

How to Overcome Fear of Public Speaking and Give a Great Presentation

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Contributor - Eric Barker

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That Dilbert comic is pretty accurate. Gallup says 40% of people fear public speaking — and some people fear it more than death.

Jerry Seinfeld interpreted this as meaning that at a funeral, more people would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy.

Via [Nerve: Poise Under Pressure, Serenity Under Stress, and the Brave New Science of Fear and Cool](#):

“A wide variety of studies have crowned fear of public speaking – or glossophobia, for sticklers – as our king of all phobias; according to a 2001 Gallup poll, more than 40% of Americans confess to a dread of appearing before spectators. (In some surveys, fear of public speaking even outranks fear of death, a fact that inspired Jerry Seinfeld’s famous observation that at a funeral, this means the average person would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy.)

How do you get over public speaking fear?

I’ve given great talks at MIT, UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania and other places. Here are 6 tips from experts and research to help you do the same.

1) You’re Not Perfect – And That’s Normal

In Scott Berkun’s excellent [Confessions of a Public Speaker](#) he points out that anytime we talk it’s a bit of a mess.

Even the unedited speeches of great orators like Martin Luther King and Churchill have numerous errors.

People know this and are naturally forgiving.

Berkun references Michael Erard's book Um:

*“They [mistakes] occur on average once every ten words.... If people say an average of 15,000 words each day, that's about 1,500 verbal blunders a day. Next time you say something, listen to yourself carefully. You st-st-stutter; you forget the words, you swotch the sounds (and when you type, you reverse the letters — and prhps omt thm too). **The bulk of these go unnoticed or brushed aside**, but they're all fascinating, as much as for why they're ignored as why they're noticed.*

Take your errors in stride. **The audience will look to you to decide how serious a blunder is and if you're cool, they probably will be too.**

Via Confessions of a Public Speaker:

“Know that your response to a mistake defines the audience's response. If I respond to spilling water on my pants as if it were the sinking of the Titanic, the audience will see it, and me, as a tragedy. But if I'm cool, or better yet, find it funny, the audience will do the same.

2) How To Prepare

Obviously you have to prepare the material. But how can you prepare for the *fear*?

Susan Cain, author of Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking, and an introvert herself, is now a professional public speaker.

How did she overcome public speaking fear?

She practiced in front of small, supportive groups to desensitize herself.

From my interview with Susan:

“I really had to desensitize myself to my fears of public speaking. I did that by practicing in very small, very supportive and very low-speed environments where it didn’t matter if I screwed up. And eventually you get used to the strange feeling of being looked at, which used to make me feel horrified. You become accustomed to it over time and your fear dissipates.”

3) Know The First Minutes Cold

The Art of Public Speaking makes an excellent point: **work especially hard practicing your intro.**

Not just because it grabs the audience and sets the tone, but **research shows having the beginning down cold can help with jitters.**

Anxiety levels drop after a few minutes so having the intro well rehearsed gets you through the toughest part of the talk.

Via The Art of Public Speaking:

“Work especially hard on your introduction. Research has shown that a speaker’s anxiety level begins to drop significantly after the first 30 to 60 seconds of a presentation. Once you get through the introduction, you should find smoother sailing the rest of the way.”

4) Reduce Stress Ahead Of Time

Scott Berkun also has excellent tips for making sure things go well – which makes sure you don’t have to *worry* about things going well.

Via Confessions of a Public Speaker:

“I want to make my body as relaxed as possible and exhaust as much physical energy early in the day. As a rule, I go to the gym the morning before a talk, with the goal of releasing any extra nervous energy before I get on stage. It’s the only way I’ve found to

naturally turn down those fear responses and lower the odds they'll fire. Other ways to reduce physical stress include:

- *Getting to the venue early so you don't have to rush*
- *Doing tech and sound rehearsal well before your start time*
- *Walking around the stage so your body feels safe in the room*
- *Sitting in the audience so you have a physical sense of what they will see*
- *Eating early enough so you won't be hungry, but not right before your talk*
- *Talking to some people in the audience before you start (if it suits you), so it's no longer made up of strangers (friends are less likely to try to eat you)*

5) What To Do If You Do Screw Up

Scott Berkun recommends looking for a face in the crowd that seems supportive.

That's your emotional base. Look to that person for support to keep you moving forward and build from there.

Via [Confessions of a Public Speaker](#):

“If all else fails — you know the audience hates you and your point of view — seek out the person who hates you the least... If you are going to get a first smile, a nod of support, or a round of applause, it's going to come from him. Once you find that one person, use him as your base. Don't ignore everyone else, but know where to look for support.

6) Cheat: Make Friends Ahead of Time

Yes, there's a way to cheat your way through public speaking fear.

Berkun recommends **talking to a few audience members before the presentation, and referencing them by name during the talk.**

This has three benefits:

- Now the audience members aren't all strangers to you.
- Those people feel special and engaged when you mention them.
- The rest of the audience feels like you're part of the group.

Via Confessions of a Public Speaker:

“Request the names of three people to interview who are representative of the crowd you will speak to. See if your fears are real or imagined. Then, when giving your talk, make sure to mention, “Here are the three top complaints I heard from my research with Tyler, Marla, and Cornelius.” Including the audience in your talk will score you tons of points.

Simply Put

What sums up the thrust of all six tips?

Spend a lot of time preparing and make every effort to connect with your audience personally.

If you forget everything else, keep that in mind and you'll still see dramatic improvements in your ability.

Full website reference:

<http://time.com/89814/how-to-overcome-fear-of-public-speaking-and-give-a-great-presentation/>