

Public Speaking Tips

Norma McGavern, MIT Freshman Advising Seminar 055, 1996.

Your Voice

1. Speech Is What You Do With Sound.

Remember where the source of your voice is--it's not in your mouth! Air is pushed out from your abdomen, *not from your throat*. Before speaking--and *while* speaking, take deep breaths that result from diaphragm movement, not movement of the upper chest.

a. It's a physical thing.

The muscles between the ribs contract when you take a breath, and the ribs swing up and out. The diaphragm contracts, then descends and flattens, causing a slight displacement of abdominal organs and an expansion of the upper end of the abdomen. The size of the chest cavity increases and air rushes in to fill the vacuum. When you exhale, muscles relax and return to the resting position and air is forced out of the lungs.

b. You can do an exercise.

Feel where the air is coming from. Stand up, put your hand on your abdomen; let air in, let air out. Count to 5, then 10, on a breath. Feel it? It's relaxing.

c. Speaking posture:

Stand in a comfortable position, not rigidly straight, not slumped over.

2. Your Voice Creates An Impression. What Kind Of Impression Do You Want To Make?

a. **Pitch:**

The tone of your voice. It is high? Low? A low voice may carry better. Correct breathing will help you achieve a lower pitch, to a point. So will relaxing.

b. **Inflection:**

Don't sound querulous. That is, don't end sentences with an upward tone as you do when you ask a question (unless you want to sound uncertain). Beware of the inflections of sarcasm; these inflections usually don't play well and can sound whiny and annoying.

c. **Pace:**

The speed at which your thoughts are put together out loud. Normal conversational speech is done with rapid bursts of sound. Public speaking pace should be slower and more deliberate than conversational speech. What may seem to be too slow to the speaker is very likely just right for the audience. The pace you choose may be related to the kind of audience and content of your material. Aim for a slow pace, with lots of pauses between ideas.

d. **Articulation and Pronunciation:**

Articulation is the ability to produce individual sounds. Pronunciation is putting sounds together to make understandable words.

Understandability is key. Don't blur words. Voice complete and distinct sounds. This is not as simple as it sounds. Articulating plosives is a big help: b, d, g, dz (j in jump), p, t, k, ts, (ch in child), particularly when they end words as in "white."

Say only words! Don't vocalize, making sounds like "um, uh, er, aaah." Avoid sounds that only masquerade as words, like "like," that impart zero information. Learn to enjoy silence.

3. Get Your Voice Ready

a. **Practice breath control.**

Avoid upper thoracic (throat) breathing.

b. **Find your natural standing body position**

and be comfortable.

c. **Watch what you eat before a talk.**

Avoid dairy products. Coagulation occurs around vocal chords and makes you want to clear your throat. Avoid having a large meal beforehand.

d. **Practice your speech**

by giving it to a tape recorder. This will be the harshest test you can give yourself. If you have no tape recorder, practice it out loud.

e. **Get your voice to stretch.**

Make sure it can reach the back of the room, at least in practice. In reality, you will probably have a microphone--but what if you don't?

Writing For Speaking

1. Reading Your Speech

Having notes with you is the safest way to give a speech, especially a long speech or one filled with important points. Those notes should be as helpful as possible. They should serve as a script.

a. **Don't read everything!**

Never read: "Hello. I'm happy to be here." (There goes any illusion of spontaneity!)

b. **Adjust your notes**

to the actual situation: "In Figure Two we can see..." (Can we?).

c. **Write how you talk.**

We don't talk the way we write. Written work can sound stuffy and pompous when being read. Sentences with numerous sub-clauses may look great in an essay, but aren't easily followed in a speech. Besides, why should people sit and hear what they could more easily read? What do you add to prose by speaking it aloud?

d. **Avoid clichés** (they make your speech sound "canned"), and cumbersome words (What did he say?). Say it simply, straightforwardly, in your very own words.

e. **Give yourself written aural hints.** It's a script, after all. Give yourself stage directions. Write down hints like "pause" and underline words you want to emphasize. Number the pages. Don't write on the back of pages when you have written on the front.

f. **Write or type with VERY LARGE fonts** and lots of spacing. It is a script. You will be acting it out. You will not be able to peer at it closely.

g. **Speed kills**, especially when a talk is loaded with statistics, technical phrases and complex ideas. Reading statistics is safer than saying them from memory. You will sound more trustworthy.

2. If You Insist On Speaking From Memory

This is actually an excellent way to speak if:

you have a real talent for it,
other people agree you have a talent for it,
you relate well to live audiences and like to think on your feet,
you have given the same speech many times before, or
the occasion is so informal that you know lapses will be forgiven.

a. **Don't do a brain dump.**

Think about what you're saying; don't go into automatic gear so that you become unstoppable. Be flexible.

b. **Don't ramble.**

When your audience is aware you have no notes, they may worry where you're going with the subject matter and how long it will take you to get there. Also be on the lookout for vagueness and inaccuracy or the appearance thereof.

c. **Have notes available, just in case.**

It never hurts to have notes on hand that you don't need to use.

3. Do What Works Best For You.

a. **Memorizing** has potentially dangerous shortcomings (like going blank).

b. **Speaking impromptu**, off the cuff is risky, though spontaneous. Talent and experience help tremendously. Best done at informal occasions.

c. **Reading** a speech can be dull but, with practice, shouldn't be. This is clearly the safest method.

d. **Small note cards** printed with abbreviated notes, lead-in phrases, important words or statistics and other cues make one of the best all-around choices--if you practice.

Mapping the Content of Your Speech

1. **The Visible Structure:**

The audience should be aware of your speech structure. It's like knowing where you are on a road map--the audience will be happier if they know where you are in your speech at any given time, and where you're headed.

a. **Outline what will be told.**

Tell them what you're going to tell them.

b. **Let the audience know where you are going.**

"Next, I'll describe..." "Then, I'll show you..."

c. **Count:**

"There are three ways..." "I will tell you two stories that illustrate..."
Keep track of those numbers!

d. **Refer back to what you said earlier.**

Tie loose ends together. Remind them.

e. **Use repetition.**

Begin similar points with the same words (but not excessively!).

f. **Use repetition.**

Refer to the same things and the same people in the same way each time. The audience cannot flip back a page to check a name.

g. **Assign responsibility.**

Don't be vague and say, "they believe..." or "they say..." unless you tell the audience who they are. If you are speaking of only your own beliefs, take responsibility and say, "I believe that..."

h. **Give credit**

for ideas and quotations you use. Speeches don't have footnotes.

i. **Create a motif...**

...if you can ("I have a dream..."), but know when to do it. Don't create a motif if you--or the occasion--aren't up to it.

2. **Putting One Foot Before the Other**

Ask yourself these questions: Is your order logical? Are you following a route? Are you taking your audience down a road they can visualize?

a. **Does the evidence you give lead to the conclusion**
you intend to draw?

b. **Don't be preachy**
(unless you are truly preaching). Don't throw conclusions at the audience. Work up to conclusions with information.

c. **Present events chronologically**
(or in some other appropriate order).

d. **Do the events or data build**
to a climax?

3. **Be Concrete. Be Metaphorical.**

A few specifics are almost always better than many generalizations.

a. **Make analogies.**
Give examples.

b. **Tell a story**
that illustrates the point.

c. **Show spatial relationships.**
Visualize things. Use your hands!

d. **Give details.**
Only you have this information--what is it (your subject) really like?

- e. **Don't hang an entire speech on the hook of a single metaphor**
(i.e. every aspect of a game of football represents a point you want to make, etc.)

4. **In Conclusion...**

- a. **Check the time discreetly.**
Be prepared to wind up quickly, or compress final stories.
- b. **Reiterate your major points.**
Did you tell them what you said you would?
- c. **Don't fade away.**
The last sentence should be one of your strongest.

Writing Elements and Speaking Elements

In a Written Piece

How is necessary information given in a written article?

- Title of book or article, author's name and (sometimes) author's position and background:
- Table of contents:
- Charts, tables:
- Underlined words, words in boldface, exclamation points!
- Photographs:
- Paragraphs:
- List of items in alphabetical, numerical, or bulleted order:
- Chapter headings:
- Quotation marks
- Footnotes:
- Page numbers:
- Names, or other identification (reader can't turn back a page to check):
- Ending may be titled "Conclusions." Final sentence is a strong, summary, or even visionary statement:

In a Speech

How do you give the same information when you're speaking out loud?

- Someone introduces the speaker, gives information about the speaker that is relevant to the occasion, plus the title or subject matter of the speech, etc.
- Speaker tells the audience what s/he's going to talk about.
- Overheads, slides, the blackboard, a live demonstration, miming (describing something with gestures), etc.
- Speaker writes word on blackboard, lingers on the word and/or repeats it; speaker uses appropriate hand gestures for emphasis.
- Speaker tells anecdotes or stories which illuminate important points.
- Speaker pauses for a few seconds between separate sections or ideas.
- Speaker counts off items in numerical order ("one... two..," etc.) to help audience keep track.

- Speaker says s/he is now going to talk about the following...
- Speaker says "as X once said..." or uses the words "quote" and "unquote," (but does not make quote signs in the air with his/her fingers).
- Speaker takes a brief moment to explain words, references, etc. which may not be understandable to everyone. This is equivalent to making a parenthetical remark.
- Speaker lets the audience know where s/he is in the speech. For example: "First I'll describe X, and then I'll tell you about Y..."
- Speaker calls people, places and things by the same name each time so that it is clear to what or whom s/he is referring. Speaker refers back: "X works in the same way as Y which I told you about earlier..."
- Speaker indicates by summarizing (saying "in conclusion..."), and by tone of voice that the speech is ending. Final sentence is a strong summary, or even visionary statement.

The Audience and You

1. Who Are They?

a. What is the background (knowledge base)

of the people you are going to be talking to? Adjust the level of your talk accordingly. Try to reach everyone.

b. What mood are they likely to be in?

What did they do before your talk? What are they going to be doing after? Is the atmosphere or setting formal or informal?

c. Who are they?

Both sexes, more than likely, probably religiously and ethnically diverse, etc. Therefore:

- i. Don't exclude part of your audience by (for example) referring solely to "men" and telling stories using only the pronoun "he." On the other hand, don't pander to your audience by overdoing in the opposite direction.
- ii. Making a show of your thoughtfulness by switching genders in every remark you make can be annoying.
- iii. Don't assume your audience is tuned into or sympathetic with group "in-jokes."

d. Be prepared to update your talk

on the spot as the result of pre-speech encounters with members of the audience. Value these encounters and mingle, if you can, before you talk. You will have an opportunity to find out who they are, what they are interested in, and what they are hoping to hear or not hear. You may be able to add a comment like, "Someone told me this evening that..." to your talk.

e. Questions:

If you have the slightest hint that not everyone has heard the

question being asked, repeat it before you proceed to answer it. It is frustrating to hear only answers.

f. **Handling disruption:**

It's probably best to acknowledge a disruption. But if you do, you will draw attention to it. So, if it's a minor disruption, it may be wiser to ignore it. Remember, at the podium, you are in charge, and your attitude will to a large extent determine the attitude of the audience.

2. Who Are You?

a. **Why are *you* the one speaking on this subject?**

The person who introduced you may not have told this to the audience or covered all the right points. Fill them in. Make corrections.

b. **Be honest!**

Tell the audience how you feel. Make sure feelings and attitudes you discuss are ascribed to the right person or group. Remember the difference between "I believe" and "they believe." If you don't know the answer to a question from the audience, admit it. Defer to an expert. Offer to look it up. If it involves a long (and possibly boring) answer, suggest the person talk with you afterwards.

c. **Make eye contact...**

...but don't link eyes with one person. You will make him/her feel uncomfortable. See everyone; back, front, sides.

d. **If you make an error, ignore it and seamlessly move on.**

Or, acknowledge it briefly and then move on. Or, engage the sympathy of the audience by either confessing the error or making a small joke about it. (Warning: Jokes are high risk. What if no one laughs?)

e. **Look friendly.**

An audience is unlikely to warm to a speaker who seems unhappy at the prospect of talking to them. Match your demeanor to your topic.

Using Visuals

1. **You, the speaker, are a visual aid.**

You are "on stage" the moment you are introduced. You can't pretend you're not there while you set up your demonstration or check out the podium, etc. That's one reason it's best to have things set up--and checked out--in advance, especially when the set-up is complicated.

2. **Talk while you do stuff.**

If you must set up a visual aid while you are delivering your talk, plan to talk about it while you're doing this, especially if this is a lengthy process. You need to keep control of the audience; don't let them drift away.

3. **Keep demonstrations or materials simple.**

Don't get yourself caught up running a three-ring circus. There will be too much for you to do; too much can go wrong, and you may trip over all your electrical cords (especially if they were not taped to the floor).

4. **Keep the visuals simple.** If you are showing something on a screen, one idea per slide or overhead is about right. Avoid complicated slides/overheads. Don't show pictures of things you do not intend to explain. Lead your audience through diagrams, even if you think they are simple.

5. **Avoid annoying the audience:**

- a. **Don't read to them.**

If a slide has a great deal of writing on it, give them time to read it; they can read faster than you can speak.

- b. **Use a pointer when you can, not your hands.**

Stay away from a light beam pointer unless you can hold it steady (most people can't, especially when they're nervous).

- c. **If you are RIGHT-handed...**

...stand on the *RIGHT* side of a visual display from the audience's perspective

(If you're writing on the blackboard this will be your LEFT.) It will force you to keep your body somewhat turned toward the audience even while working on the blackboard; you can talk to the audience over your right shoulder if you talk while writing.

- d. **Look at the slides you are showing;**
make sure they are showing what you say they are showing.
 - e. **If you use an overhead projector...**
...practice laying transparencies right-side-up and turning the projector on/off. Keep your hands off transparencies while they are being displayed.
 - f. **Be certain that equipment works.**
Check it out in advance.
 - g. **Number slides,**
and make sure they are facing properly.
 - h. **Make sure everyone can see your demonstration or slides.**
And listen to your audience: if people indicate they cannot see, find a way they can.
6. **Heighten interest.**
If you have a number of objects to display, reveal them one at a time. Don't show your audience all your tricks before you begin. When you're finished with an object, put it away. Don't play with it.
7. **Chose the right time to give out handouts.**
Do you want people to look at them while you talk? Will the handouts heighten interest in your talk? Or diminish it?
8. **Practice your speech with all the visuals.**
Time them as they are integrated with your speech, and get comfortable with the way they fit in. Including visuals will magically lengthen the time it takes you to give your speech.

On the Day of Your Speech - Avoid Panic!

Check everything! Pretend to be confident!

- 1. Did you preview the site?**

Check room size, acoustics, lighting (and how to control it, if it's controllable), microphones, availability of a blackboard, chalk, electrical outlets, where people enter and exit, etc.

- 2. Do you know where your equipment is?**

Confirm your order for an overhead, etc. Plan where to locate your handouts. Consider whether you should have them available in advance or after your talk.

- 3. Establish where you will situate yourself with relation to your graphics and equipment.**

Will you block the view? How will you point things out? Where should your notes rest?

- 4. Don't eat heavily before your talk, and avoid milk products.**

The reasons for avoiding a heavy meal may be obvious. Milk products coat your larynx and may cause you to do a lot of throat-clearing.

- 5. Mingle with the audience before you speak, if you have the opportunity.**

You may learn some relevant things that you can incorporate into your talk. Or make a last minute adjustment to what you were going to say.

- 6. How are you being introduced?**

Did you tell the person who will introduce you what to say? And how to pronounce your name? Listen carefully to your introduction and take note so that when you speak, you don't repeat what was said. Make a mental note to add to it or make a minor correction if you think it's necessary.

- 7. Once you've been announced, you are on stage.**

From the moment you were introduced you have been the focus of the audience's attention. It has no one else to look at but you. Move confidently.

8. When you're ready to begin- don't. Wait!

Take a moment to catch your breath. (Remember- *abdominal* breathing!)

Make a pleasant face at the audience. Take a comfortable stance. Breathe.

Look at everyone *before* you start.

9. Keep an eye on your equipment as you move around or move things around.

Avoid lengthy silences while you adjust equipment or arrange visuals or write on the blackboard. Talk and do. Watch where you're walking. Don't get tangled up in electrical cords. Keep your overheads in order as you use them. Don't get too close to the microphone.

10. Questions: the inaudible, the complex, the unanswerable, and the hostile.

Repeat questions to the rest of the audience. Feel free to comment, e.g., "That's a good question!" Break complicated ones into simple components; tell the person asking a question you can't answer that you'll get back to him/her later or that you don't know. Don't respond to hostile questions by repeating the accusation; answer positively.

11. Head up when you're done!

End naturally, without a "thank you." Look at the audience and acknowledge to them that you are done. Save your "thank you" for the roar of applause. Smile. Leave the podium as slowly as you walked to it. Don't look as if you're escaping. Head up all the way back to your seat!