

TEN TIPS FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING

As a practicing scientist, you will be called upon to speak in public about your work. This is crucial for the dissemination and promotion of not only your science but also yourself. Public presentations are often in the form of conference papers or research seminars, but can also include lectures, tutorials, workshops, speeches, press reports, debates, etc. While many think public speaking may come naturally or intuitively to some people, this is incorrect as we can all communicate with each other and hold conversations. Effective public speaking is a learnt skill – the more you practice, the better you get. But you have to be open to feedback in the form of suggestions, comments and criticisms. You also have to have a healthy ego so that you learn and grow, rather than wither and hide.

PUBLIC	Why?	1. Be clear of purpose!	(intent, goals, brief)
	Where?	2. Recon the venue!	(room, audio-visual aids)
	Who?	3. Know your audience!	(intellectual level, dress, sobriety)
SPEAKING	What?	4. Tell/sell a story!	(content, story-line, a-v aids)
	When?	5. Watch the clock!	(schedule, timing)
	How?	6. First impressions!	(introduction, first words)
		7. Have a conversation!	(volume, speed, text, eyes)
	8. Be theatrical!	(comedy, drama, gesticulation)	
	9. Be confident!	(relax, nerves, errors, apologies)	
	10. Prepare, Practice!	(aloud to others, watch masters)	



1. Be clear of purpose!

Know precisely why you are speaking. Get a clear brief from the organizers with specific indications for content (topic, level, length, etc), process (oration at lectern, audio-visual presentation, informal workshop, after-dinner speech, etc) and logistics (venue, facilities, expected size and type of audience, etc). If such information is not forthcoming, aggressively pursue answers because it is your credibility and reputation that is on the line. There is nothing worse than pitching your talk wrong for the occasion.

Develop your own goals for the talk. Are you going to reminisce, be informative, be provocative? Find a few take-home messages to concentrate on rather than give encyclopaedic coverage. This will enable you to find a common thread to tie your talk together. Be adventurous in developing story-lines and using analogies.

2. Reconnoitre the venue!

Insist on checking out the physical specifications of the venue. Walk the room, switch on the microphone, dim the lights, boot up the computer, test the data projector, remote control, laser pointer, etc. Will the press or media be in attendance, will they have specific requirements for video, lighting, sound, etc. The more familiar you are with your environment, the more comfortable you will be during your presentation. Remember Murphy's Law - if something can go wrong, it will! Be prepared and have a rescue strategy (spare batteries, names of IT personnel, venue manager). You can all recall seeing a speaker embarrassed by technical problems; do not be one of them!

3. Know your audience!

To whom are you speaking? If they are colleagues, they probably want to learn something from you. If they are friends, they are likely looking to be entertained. Know who your audience is and tailor your speech and delivery to them. Give them what they want! Predict their intellectual level and pitch your talk accordingly. You score more accolades by paraphrasing complex material into simpler language, than vice-versa. Greet some of the audience members as they arrive. It is easier to speak to a group of friends than to strangers.

Make sure you are dressed appropriately for the occasion. By engaging in public speaking, you are portraying the role of respected authority so adopt a professional dress code. Under-dressing intimates contempt, over-dressing suggests arrogance, mimicking the audience dress-style works if you are of the same generation and it is an informal occasion. In general, it is best to dress slightly better than your audience to show respect. Pay attention to personal grooming. There is nothing worse than distracting the audience by pillow hair, wayward shirt tails, open flies, etc. The better you look, the more ready and professional you will feel. A lot of people are going to be looking at you - make sure you look your best.

Stay sober. Do not try to calm nerves with alcohol. It interferes with your judgement and trips your tongue. You also need to gauge the sobriety of the audience. Speaking at social functions where alcohol is served requires more finesse and versatility than at more formal events.

4. Tell/sell a story!

Public presentations are full of content which has structure often only transparent to the presenter. Make your story transparent to your audience. Develop a logical thread or story-line that your audience can, and wants to, follow. Have a beginning, middle and end. You are giving the talk because you are the content expert. It is therefore your job to communicate your content in an informative and entertaining manner.

Be prepared. Make sure you have spent time working on your talk, practicing it and refining it. Use the triple exposure rule – preview, view, review! Get comfortable with your material. 'Winging it' is not a good idea. While 'going with the flow' and 'being flexible' is smart, trusting yourself to be brilliant without any preparation is something professionals do not attempt. Do your research. Know

your topic and what you are going to say about it and how you would like to say it. Use humour, personal stories and conversational language – that way you will not easily forget what to say and the more confident you will be up there. Be an advocate for your topic! Enthusiasm is infectious. Model effervescent behaviours to captivate and motivate your listeners. Show the audience your passion without being manic.

5. Watch the clock!

Know when your talk is scheduled in the proceedings. Are you the only speaker, the third speaker, etc. Expect time delays due to garrulous comperes/speakers, extended question periods or rowdy audiences. Few events run according to schedule. Nonetheless, do not feel pressured to make up time due to the tardiness of others. Know exactly what is expected of you and deliver that - and no more. Practice the timing of your talk and use your own watch or timer on the lectern to monitor your progress. Know when to stop talking. It is better to finish your talk early than to go overtime. We have all been tortured by a speaker who goes on and on, caring little for the audience's interest or comfort level. Do not be one of those speakers.

6. First impressions!

Everyone judges everyone else on first impressions (consciously and subconsciously). Make your first impressions count. Do not be a 'nervous nedly' and leap into the fray. Approach the lectern composed and comfortable. Make sure your audio-visual aids and remote-controls are at hand. Take a breath and pause. Acknowledge the compere/chairperson, then turn and look at the audience. Having practiced your first few sentences over and over in your mind, you should be able to recite them perfectly. This will give you time to settle into the flow of your talk and dispel any nervousness. Say hello, introduce yourself and your topic. Sometimes, your introductory thunder may have been stolen by an overzealous chairperson. Do not let this throw you. Stick to your introductory remarks because they set the scene and tone.

7. Have a conversation!

The best public speakers appear to have a conversation with every member of their audience. They use conversational rather than formal language. There is a marked difference between spoken words appropriate for the ear and formally written words intended for reading. Public speaking has moved from the formal didactic orations of the past to more informal dialectic discussions (see any media outlet for contemporary styles). Keep your sentences short, sharp and clear. Avoid unnecessary words or previews, do not bore your audience with repetition. If you can at all avoid it, try not to read your presentation from a written script. It lacks spontaneity, and ties you to the lectern. By all means, develop written notes or palm-cards as reminders to yourself, but try not to refer to them unless in an emergency. Above all, do not read your PowerPoint slides. Your audience can read them faster than you can say them. Audio-visual aids are simply that, they are aids (not replacements for the real thing). They should be in dot-point form rather than sentences, they should have a train of logic transparent to the viewer, and they should not be buried under animations, clipart or images. They should give a clear synopsis of what you are saying!

Remember that you are speaking to an audience. Modulate the tone, volume, inflection and speed of your spoken language. Speak slowly, enunciate clearly, and show appropriate emotion and feeling relating to your topic. Establish rapport with your audience. Speak to the person farthest away from you to ensure your voice is loud enough to project to the back of the room. Pause and take breaths at appropriate intervals. One of the biggest indicators of nervousness is the lightning-fast talker. You might have the best speech ever written, but if no one can understand what you are saying, it does not matter. Pace yourself and remember to speak at a normal (or even slightly slower) pace when you are speaking publicly.

People trust those who look them in the eye, so look at your audience when you are speaking. Do not look at the floor or over their heads. Maintain sincere eye contact with your audience. Use the

three-second method, e.g. look straight into the eyes of a person in the audience for three seconds at a time. Have direct eye contact with a number of people in the audience, and every now and then glance at the whole audience while speaking. Use your eye contact to make everyone in your audience feel involved.

8. Be theatrical!

When you are presenting in front of an audience, you are performing like an actor on stage. Actors learn early in their careers to over-emphasize their roles and be noticed, rather than be subtle and over-looked. How you are perceived is up to you. Be solemn if your topic is serious. Be humorous if the situation permits. Be dramatic to emphasize material. Gesticulate to be dynamic and vibrant. Portray the character you desire for your audience. Look pleasant, enthusiastic and confident. Body language is important. Standing, walking or moving about with appropriate hand gesture or facial expression is preferred to sitting down or standing still with head down and reading from a prepared speech. Use audio-visual aids or props for enhancement if appropriate and necessary. You do not have to be a comedian, but a few light-hearted comments can help humanize you to your audience. Win them over with a smile and a well-timed clever remark, if you can. But be advised, too many jokes can weaken the validity of a presentation.

9. Be confident!

Negative thinking will get you nowhere but down in the dumps. If you believe that you will be great, you will be. If you think you are going to fail, you probably will. It is as simple as that. Visualize yourself giving your speech. Imagine yourself speaking, your voice loud, clear and confident. Visualize the audience clapping – it will boost your confidence. We are usually our own worst critics. If you forget to read a sentence off your notes, it is doubtful anyone will know. If you skip forward to the next image on the projector by mistake, no one is going to run you out of town. Do not worry. It is not life or death, it is just a speech. Begin by addressing the audience. It buys you time and calms your nerves. Pause, smile and count to three before saying anything. Transform nervous energy into enthusiasm. Your body produces adrenalin to make it ready for fight or flight. Harness that energy.

If it makes you feel better to announce to the room that you are so nervous before you begin, go ahead. But your speech will have a lot more weight if you do not. Chances are good that you are the only one who knows you are shaking in your boots - why show the cracks in your armour? Let them believe you have it under control, even if you do not feel like you do. So you tripped on the microphone cord. So what? So you said 'macro' when you meant 'micro' somewhere in your speech. So what? Everyone makes mistakes. Acknowledge them and move on. Do not apologize for any nervousness or problem – the audience probably never noticed it.

10. Prepare, Practice!

Once you are prepared, go through the speech. Then read it again. Then again. And then once more. Practice in front of a mirror. Practice out loud. Practice to a friend, a family member or even your dog. Every time you go through your presentation, you are adding another layer of "I know this stuff." Rehearse with all equipment you plan on using. Revise as necessary. Practice, pause and breathe. Practice with a timer and allow time for the unexpected. Look to examples of who you consider to be successful public speakers. Note their styles and habits and keep them in mind as good examples. Terminate your presentation with an interesting remark or an appropriate punch line. Leave your listeners with a positive impression and a sense of completion. Do not belabour your closing remarks. Thank your audience and sit down.

Above all, enjoy yourself, and then your audience will as well!