

Managing Speech Anxiety: Confronting the Inevitable

Speaking in public is among Americans' worst fears; for most people, it ranks higher than death! The key is to realize that it is perfectly normal to be nervous when you are facing an important task, and you never will completely eliminate that anxiety. Practice and experience will reduce it, but you likely always will be nervous when you need to present information publicly to other people.

Therefore, you should focus on working *with* your anxiety, rather than letting it work against you. Knowing that your anxiety will manifest itself in various ways, be familiar with those feelings and don't let them get the best of you. You can reduce the negative effects of your speaking anxiety by doing several things:

Before the presentation,

- Practice! There is no substitute for this.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Familiarize yourself with the presentation setting and context.
- Visualize yourself doing a good job.
- Develop a strong opening that can help increase your confidence.
- Write cues to yourself on your note cards (e.g., "smile," "deep breath," etc.)

During the presentation,

- Take several deep breaths just before starting.
- View the audience as your friends.
- Work on maintaining good eye contact, as it helps you become more confident.
- Keep water handy.
- Don't be afraid to take a moment if you need to collect your thoughts.
- Have fun! Enjoy this opportunity to share your expertise with other people.

The following reading provides some guidelines for managing speech anxiety. It is an excerpt from: O'Hair, D., Stewart, R., & Rubenstein, H. (2007). *A speaker's guidebook: Text and reference* (3rd ed.). Boston: Bedford-St. Martin's.

Managing Speech Anxiety

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Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.
-Marie Curie

For many of us public speaking tops the list of things we fear. According to one study, at least 75 percent of students in public speaking courses approach the course with anxiety, while some other surveys show public speaking to be the number-one fear, mentioned more often than death at number two.¹ Even accomplished speakers often feel jittery before they give a speech. It turns out that feeling nervous is not only normal but desirable. "Of course I was nervous," baseball great Lou Gehrig replied when asked if he was anxious about coming to bat in the ninth inning. "If I wasn't, I couldn't have hit that double off the wall."²

Channeled properly, nervousness can boost performance. The difference between seasoned public speakers and the rest of us is not that the seasoned speakers don't feel nervous or anxious. It's just that they're more practiced at making it work for rather than against them. They've also mastered specific techniques that help them cope with and minimize their tension.

What Makes Speakers Anxious?

Researchers have identified several factors that underlie the fear of addressing an audience.³ These include lack of public speaking experience (or having previously had a negative public speaking experience), feeling different from members of the audience, and uneasiness about being the center of attention. Each factor can lead to the onset of **public speaking anxiety (PSA)** – that is, fear or anxiety associated with either actual or anticipated communication to an audience as a speaker.⁴

LACK OF POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Anxious anticipation is a natural reaction to new experiences, especially those that are challenging or complex. For those who have had no public speaking experience, anxiety about what to expect is only natural. And with no experience to fall back on, it's hard to put these anxieties in perspective. It's a bit of a vicious circle. Some people react by deciding to avoid making speeches altogether. Unfortunately, although they avoid the anxiety of speechmaking, they also lose out on the considerable rewards it brings. Lack of experience may be particularly

hard on females. One study found that female executives experience markedly higher levels of speech anxiety (42 percent) than their male counterparts (15 percent) when they make only occasional speeches.⁵

Anxious anticipation also results from previous negative experiences with public speaking that led to unfavorable audience reactions. This can sometimes happen to inexperienced speakers when, for example, they lose track of their thoughts during a speech or misjudge audience expectations. Gaining more speaking experience provides opportunities to assess different kinds of audiences, to adapt to unexpected occurrences, and to self-evaluate each speech, thus providing more successful speech experiences and more confidence.

FEELING DIFFERENT

Novice speakers often feel alone—as if they were the only person ever to experience the dread of public speaking. Moreover, the prospect of getting up in front of an audience makes them extra-sensitive to their personal idiosyncrasies, such as a less-than-perfect haircut, a slight lisp, or thinking that no one could possibly be interested in anything they have to say.

As novice speakers, we become anxious because we assume that being different somehow means being inferior. Actually, everyone is different from everyone else in many ways. Just as true, nearly everyone experiences nervousness about giving a speech.

BEING THE CENTER OF ATTENTION

Speakers often comment about how audience members appear to behave toward them during a speech. Listeners might fail to make eye contact with the speaker, converse with one another during a speech, or point at the speaker. When this

✓ CHECKLIST

Recognizing and Overcoming Your Underlying Fears about Public Speaking

Problem	Solution
✓ Does a lack of public speaking experience intimidate you?	Prepare and practice rehearsing your speech at least several times. Do it in front of at least one other person. This way, you'll feel more confident that you have experience with your present speech.
✓ Do you worry about appearing different to others?	Remember that everyone is different from everyone else in many ways. Dress well, be well groomed, and trust that you will make a good impression.
✓ Do you dread being the center of attention?	Remind yourself that the audience won't notice anything about you that you don't want to reveal, especially if your speech is well planned and rehearsed. Put the focus on the speech instead of on yourself.

occurs, our tendency is to think that we must be doing something inappropriate; then we wonder what's wrong and whether the entire audience has noticed it.

This kind of thinking builds rapidly and, left unchecked, can distract us from the speech itself, with all our attention now focused on "me." As we focus on "me," we become all the more sensitive to things that might be wrong with what we're doing—and that makes us feel even more conspicuous, which increases our anxiety. In actuality (and ironically), an audience notices very little about us that we don't want to reveal, especially when the speech is well developed and effectively delivered. Consequently, there is no good reason to be anxious about being the center of attention. You see yourself more critically than the audience does, so relax and focus on delivering your message.

Pinpointing the Onset of Public Speaking Anxiety

Different people become anxious at different times during the speechmaking process. For some people PSA arises as soon as they learn that they will have to give a speech at some point in the future. For others it arises as they approach the podium. Research suggests that females may experience higher anxiety than males at all stages of the speechmaking process.⁶ As such, it is particularly important that they experiment with the anxiety-reducing techniques described in this section. Figure 5.1 illustrates the different points during the speechmaking process at which PSA can occur.⁷

PRE-PREPARATION ANXIETY

Some people feel anxious the minute they know they will be giving a speech. **Pre-preparation anxiety** at this early stage can have several negative consequences. First, depending on its severity, the person may be reluctant to begin planning for the speech. Second, it can preoccupy the person to such an extent

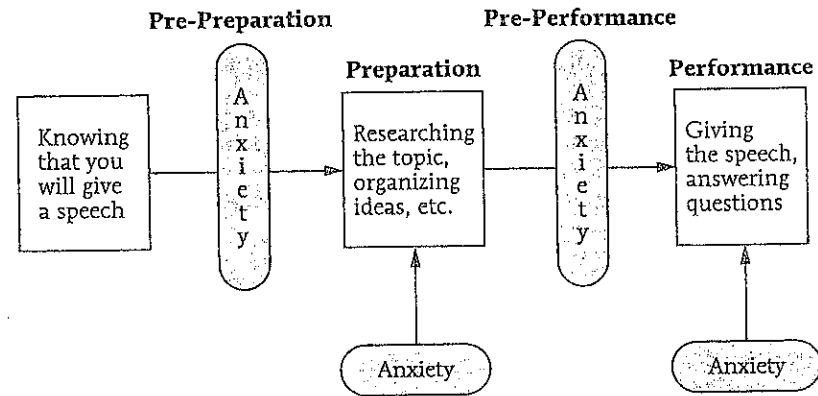


Figure 5.1 Where Anxiety Can Occur in the Speechmaking Process

that he or she misses vital information that is required to fulfill the speech assignment.

PREPARATION ANXIETY

For a minority of people, anxiety arises only when they actually begin to prepare for the speech. At that point they might feel overwhelmed at the amount of time and planning required. They might hit a roadblock that puts them behind schedule, or they might be unable to locate adequate support for a critical point. These kinds of preparation pressures produce a vicious circle of more stress, avoidance of the process, and procrastination—all of which contributes to **preparation anxiety**. Research has shown, however, that for the great majority of people, anxiety is lowest during the preparation phase.⁸

PRE-PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Some people experience anxiety when they rehearse their speech. At this point, the reality of the situation sets in: Soon they will face an audience of people who will be watching and listening only to them. As they rehearse, they may also realize that their ideas don't sound as focused or as interesting as they should. Knowing that time is short, they begin to get nervous. If this **pre-performance anxiety** is strong enough, and is interpreted negatively, they may even decide to stop rehearsing.

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

For the majority of people, anxiety levels tend to be highest just before speaking begins.⁹ This is true even of celebrities, who report that their worst stage fright occurs just as they walk onstage to begin their performances. **Performance anxiety** in speechmaking is probably most pronounced during the introduction phase of the speech. This is when the speaker utters the first words of the speech and is most cognizant of the audience's attention. In fact, the speaker's perceptions of the audience are important here—an audience perceived to be hostile or negative usually elicits higher anxiety in the speaker than either positive or neutral audiences.¹⁰ However, experienced speakers agree that if they control their nervousness during the introduction, the rest of the speech comes relatively easily.

Strategies for Getting Started with Confidence

Depending on when it strikes, the consequences of public speaking anxiety can include everything from procrastination to poor speech performance. The important thing to remember is to manage your anxiety and not let it manage you—by harming your motivation or by causing you to avoid investing the time and energy required to prepare and deliver a successful speech. The first step in effective management of speech anxiety involves planning and practicing your speech.

ESL Speaker's Notes

Confidence and Culture: When English Isn't Your First Language

In addition to the normal fear of being at center stage, non-native speakers of English face the burden of worrying about delivering a speech in a non-native language. If English is your first language, remind yourself of how difficult it would be for you to deliver a speech in another language. As you listen to a non-native speaker, place yourself in his or her shoes. If necessary, politely ask questions for clarification.

If you are a non-native speaker of English, try to think about public speaking as an opportunity to learn more about the English language and how to use it. As you listen to your classmates' speeches, for example, you will gain exposure to spoken English. Practicing your speech will give you time to work on any accent features you want to improve.¹ In addition, by spending time writing and outlining your speech, you will gain confidence in your written language skills.

Throughout this text there are exercises that you may find useful. You can practice some of them while rehearsing your speeches. Some can be done alone, and others during conversations with friends. Here are a few to get you started. Native English speakers can also use the following tips:

1. Take your time and speak slowly as you introduce the purpose and the main points of your speech. This will give your listeners time to get used to your voice and to focus on your message.
2. You may already be aware of certain English words that you have trouble saying. Practice saying these words five times. Pause. Then say the words again, five times. Progress slowly until the word becomes clearer and easier to pronounce.
3. Avoid using words that you don't really have to use, such as some kinds of jargon (see Chapter 16 and the Glossary). Learn to use a thesaurus to find *synonyms*, or words that mean the same thing, that are simpler and easier to pronounce.
4. Offer words from your native language as a way of drawing attention to a point you're making. This helps the audience appreciate your native language and your accent. For example, the Spanish word *corazón* has a more lyrical quality than its English counterpart *heart*. Capitalize on the beauty of your native tongue.

Remember, practicing oral English is the surest way to master it.

1. J. E. Flege, J. M. Munro, and I. R. A. MacKay, "Factors Affecting Strength of Perceived Foreign Accent in a Second Language," *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 97 (1995), 3125ff.

PREPARE AND PRACTICE

There's nothing magical about gaining confidence in public speaking—except, of course, the glow of accomplishment that sets in after the hard work is done and the speech is over. Confidence comes with knowing what you're doing, and the surest route is through preparation and practice. If you are confident that you know your material and have adequately rehearsed your delivery, you're far more likely to feel confident at the podium than otherwise. Thus preparation

CHECKLIST

Preparation and Practice Check

Note the date each item is started and completed. Place a check mark in the space at the front of each item to indicate its completion.

Activity	Date Started	Date Completed
When did I receive the assignment? When will I complete it?		
<input type="checkbox"/> In advance of preparing my speech, have I planned what I need to do and where I need to get it done?	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I selected an appropriate speech topic and purpose?	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> When will I need to spend time in the library?	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> When will I need to work on a computer?	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I tried to discover as much information as possible about the audience and the speaking environment? (See Chapter 6.)	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I allowed enough time to thoroughly research the material required to support my key points? (See Chapters 8–10.)	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I organized and outlined main and supporting points? (See Chapters 11–13.)	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I rehearsed delivering my speech, beginning two or three days prior to the speech date? (See Chapters 17–19.)	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I planned and constructed any necessary presentation aids? (See Chapters 20–22.)	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Am I confident that I know how I want to express myself?	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I checked out the site where I will be speaking?	___	___
<input type="checkbox"/> Have I made sure that any audiovisual equipment I plan to use is in good working order?	___	___

should begin as soon as possible after a speech is assigned. Once you have prepared the speech, you should rehearse it several times.

MODIFY THOUGHTS AND ATTITUDES

Negative thoughts increase speech anxiety.¹¹ Maintaining a positive attitude toward speechmaking, however, results in lowered heart rate and reduced anxiety during delivery of the speech.¹² Thus, as you prepare for and deliver your speech, it's important to regard it as a valuable, worthwhile, and challenging activity.

Remind yourself of all the reasons that public speaking is helpful personally, socially, and professionally. The point is to think positively about public speaking and to remind yourself that it is an opportunity, not a threat. One communication researcher has shown that altering one's thinking about public speaking from a "performance orientation" to a "communication orientation" can significantly increase confidence.¹³ Rather than thinking of your speech as a formal performance or event in which you will be judged and evaluated, try thinking of it as an extension of an ordinary conversation. By doing so, you will feel less threatened and more relaxed about the process. And with each successive speech experience, your mind-set about public speaking will grow more positive.

VISUALIZE SUCCESS

Visualization is a highly successful way to reduce nervousness and help you prepare effectively for your speech.¹⁴ Speech communication professors at Washington State University have been working for several years to develop visualization techniques for increasing positive expectations associated with speechmaking.¹⁵ Below is their script for visualizing success on a public speaking occasion. The exercise requires you, the speaker, to close your eyes and visualize a series of positive feelings and reactions that will occur on the day of your speech.

Practicing the mental exercise of seeing yourself give a successful speech will help you prepare with confidence and strengthen your positive attitudes and expectations for speechmaking.

Close your eyes and allow your body to get comfortable in the chair in which you are sitting. Move around until you feel that you are in a position that will continue to be relaxing for you for the next ten to fifteen minutes. Take a deep, comfortable breath and hold it . . . now slowly release it through your nose. Now take another deep breath and make certain that you are breathing from the diaphragm . . . hold it . . . now slowly release it and note how you feel while doing this. Now one more deep breath . . . hold it . . . and release it slowly . . . and begin your normal breathing pattern. Shift around if you need to get comfortable again.

Now begin to visualize the beginning of a day in which you are going to give an informative speech. See yourself getting up in the morning, full of energy, full of confidence, looking forward to the day's challenges. You are putting on just the right clothes for the task at hand that day. Dressing well makes you look and feel good about yourself, so you have on just what you want to wear, which clearly expresses your sense of inner well-being. As you are driving, riding, or walking to the speech setting, note how clear and confident you feel, and how others around you, as you arrive, comment positively regarding your fine appearance and general demeanor. You feel thoroughly prepared for the target issue you will be presenting today.

Now you see yourself standing or sitting in the room where you will present your speech, talking very comfortably and confidently with others in the room. The people to whom you will be presenting your speech appear to be quite friendly, and are very cordial in their greetings and conversations prior to the presentation. You feel absolutely sure of your material and of your ability to present the information in a forceful, convincing, positive manner.

Now you see yourself approaching the area from which you will present. You are feeling very good about this presentation and see yourself move eagerly forward. All of your audiovisual materials are well organized, well planned, and clearly aid your presentation.¹⁶

USE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Relaxation techniques are to public speaking anxiety what warm-ups are to exercise. Just as you would warm up before taking a lengthy jog, you should practice relaxation techniques before—and even during—your speech. The goal is to feel a sense of control over the physiological reactions you're experiencing, keeping in mind that physiological changes are normal. According to public speaking experts Laurie Schloff and Marcia Yudkin,¹⁷ the following techniques will lessen anxiety before and during a speech.

Stress-Control Breathing

When you feel stressed, the center of your breathing tends to move from the abdomen to the upper chest, leaving you with a reduced supply of air. The chest and shoulders rise, and you feel out of breath. With *stress-control breathing*, you will feel more movement in the stomach than in the chest. Try stress-control breathing in two stages.

Stage One. Inhale air and let your abdomen go out. Exhale air and let your abdomen go in. Do this for a while until you get into the rhythm of it.

Stage Two. As you inhale, use a soothing word such as *calm* or *relax*, or a personal mantra, as follows: "Inhale *calm*, abdomen out, exhale *calm*, abdomen in." Go slowly. Each inhalation and exhalation of stress-control breathing takes about three to five seconds.

Begin practicing stress-control breathing several days before you're scheduled to speak. Then, once the speaking event arrives, begin stress-control breathing while awaiting your turn at the podium. (You can even place your hand on your abdomen unobtrusively to check how you're doing.) After you've been called to the podium, you can focus on breathing once more while you're arranging your notes and getting ready to begin.

Natural Gestures

Practice some controlled, natural gestures that might be useful in enhancing your speech, such as holding up your index finger when stating your first main point. Think about what you want to say as you do this, instead of thinking about how you look or feel. (See Chapters 2 and 19 for tips on practicing natural gestures.)

Move as You Speak

You don't have to stand perfectly still behind the podium when you deliver a speech. Walk around as you make some of your points. Movement relieves tension and helps hold the audience's attention.

LEARN FROM THE SPEECH EVALUATION

Evaluation helps you identify needed improvements and problems to avoid in what you do. You can learn a lot by evaluating your own behavior, but relying on the objective evaluations of others often is even more helpful because self-evaluations tend to be distorted.¹⁸ For instance, your physician evaluates your physical condition to identify your healthy living choices or your need to make adjustments for healthier living. Although no one likes to feel evaluated, it is a necessary part of a speech class; inevitably, your speech assignments will be evaluated by your instructors and probably by your classmates as well. Whether the evaluation is formal (i.e., written and graded) or informal, it's easy but not necessary to take it personally.

First, your instructor and your classmates don't know everything about you; they know only how you've presented a speech. Second, if that speech is planned and delivered well, your listeners will be most aware of your message, not of you personally. That is the way it should be in any good speech. After all, the audience is there to evaluate the information you've presented. Audience members will be deciding whether the information is relevant and accurate and interesting. Your concern as a speaker should be with the audience's evaluation of your message, not of you as a person. Your classmates and instructor will provide practical feedback to help you do better in your next speech. Using their evaluations is part of learning to be an effective speaker.

✓ OBJECTIVE

Steps in Gaining Confidence

- ✓ Prepare and practice often.
- ✓ Modify thoughts and attitudes—think positively.
- ✓ Accept your nervousness as normal—work with it rather than against it.
- ✓ Concentrate on your message, not on yourself.
- ✓ Visualize success.
- ✓ Use relaxation techniques.
- ✓ Anticipate learning from the speech evaluation.
- ✓ Enjoy the occasion.

ENJOY THE OCCASION

Although no one can be forced to enjoy something, most people ultimately find that giving speeches can indeed be fun. It's satisfying and empowering to influence people, and a good speech is a sure way to accomplish that goal. Preparation and practice, maintaining a positive attitude, managing the inevitable stress of public speaking by making it work for you, and visualizing success—all of this makes public speaking both challenging and exciting. Think of it in these terms, and chances are it will come out that way.

