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# 1

## Why Speak?

*Public speaking is not a natural ability for most of us. The ability to put together a coherent speech and deliver this with authority is a great life skill, both in your professional and personal life.*

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# What's the Big Deal?

Why bother? “*I don't want to do this. It's too difficult.*” Yes it is – speaking in public is not easy. Some people make it *look* easy but it takes much planning and practice to make it look easy.

Public speaking is a great skill to have both personally and professionally. If you have mastered it, and are comfortable speaking to an audience, then you should congratulate yourself. Most people dread this limelight and would rather do anything than stand up in public and talk to friends, colleagues or peers. Why? Because public speaking is scary.

The anxiety often starts days or weeks before the event and results in poor sleep and loss of appetite for many (not to mention the effect it can have on your gut!) The speaking engagement gets blown out of all proportion and people always fear the worst! I am not sure what the “worst” is, but I have seen very few people have a really bad time presenting a speech. Nonetheless, people build the event up into something gargantuan that becomes all-consuming. The reality is very different, and people get up, deliver their speech and think later “That wasn't so bad!” So, what are the advantages to being able to speak in public?

## Hot tip



Many careers involve public speaking. If you can master this, you will raise your profile and enhance your career prospects.

## Career

Most jobs nowadays involve some public speaking. Certainly in business, education, medicine, law, sciences and the arts you will be called on to speak. The better you speak, the more you will be asked to speak and your profile will rise and you will become more successful. The business will also become more successful, so your employer will be happy.



...cont'd

## Social

It is a great advantage to be able to get up at a wedding or leaving party and say a few words without falling apart. Being able to do this is a real ego boost and you will be appreciated by the group to whom you are speaking.



So public speaking *is* a big deal – it is important to you personally, as well as your organization. Yes, it may be tough at times, but this skill is one well worth mastering since it will open up many doors which might otherwise remain closed. The key features of a good public speaker are self-confidence and mastery of your material. Once you have these you should be comfortable giving

speeches to a handful of people or audiences of 1,000 or more.

## Confidence

You may already be a confident person but you could raise this to the next level through learning to present well, and get your point across in a concise and clear manner. If you tend to steer clear of situations that put you in the spotlight, you will learn to overcome this fear. By tackling Question & Answer sessions after a presentation you will no longer stumble over your arguments during one-on-one discussions.

So, in its narrowest sense, learning to speak in public helps you inform and entertain, and in the broadest sense it can help you become stronger, sharper and more confident.

**Hot tip**

Great speakers are not born. They have worked hard to get where they are. With determination and practice you can raise your game to a much higher level.

## Good Speakers Are Not Born

Professional speakers are everywhere, on the TV, radio and the Internet. They make it look easy. No matter which subject they are presenting they make it sound interesting. Yet if you attend an internal meeting at work the presenter generally makes the topic sound dull, even when they know the subject well. The same is true of professional conferences. The Chairmen usually fail to get the audience excited, introduce the speakers in a lazy way and the talks themselves are often boring.

The real pros (those on TV, radio and other media) have been trained to present the way they do. They have no innate gift that makes them so interesting. The misconception, however, is that these skills are complex. The opposite is true – with a little effort, planning and practice we can all deliver good speeches. But few of us really commit the time or effort, and we tend to emulate our peers and subject them to half-hearted attempts that are, well, boring.

Some natural talent and enthusiasm does help, though. For example, if you are a natural extrovert and enjoy the limelight then standing up in front of a group of people will not be as daunting as it would be for someone who is shy. Nonetheless, even the most shy individuals can master the art of powerful presentation provided some effort is put in during the early stages.

### Examples of inspirational speakers

Barak Obama is a current example of someone who knows how to play to the crowd. His timing is excellent. He talks to thousands of people yet makes it feel intimate, as if he is only talking to you. He has passion and enthusiasm which helps get his message through clearly. Look at the way he works the crowd and scans the arena, “touching” each person.

### Why are they inspirational?

- They *talk* to us rather than lecture at us
- They make it look effortless
- We can truly *identify* with what they are saying
- The content has real *relevance* to us
- They make us think more about ourselves, our actions, and they can *change* the way we think and act

# Everyone Can Improve

Try not to dwell on negative experiences associated with previous presentations or speeches. This creates a downward spiral – maybe your last speech did not go well, the audience seemed bored so you fear that the next one will probably fail too. Don't allow negative thoughts or feedback to affect your next speech. This represents a fresh opportunity to shine and, with more effort and planning, the next one will be better.

So much of our professional and personal life benefits from achieving success through public speaking that it is really worth the effort to work hard at this and achieve maximum impact.



## Put the speaking experience to good use

Each time you give a talk, speech, sermon or lecture you learn more about your subject and yourself. You gain experience in learning how to pace yourself, improve your timing so you seldom overrun your slot, you also learn how to construct better slides or other audiovisuals. Your degree of anxiety will lessen the more you put yourself in the hot seat – it is *impossible* to be very anxious if you regularly speak in public. Even the most skeptical people realize that they are improving so they feel less uptight about speaking. Each time you give a talk, jot down a few notes on what went well and what went badly. Next time you are asked to give a speech, try to improve on the weak areas.

Beware



Do not dwell on bad speaking experiences. Learn from them and move on.

Don't forget



With practice and experience your anxiety level will diminish. It is impossible to remain highly anxious if you speak in public regularly.

**Hot tip**

The ability to speak well will set you apart from other candidates if you are competing in the job market.

## Communication is Critical

### Public speaking skills may help you secure that job!

The job market is tough and there are usually several people competing for the same post. Everyone will be well qualified and interviewers will be looking for key skills that will help them select the best candidate for the job.

It is common for interviewees to be asked to give a short presentation before the main interview begins. The presentation title is often broad in order to see what critical information the candidates can find, and test their skills in finding faults with current strategies, or

seeing how good they are at highlighting ways of improving sales, company image, team morale, and other “weaknesses”. Interviews are stressful at the best of times, but if you have to deliver a speech before the interview starts this adds to the pressure considerably. If you present your material well, and handle the questions during the speech, you will have established yourself as someone who can handle pressure without falling apart. One advantage of the pre-interview presentation is that your nerves will calm down after the presentation which should make the interview proper that little bit easier.



### Use public speaking to help you sell

The business world is a tough place. All companies, whether financial, manufacturing, education or medicine, need to have a presence and visibility. Organizations need spokespeople – individuals who can think fast on their feet, can talk to the media and deliver presentations well, with total clarity and focus. If you have these skills you will become a real asset to your company and will reap the rewards.

### Use public speaking to help you persuade

Maybe you have faulty goods and want to complain about them, or want to argue against an unfair parking fine? Generally we just back down and pay up. But if you were better able to present your case and argue you might be better off discussing your dissatisfaction with the shop or parking authority. This often takes nerve, and the skills acquired through learning to project yourself during public speeches can be used for just this very thing!

# Preparation Takes Weeks

## The speech is only the tip of the iceberg

Public speaking is always viewed as the actual pitch itself, where the speaker stands up on a stage or behind a microphone and delivers his or her message. But this is just the tip of the iceberg – the final part of a long process. Trust me, this is the easier part, in a way.

Most of the work lies underneath. Before getting up to give that speech you will have had to weigh up the pros and cons of speaking and accept the invitation. You will have spent many hours researching the topic area and made notes on paper or using a PC.

You will then need to organize your thoughts and your notes in order to make sure your key messages are clear. Your slides or notes will have to be refined so that they flow in a logical order ending up with a conclusion that encapsulates all that you have said, while driving home the key messages. You will have practiced extensively, alone and to colleagues to make sure the content of your speech makes sense.



All of this will take weeks if you are to do it well. So the actual delivery of the speech may only take 30 minutes but if your preparation has been extensive and focused your speech will be clear, focused and will leave the audience with a strong impression of you, and your key points.

Don't forget



There is a great deal of work involved in putting together a speech. Delivering the content is the smallest component of the whole process. Only agree to give a speech if you really have the time to commit to the project.

# The Audience

## Put yourself in the audience's seat

While you are thinking through the content of your speech, consider what *you* would like to hear if you were in the audience rather than on the podium. What style would you find interesting? Or boring? We have already looked at what makes some speakers inspirational so that should provide some clues.

Based on the title of your presentation, what would you expect to hear from the presenter? What would you *not* want to listen to? As an audience member, why might you be there at all? What is your role? Expert? Novice?

### Beware



You must find out who the audience is and what they expect to hear from you. Tell them what they want to hear not what you want them to hear.

One of the first things you must get right is knowing how to pitch to *this* audience. Who are they, what do they know about the subject matter and what will they expect from your talk? If you get this right, the audience will be appreciative. If you get this wrong (for example a dumbed down speech to people with extensive knowledge of the topic) the audience will be bored (at best) or hostile (at worst).

Whoever invited you to give this speech will have a pretty good idea of what is expected of you. So, if you are not completely clear about what they want from you – ask! It does no harm to clarify this well before you start to research the topic. You may save many wasted hours of frustration if you can get this sorted right at the beginning.



# Speaking Skills Can Help

The ability to speak in public is a major asset, in any career. There are many jobs where regular public speaking is not required, but this skill goes way beyond the delivery of a “lecture” or similar style of speech. Most of us have face-to-face contact with senior management to review our job plans, for appraisals, to monitor progress of a project or role. If you can talk to small groups in a calm and determined manner this will help your seniors understand how the project is progressing, or your role in their business. If you are seeking promotion you can plan your speech well before you meet them and put your case to them in a clear way and secure the promotion you deserve. On the other hand, if you tend to avoid conflict and exposure within your organization you will not be “seen” and quite possibly you will not secure the promotion or recognition. Presenting to peers or seniors can be daunting for many people, and just as frightening as standing up on a stage speaking at a conference. By developing good strategies, and with planning, you will be able to stand up and be counted.

## A good grasp of public speaking is useful for:

- Job interviews
- Promotion interviews
- Asking your bank manager for a loan
- Internal presentations to your team at work
- National or international conferences
- Chairing committee meetings
- Panels or advisory board meetings
- Debates
- Web-based presentations
- Leaving parties
- Weddings
- Funerals
- Impromptu speeches
- Other social gatherings

### Hot tip



Developing the skills of public speaking will help you in your personal life as well as your professional career.

# What Makes a Good Speaker?

As with all aspects of life, there are good and bad speakers. Those whom we rate highly are interesting to listen to. They talk *to* us, not *at* us, and at our level. They tend to remain on message throughout (although diversions are interesting!) They vary the pitch of their speech and avoid speaking in a monotone. They often use gestures involving their faces, arms, hands or whole body. Very often they will move around the stage or the room looking at different groups within the audience. They avoid turning their backs on us even if they are presenting visual material. They make us feel included in the discussion, almost like a one-on-one discussion, even if the audience is large.

Great speakers avoid the over-use of technical terms just for the sake of it, and speak in a natural manner which is very easy to understand. They may use humor but they will avoid “jokes”. They would never use racist or sexist material unless they are stand-up comedians but we are not talking about that type of presentation here.

Within the workplace, a good public speaker can be inspirational, making us feel more committed to the company or our role within the organization. This is critical if you are managing staff or trying to influence behavior.

People who are skilled in public speaking can help us learn complex concepts without overburdening us with details. Most importantly of all, after we have listened to a skilled speaker we will be able to recall the key messages long after the event since they will have used techniques throughout their speech to ensure there are only a few key messages and they will have been repeated throughout the speech and again at the end.

## Don't forget



Good speakers are passionate in what they do. They tell a great story and can hold the audience's attention.

## Features of a good speaker, in a nutshell

- Has a real *understanding* of the subject area
- Someone who is *passionate* about this
- Uses *simple language* to explain even the most complex of concepts
- Tells a *great story*, often with a sense of theater
- Has *polish* and style, can *connect* with the audience and hold their attention for however long the speech takes

# What Makes a Bad Speaker?

Unfortunately, we have all listened to many bad speakers in our time. Often they will start late and have a slide deck with material that has been used for other similar speeches. They are often very busy people who therefore do not have enough free time to tailor their speeches to individual audiences. They may not worry too much about the actual delivery style and end up talking in a monotonous manner that becomes boring after a while. Their style is often not individual and feels less like a conversation.



## Features of a bad speaker

- May not know the subject as well as they would like you to think
- They may be passionate but it does not show. Their delivery style is boring and monotonous
- They try to impress by having their slides crammed with huge amounts of bulleted text lists and irrelevant graphics
- Their sense of theater is missing and their timing is poor
- Complex areas are not well explained
- They lack polish, and often just recycle old talks
- As a result they fail to persuade, educate or motivate

**Beware**



A lack of passion and slides crammed with unnecessary detail will result in a lack-luster pitch. You will bore the audience.

**Hot tip**

Try to choose the topic to suit you. If you are not happy with the suggested title, ask to have it changed to something more suitable for you.

## Choosing the Topic

The title of your talk is usually designed by one of the organizers of the session. It may be very tight such as “*Xenopus oocyte cAMP-dependent protein kinases before and during progesterone-induced maturation*” which leaves little to the imagination and gives the speaker a very limited remit or “*Control of cell division in mammalian cells*” which is very broad – here the speaker could talk about kangaroos or humans and can choose which aspects to discuss.



Maybe you don't like the title of the talk which they have provided. In this case you should talk to the organizers and see if you can modify the title, perhaps making it broader so that you can develop the theme the way you want, and not be forced to talk about something which you are not interested in.

### **Broad titles are best**

As outlined above, try to keep the title of your talk as broad as possible. This gives you much more flexibility when it comes to writing the speech. Use phrases like “*Advances in ...*”, “*Developments in ...*”, “*Update on ...*”, or “*Review of ...*” since these essentially allow you to talk about anything you want. This has the advantage that if something crops up between now and your speech you can add it in without the content looking out of place. But do remember to discuss this with the people who have invited you to talk otherwise they might have a specific topic in mind, and if you change it they may be upset.

# Are You Qualified?

## Flattery will get you everywhere

It is always flattering being asked to give a talk. In fact, the organizers know this and will make the invite so appealing you will hardly be able to refuse! They will use terms like “*As a recognized expert in the field... the committee would be honored if you would consider giving a lecture on...*”. One of the recent invites I have received was: “*Company X will organize a satellite symposium on product Y during this edition on Friday 09/01/09. Our colleagues from the European affiliate, Fred Bloggs and from the UK John Doe have recommended you as an expert and as an eventual speaker. We would be honored if you could give a presentation on this topic. Could you please let us know if you are interested and if this date suits you?*”

Flattering though invites may be, you should take a deep breath and look beyond the kind words. Are you *really* well-placed to talk about this? You may know a little but if this is an expert audience might they not expect something more than you can deliver? Sure, you can do some research but you also have a day job, and achieving the level required may not be possible.

## Sleep on it

Do not answer the invitation straight away. Give it some serious thought and if you still feel you want to accept then do so. Check your diary – how many other talks are you giving? Can you really manage to squeeze another one in?

If you are *really* sure you have the knowledge required to pull this off then by all means accept the invitation (provided you really are clear what is expected and who the audience will be). But if you feel that maybe you are not up to it, try to suggest an alternative speaker. Usually we can think of colleagues who have a better working knowledge of certain aspects of the topic or organization. These people would be better to deliver this speech than you. If this is the case, thank the organizers (you do want to be invited in the future!) and tell them that this is not your area of expertise. However, your colleague Jane Doe is a *real* expert and would be able to address the topic they have suggested. Provide them with her name, title, address and email address if possible. This makes it very easy for them to get in touch with her. It will also ensure that they think you’re a nice person for being so helpful and they will keep your name on the invite list. Your colleague will be delighted to be asked and should return the favor!

Beware



You may be flattered to be asked to give a speech but do not agree if you are not qualified for the job. The audience will realize this and will be disappointed.

# Is There Time to Prepare?

Do not underestimate the time required to plan a good speech. You may be asked to speak only for 20 minutes but the preparation time required may be many hours. This includes writing a rough draft of the speech on paper, doing the research from books or the Web, typing your speech using a word processor or slide program such as PowerPoint. After this, you will need to go over your speech many times, adding and deleting items, checking the timing to make sure you can deliver the presentation within the time allotted to you.

## Don't forget



Plan all aspects of your speech to the last detail. Find out everything you can about the topic, the audience, format of the session, the titles of your co-presenters' speeches. After this you can start work on your own talk.

Another time-consuming part of the task is practicing your speech. Simply writing it out and reading it over is not sufficient since you will skim over the text and assume the delivery in public will be as easy. This is not the case, and there may be areas where you stumble, or use words that are difficult to say, or there may be concepts that are difficult, requiring you to slow down to a crawl when you actually deliver the speech.

## Checklist:

- What kind of speech are you making?
- Is it part of a conference?
- Are there any cultural or language issues?
- Clarify the title of your speech and what they expect you to include?
- Are there any areas they would prefer you avoid discussing?
- Are you there to entertain? Inform? Influence their behavior?
- Who is the audience? How many will be there?
- What do they know about the subject area? Are they experts?
- Is this part of a panel symposium?
- How many speakers are there?
- What are the titles of their presentations?
- Are you taking questions after your speech or during the presentation?
- Is there a Chairman? Who is it?

# Strategy

If you have accepted the invitation to give a speech or presentation make yourself a checklist of things you need to do:

- Is the topic one that you can speak on? If you are not truly comfortable talking on this subject say so – early. Allow them time to find an alternative speaker
- Check your diary for availability. Are you free on the day of the speech? Is there any traveling to the venue?
- Is it outside your home country? If so, work out when you need to travel (the day before?) and that you are free on the days either side of the event
- Do you need to provide cover for your work when you are away from base?
- Check with your line manager that you can have the time off to attend the event
- Check title, venue, time allocated for speech
- If part of a conference, do you need to register, or will the organizers do this on your behalf?
- Will they book the plane, train or other transport?
- What is the format of the speech?
- Are they expecting you to use visuals such as PowerPoint?
- Do they require these in advance of the meeting?
- Do you need to take a laptop or can you use theirs?
- Is there a rehearsal before the event? Many conference organizers use this, especially corporate satellite sessions (this is to make sure you are not saying anything off-message!)
- How much time do you have to prepare your speech? You will need time to research, write, refine then practice (this may require four weeks or more depending on the topic)



# Summary

- Being able to express yourself and convey your ideas clearly is critical in today's job market, where there is intense competition for jobs and promotion
- Public speaking is definitely a big deal. Being able to speak well, and engage an audience is a highly valuable transferable skill. If you can achieve this you will become an asset to your organization and you will enhance your own career prospects
- Attaining these skills takes time and practice. Natural speakers are not born. Instead, they work hard at perfecting their techniques so that when they get up to speak they are totally in control, are engaging and entertaining. The best public speakers can inspire us to work better, buy their goods and adopt their philosophy
- Even if you are not a great public speaker at present, you can work on your techniques and raise the level of your performances. This will boost your confidence allowing you to further improve on your delivery
- Do not underestimate the time it takes to craft a good speech. Delivering a 20 minute pitch may take you 4 weeks *or more* of work – make sure you have the time to commit to this before you accept the invitation
- Think about the audience and what they need as you write the speech. This is about them – not you. What would you most want to hear about if you were in their place?
- If this is a business meeting or academic conference make sure the topic is one you can talk about with confidence. If you are giving a best man's speech at a wedding, or some other social function, you will have little choice about accepting
- If you feel unqualified to speak on a topic say so, and suggest an alternative speaker
- Make sure you have sufficient time and resource to take this on?
- Check with your work colleagues if you need someone to cover for you while you are away from base