

## Tips for public speaking: How to become a stronger public speaker



By Laurie Davies

### Overcoming the fear of public speaking

There's a reason most high school students hate speech class. The scrutiny! The fear of failure! And these anxiety-producing fears of speaking in front of friends collide with the time in life when self-consciousness about body image and back-row whispers are at their highest.

Or do they?

The same things that made us dread speech class in school still make many of us dread public speaking in the real world. "Americans were polled years ago and their No. 1 fear over death was public speaking. Some people would literally rather die than give a eulogy," says [University of Phoenix career advisor Alice Rush, MA, CCC](#).

Yet, excellent public speaking skills are key to almost any profession. Whether you're leading a company-wide presentation, giving a sales pitch or speaking up in a meeting, you can overcome your fear of public speaking and deliver a polished presentation. Here are three primary principles to follow to become a better speaker.

### 3 public speaking tips

For most people, being a good speaker doesn't come naturally. It takes time, practice and a lot of discomfort. We've all heard the basics: speak clearly, speak loudly, speak like you know what you're talking about. Here, Rush breaks down the skills behind public speaking and what it takes to nail your next speech or presentation.

## **1. Know your audience**

You can't connect with your audience if you don't know who they are. "How can you meet their needs if you don't know their needs?" Rush asks.

For a speech or company-wide presentation, Rush advises learning their priorities *and* their gripes. "Obtain Glint or Morale [company satisfaction] survey results up front if you're speaking to employees," she says. For internal or external corporate presentations, read anonymous reviews of the company on sites like Glassdoor. "Weave in employee sentiments, quotes, content or subject matter to keep what you're speaking on relevant and interesting."

If you've been asked to deliver an inspirational or motivational speech, work with your event contact to understand the audience. How old are they? (This will help you select stories and illustrations that land well.) What do they need? How can your message reinforce the theme of the event?

Having a handle on who your audience is will also better help you engage them in your presentation. "Ask your audience questions — rhetorical or to be answered out loud. You want your audience to remain active participants thinking alongside you as you speak, instead of falling asleep during your presentation," Rush says.

Remember, everything is about the audience, not you. This will help you navigate some of the obstacles inherent to public speaking. But we don't want to jump the gun. Next up: message.

## **2. Know your message**

It's important to know your stuff. Effective public speakers don't just get up on the platform and freelance their content. They live and breathe their message.

Rush says this is important even if you're "just" piping up in a meeting. "Research data points or articles on the meeting topic, and email it to your staff or meeting participants a day before the meeting," she suggests. "This will prepare everyone to get involved too, which is ideal for staff collaboration."

Clarity is also key. It's much more difficult to give a clear, concise presentation than it is to ramble. Your audience will appreciate the work you put in to craft a clear message. You may be the subject matter expert and know almost everything about your topic, but your audience can't absorb it all. "How can you edit your knowledge base down to three main points in a presentation? That's the question to keep asking yourself. It's like a strong resumé. You stick to the highlights," Rush advises.

## **3. Know your obstacles**

Remember how many Americans would rather go to their grave than give a eulogy? Fear of public speaking is real. "You never know what you're going into — it's completely the unknown. You don't know what the audience might do or say, and you can't control the result," Rush says.

In her own public speaking career, which has included collegiate instruction, corporate training, live NPR and television interviews, and being a keynote at an Intel worldwide internal corporate speaking conference, Rush has adopted certain public speaking tips to help overcome the obstacles inherent to any kind public presentation. These are:

- **Have confidence in your message and preparation:** “You have something to give, and you’re giving authentically from your heart and your values,” Rush says. It’s important to stand on that, regardless of the audience response.
- **Disconnect from what people think:** “As we get older, we learn not to worry so much about what people think,” Rush says. But what if you’re younger? Rush suggests being intentional about practicing a mental disconnect of needing to be liked by everyone. “It is a hard road. We are pre-wired to want to people-please,” she says. Disconnecting from that compulsion takes intentional effort.
- **Imagine success:** Literally. Rush visualizes success before she utters a word. “I imagine connecting with my audience and being well received,” she says. “I imagine saying all the things they are going to need to hear.”

### Public speaking tips to reinforce your message

They say content is king. But good props, easy body language and other message-reinforcing strategies can take your message over the top when public speaking.

- **Humor, illustrations and stories:** “The most memorable presentations are always infused with humor,” Rush says. You’re not funny? No worries — let other people be funny for you by sharing cartoons or quotations. “Whatever you’re presenting, humor and storytelling bring a relief and a release of the stress that we have going on in our animal brains all the time.”
- **Metrics:** Rush suggests reinforcing a story with a quick dive into metrics. Not only will this build credibility for the skeptics in your audience, but it can also offer actionable context, especially in corporate settings. For example, you could give a statistic about how many American workers have left their jobs during the “[Great Resignation](#),” followed by questions that prompt the audience personally, such as: What does this mean to you in your department? What are you doing to do to retain employees?
- **Visual aids and props:** [Toastmasters International](#) recommends using colorful and unique props with your speech while making sure they don’t detract from your presence. Think diagrams, physical objects, photographs or PowerPoint slides. Rush offers a word of caution about the latter: “Never, I mean never, fill up your PowerPoint slide with words in a long paragraph and then read it to your audience. It insults their intelligence and is boring. Be brief — just a quote or data point or two at a time on each slide.”
- **Body language:** Effective body language through eye contact, effective gestures and movement on the stage takes practice! Just be mindful about what you’re doing. Toastmasters suggests avoiding awkward mannerisms, such as stuffing your hands into your pockets.

In the end, not everyone gives a speech to packed houses with thousands in rapt attendance. But you might present to 10 or 20. Either way, these strategies for effective public speaking can position you to delight and inform your audiences, no matter the size.

And doesn’t that sound better than going to an early grave, not to mention high school speech class?

For additional information, please visit: [Tips for Public Speaking: How to Become a Stronger Public Speaker \(phoenix.edu\)](#)