

HOW TO Speak in Public

PUBLIC SPEAKING

Some people dread public speaking more than death. The Book of Lists reports public speaking as the number one fear among those surveyed, while death came in fourth. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld has concluded from this that at a funeral, most people would rather be lying in the coffin than giving the eulogy.

As a member of a grassroots group, your knowledge and opinions are the lifeblood of your organization, so don't let fear keep you from speaking out. If you get weak kneed at the thought of getting up in front of a crowd, or break out into a cold sweat if you have to say a few words when there are more than a couple of people present, you can overcome your anxiety with practice and preparation. Even if you're already a confident public speaker, you can always sharpen your skills.

Whether you are testifying at a formal hearing to try to persuade a state agency to deny a proposal to weaken water quality standards, or simply trying to summon the courage to speak up during a board meeting, many of the same techniques apply.

SPEAKING IN PUBLIC

When preparing for a presentation, the first thing you need to do is clarify what you want to accomplish. This step is critical, because everything you say should introduce, reinforce and help you achieve your purpose. You do not have to state your purpose during your presentation, as long as you are clear on what it is.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Find out as much as possible about your audience. What are their self-interests? Are they likely to be friendly or hostile, open-minded or skeptical? What are their "hot buttons" —things that will excite, motivate, offend, inflame, etc? Thinking about these questions as you prepare your talk will help you choose the right approach.

ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS

Outline the structure of your presentation. Keep your outline short, simple and to the point.

Start by identifying the key points you want to make. Limit yourself to no more than three points, because it's hard for any audience to remember more.

Next, think about the supporting arguments for each point. You can use anecdotes, examples, short facts and quotations, but use only the one or two best arguments to support each point.



The final part of your outline is the action request, when you tell your audience what you want them to do. A presentation without a request is a lost opportunity.

WRITE YOUR PRESENTATION

Next, write a rough draft of your talk, filling in your outline. Don't be fancy: be yourself. The best speakers speak from their own experience in simple language that the audience can relate to. Be visual, painting a picture for the audience. Use emotional appeals to touch the hearts of your listeners.

WRITE YOUR PRESENTATION *(continued)*

The very first statement of your presentation is your “hook,” which gets your audience’s attention. The hook can be a question or statement; it can be dramatic, humorous or provocative. Anecdotes or personal experiences make great hooks, as do jokes, but only if you have a good delivery. Other options are quotes, newspaper headlines and startling facts.

Next, tell your audience what you’re going to talk about and why it’s important to them. A good presentation starts by telling the audience where you’re going to take them. The body of the presentation takes them there by the most interesting and shortest route. When it’s time to finish, you complete the journey by telling the audience where you’ve been.

Your audience will have an easier time following your presentation if you follow this method.

After the introduction, tell your listeners something about yourself to establish your credibility. You do not have to be an out-of-town expert with a graduate degree to have credibility. For example, if you’re speaking to parents at a school, you can say, “My kids ride these school buses, too, and I’m concerned about their safety.”

The body of your talk contains your key points and request. This will probably be the lengthiest part of your presentation, so remember to keep it brief, and to the point. Remember to limit yourself to three points, and use only the best supporting statements.

After your request, plan your close. A memorable ending is a critical component of a good presentation. Think about how you want your audience to feel at the end—excited, motivated, empowered, concerned—and end your talk on this note.

As you develop your presentation, think about what visual aids you can use, such as photos or charts.



ANSWER QUESTIONS LIKE A PRO

Use your practice sessions to anticipate questions you may get, and prepare your responses.

- Take your time. Pause when you’re gathering your thoughts.
- Repeat or summarize the question to make sure that you understand it, and that the audience heard it.
- Start your answer with a powerful beginning, such as, “That is simply not true, and let me explain why.”
- Address all questions. Look for opportunities to bring questions back to your original message, but don’t just answer the question you want to answer, ignoring the question that was asked.
- Use bridging phrases to get back to your original message, such as “You’re absolutely right, and that’s why we need to or “That can wait until tomorrow, but something that can’t wait is“
- Remember, other people have the right to disagree with you. Respect their opinions and realize whose minds you can and cannot change.
- Don’t fuel fire with fire if a questioner is hostile. If they get louder, get softer. Keep your cool, and your sense of humor.
- The worst thing you can do is fake it. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so.
- Don’t forget facts that you didn’t use in the body of your talk. They may come in handy during the question and answer period.

Keep your visual aids simple, so that your audience does not focus on them, rather than you.

Think about what handouts you can use to support your points and remind people of your request. Do you want to bring an action alert flyer, extra newsletters, copies of newspaper articles, or a stack of business cards? Incorporate any handouts into your talk and refer to them as you speak, otherwise they’ll be forgotten and never looked at again.

Finally, reduce your talk to notes. You don’t want to memorize or read your speech, but you can bring note cards with you and look at them during your talk to help keep yourself on track.

HOW TO DEAL WITH ANXIETY

WORC members and staff and the Roundhouse Center in Alexandria, Virginia, offer these tips for those plagued by stage fright:

REWRITE YOUR INTERNAL SCRIPT

Train yourself to think positive thoughts instead of negative ones. For example, rather than telling yourself “I’m going to blow this one,” or “I wish I didn’t have to do this,” think “Next Tuesday, this will all be over,” or “I know more about this project than anyone else in the room.”

BE DEMANDING

Make sure that you get whatever you need to be comfortable. If you want a podium or table to stand behind, ask for it. If you want a chair to sit in, make sure that there’s one there for you. If you’re more comfortable speaking through a microphone, see if one is available.

OWN THE ROOM

Try to arrive early, when the room is empty, to get used to it. Walk around to see what you will look like when you’re speaking. Spend some time in the front, on the stage, or wherever it is you’ll be speaking from. Try turning cartwheels or doing a song and dance on the stage, just to make it your own space.

SPEAK UP EARLY

If you get nervous speaking up at meetings, make it a point to say something in the first 10 minutes, even if it’s just to ask where the bathroom is.

SLOW DOWN

When we are nervous, our natural reaction is to speed up, to get through the experience quickly. Instead of starting your speech in a rushed manner, take command of the lectern and the audience’s attention by pausing. Don’t begin until your anxiety level is steady or falling, not rising. When you are speaking, slow down both your thinking and your speech.

STAY IN THE PRESENT

Thinking about yourself right before a talk—about how nervous you are or how you’ll do—will only make you more nervous. Instead, listen intently to the previous speaker or the person introducing you, or focus on something in the room, such as the conference table or carpet, and memorize its features, or try counting backwards from 1,000.

ACCEPT STAGE FRIGHT

The more you struggle, the greater the anxiety. If you accept that you have stage fright, you will get less panicky. In fact, stage fright can work to your advantage—fear and the adrenaline rush that it brings can add energy to your presentation, as long as you control them.

WANT TO BE THERE

People with stage fright, like claustrophobes, often feel trapped. But, most often, we are in public speaking situations because we put ourselves there. Remind yourself of why it’s important for you to tell your story. Remember the other people you are speaking for who cannot be there.

PRACTICE

Nothing helps alleviate anxiety better than knowing that you’re prepared. Practice in front of a group. It’s a great idea for members of your group to practice speaking skills even when you don’t have an important talk coming up.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Now you're ready to rehearse. There is no set formula on how much you should practice before a presentation, except that you should take at least one dry run through your entire talk. This means reading it out loud. For important speeches, new material, or if you're not a confident public speaker, more practice will be beneficial.

One of the best ways to prepare for a talk is to practice in front of other people. A sympathetic test audience can give you helpful advice, especially if you encourage them to be frank with you. Ask them to give their comments about the content of your talk, as well as how you deliver it. Here are some questions to ask them:

- Is each part of your talk absolutely necessary. or are there sections you could drop?
- Did you back up your points well?
- Did they have any unanswered questions?
- Were any parts of your talk confusing?
- Did you seem confident?
- How was your body language posture, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact?

- Do you make unconscious filler noises often. such as "umm," "err," or "well"?
- Did you speak clearly and loudly?

Another great way to prepare for a talk is to videotape your practice session. This technique can be especially helpful for people who are nervous about public speaking, because often you come across better than you think you do. When you watch yourself ask yourself the questions listed above.

When you're rehearsing, recreate the setting of your talk as closely as possible room size, microphone, standing or sitting, podium, etc. Be sure to time your talk, especially if you have a strict time limit.

REVISE

Finally, don't forget to go back and incorporate any suggestions into your presentation.

USE BODY LANGUAGE TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

- Make eye contact. Look at someone in the audience when you're speaking. Pause when you look down at your notes.
- Pause before you begin to gather your thoughts.
- Use an "open face," with brows raised and eyes wide, as if you're talking to a baby or a pet. (But don't use the voice you'd use to talk to a baby.)
- Let your arms hang by your sides or rest on the podium or table, except when making appropriate gestures. If you stand with your hands in front you (common with men), or with your arms crossed in front of your chest (common with women), you'll come across as defensive. If you flail your hands around, you'll distract your audience from what you're saying.



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council
Dakota Rural Action
Idaho Rural Council
Northern Plains Resource Council
Oregon Rural Action
Powder River Basin Resource Council
Western Colorado Congress

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FOR MORE ON PUBLIC SPEAKING
Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held twice a year by WORC.

How to Run a Good Meeting and How to Hold a Press Conference are other topics available in this series of guides to community organizing.

MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – www.worc.org. These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.