

Richard Branson on the Art of Public Speaking

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Q: My biggest fear is speaking in public because I usually start shaking or stammering, or sometimes I can't speak at all. How can I overcome my fear? -- Rispa, Kenya

Rispa, you are not alone. The writer Mark Twain, who knew a thing or two about making a good speech, said: "There are only two types of speakers in the world: 1) the nervous and 2) liars."

If you are worried about public speaking, try tracking down videos of some of my early efforts online -- I'm confident you do well in comparison! I'm thankful that there is no footage of the very first time I spoke in public.

When my first venture, Student magazine, started to gain recognition, I was sometimes asked to talk at gatherings. The first event that could have been considered high-profile was at University College, London, for a German TV channel.

Before my turn came to take the stage, the student leader Danny Cohn-Bendit and the activist Tariq Ali gave exceptional speeches about human rights. They were passionate about their topics, oozed confidence and had the intellectual clout to back up their rhetoric. While the crowd cheered and stamped, I was fighting the temptation to throw up.

My mind went blank when I took the microphone. I mumbled incoherently for a bit before leaving the podium. It was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, and my face glowed red as the Virgin logo.

A few years later, Sir Freddie Laker, one of my most important mentors and the man who inspired me to get into the airline industry, urged me to make myself the public face of our company. He argued that rather than trying to get people's attention with a big marketing campaign, it would

be much cheaper and far more effective for me to make headlines myself -- especially since my small company was competing against bigger rivals. But this meant addressing my problem with public speaking. I realized that if I was going to be the face of our brand, I was going to have to talk the talk.

What I soon learned was that practice made all the difference. The more prepared I was, the less I stammered and stumbled. Good speakers aren't just talented or lucky -- they work hard.

Start practicing your speech well ahead of time at home. Try to get comfortable with the material and learn where you should be forceful and where you should use a lighter tone.

Above all, you should prepare to be yourself. Often when someone delivers a speech that was written for them by somebody else -- politicians come to mind -- it sounds too suave and premeditated.

The key is to understand your message, put your own personality into it and convey it in your own words. Remember, not everybody has a huge vocabulary. Often a short word will work much better than a long one that you may mispronounce anyway -- especially if you suffer from dyslexia like me.

Twain also said: "It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." Whether you're preparing a few remarks or are just going to answer questions from the crowd, think about potential topics you want to talk about, then write them down -- bullet points will do. It helps to have a rough outline of where you're going to take a point, to keep the conversation moving forward.

Then, when it's time to make your speech in public, try to imagine that you are back in your living room chatting with friends. Pick out someone in the crowd and try to get your point across to them personally -- you'll find the rest of the audience will understand your message too.

Keep in mind that there's no need to stick rigidly to your script if an interesting tangent presents itself. Some of the finest moments in the history of oration include off-the-cuff remarks. Also, this is when spontaneous humor is most likely to erupt. A good joke will not only help you connect with the crowd, but help you relax. If you loosen up a bit, the words will flow more fluently.

To be an impressive public speaker, you have to believe in what you are saying. And if you speak with conviction and you're passionate about your subject, your audience will be far more forgiving of your mistakes because they'll have faith that you are telling the truth. My answers aren't always smooth and immediate, and often include a fair few "erms" and "ahs." But most audiences are far happier with a hesitant, sincere response than a speedy but superficial answer.

Prepare, then take your time and relax. Speak from the heart.