

Speak Successfully!

Eight steps to take *before* your presentation

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Public speaking and visiting the dentist are the two activities most dreaded by American adults. You can ease the pain, though, and improve your chances for speaking success with these eight strategies **BEFORE YOU EVER OPEN YOUR MOUTH IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE.**

ONE: RESPECT THE SPEAKING OPPORTUNITY.

As soon as you commit to a speaking engagement:

- Begin considering your goals and your message.
- Gather supporting material.
- Take notes and form an outline that makes sense to you.
- Commit to Step Two

TWO: REHEARSE, REHEARSE, REHEARSE!

Practice creates polish, pure and simple. If you respect the speaking opportunity, you begin preparations early enough to have an actual rehearsal schedule. Rehearse in front of a mirror – or not, whatever works for you. But do:

- Get on your feet to replicate the speaking situation.
- Give yourself at least three separate rehearsal times.
- Practice with notes or an outline, reducing the number of notes as you go.
- **TIME YOUR PRESENTATION** as you rehearse, aiming for the stated limit.

THREE: FOCUS ON YOUR AUDIENCE

Stage fright is normal, but it can be mitigated by changing your perception. If your focus is on how you will look or sound or perform, you invest nervous energy in yourself that could be invested in your audience. That's right: invest in your audience:

- How much do they know about my topic?
- What would they most like to hear me talk about?
- What preconceived biases do they have?
- How can I give each listener the information he or she wants?

Plan to address those *audience issues*. Forget about yourself; it's all about the audience.

FOUR: ADJUST TO THE VENUE

Each new venue presents challenges. Investigate the site in advance and adapt. Arrive early and think ahead. Look the place over and consider your options.

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Notice the room's layout. Where can you stand so that all will see and hear you? Remember, it's all about the audience. Should you use the podium? Only if you have to. Never put an artificial barrier between you and the audience if you can avoid it. Practice with a variety of microphones. If the person who introduces you speaks into a microphone, you probably should follow suit. In any case, project your voice to the farthest row of listeners. Make the room work for the audience and for your own purpose.

FIVE: INCLUDE A VISUAL AID

Unless every member of the audience is blind, a picture really is worth a thousand words. Always try to have some sort of visual. The number and type of visuals depends on what will help you clarify your concepts and supporting material. Commit to using visuals as an integral part of your presentation and rehearse with them.

Keep these guidelines in mind:

- Select visuals that clearly and immediately convey your point.
- Show each visual at the appropriate moment.
- If you use text, keep words to a minimum, and be sure each letter can be read by the person in the last row.
- Never pass things around the audience as you speak.

Guidelines for using PowerPoint:

- Minimize on-screen verbiage.
- Animate your presentation for timeliness of display.
- Learn to use black screen and "previous" commands.
- If at all possible, have a remote!

Should you skip the visuals for a very short presentation? On the contrary! The less time you have in front of the audience, the more precious it is. Use it effectively by showing as well as telling.

SIX: PROMISE YOURSELF TO COMMUNICATE, NOT JUST TALK.

If you're determined merely to say the words you have planned, you might not communicate at all. Some speakers mistakenly assume that talking aloud means communicating. In fact, communication involves a speaker, a message and a receiver. If the message is not received, no communication occurs. That's why reading to the audience is deadly.

The solution? Well before the date of your presentation – focus your concern on your *listeners*. Imagine them straining to hear your speech. Review Step Three: Focus on your Audience. Maintain that focus as you prepare. Then survey the audience with your eyes as you wait, and fill yourself with a desire to truly *communicate*, not just talk.

SEVEN: PREPARE A DYNAMITE OPENER.

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Plan an appropriate opener for your speech that will set the tone, hook the audience, and launch you on your way. Then use it. The person who introduces you will tell the audience your name. **DON'T REPEAT YOUR NAME.**

Some possible openers:

- A rhetorical question
- A striking fact or statistic
- An anecdote
- A kind and gentle joke that really is funny and segues nicely into your topic
- A quotation
- Striking facts or statistics
- An informal poll of the audience

A few guidelines for openers:

- Plan your opening with care.
- Practice your opening just the way you'd like to say it.
- Try to have someone introduce you so you don't have to open your speech by introducing yourself.

EIGHT: BEGIN WITH EYE CONTACT

One of the hardest aspects of public speaking – but one of the most important – is eye contact. Whether you like it or not, eye contact is necessary for public communication, and it should begin before you open your mouth. As you reach the podium or stage, stop, look, and then speak. Acknowledge the audience by looking at them. Attract their attention with your eyes.

You arrive as an outsider with a speech to give. In the blink of an eye, literally, you can change that. Stop. Face the audience. Sweep your eyes around the room, looking into faces before you say a word. Now you have made a connection. Direct eye contact is the way a speaker connects to *individuals* in the audience. You want each listener to sense a one-to-one connection with you, and you achieve that with eye contact.

So, think before you speak!