moment into a mini-discussion that can help you out (provided you don't let it go on too long). But be honest, don't try to waffle and if you are asked something you don't know, say you don't know and offer to find out.

Fear of letting your company down

Make sure that you have a brief from your company and that you know your objectives and you are well-prepared and practised. Consult with your colleagues and make sure that you know your boss's 'take' on the subject. Make sure that you know your objectives for the speech and your company's objectives too.

Fear that your voice is not up to the task

You might feel that your voice weak to start off with, but because public speaking is not the same as conversational speaking, so there are techniques and exercises to help, and we cover the techniques in later chapters. Also any work you do in front of a mirror, or especially a webcam, will help you.

If you fear that your accent will let you down you can lay that fear by pronouncing your words clearly and, if necessary, a little slower than you would normally speak – remember that it is all about communication. Don't try to put on a 'posh' accent – it will be sure to slip somewhere during your speech; but at the same time don't slip into dialect, with its particular grammar and phrases – that will put your audience off. Your words should be

standard English (or whatever language you're speaking in) but as long as you are clear your accent shouldn't matter.

Fear of the unknown

We are always nervous to some extent when we face a new situation and this one is entirely natural. The best way to overcome this is to stop it being 'unknown' by gaining experience in actually doing it a few times.

You could join a speaking club such as the Association of Speakers Clubs here in the UK or Toastmasters International, where you can make your mistakes alongside others like you in small groups - these clubs are very supportive. Ongoing experience and the support of the other speakers will give you more confidence. Once you find what works for you, you will begin to feel more confident.

To sum up

Remember that pre-performance nerves (after all, your speech is a performance) are entirely natural. Learning to speak and overcoming your fears is rather like learning to drive - you are nervous and don't really know what you're doing at first and you think you will never get the hang of it, but you get better and better as you gain more experience and learn the skills.

We always tell those who we train to speak in public:

'When you're at the lectern, YOU are in charge ... YOU are in the driving seat!'

From what we've said above you will see that a lot of your fears can be minimised with preparation, practice and knowing the techniques of public speaking. That's why we have written this book - so read on!