

Speaking your mind and minding your speak

Remember a film called “The King’s Speech”? It triumphed at the Oscars in 2011. More importantly, it drew huge cinema crowds to watch the pain of public speaking – and see how that pain can be relieved. Britain’s George VI suffered from a stammer, one of the worst challenges a speaker can face. Catapulted unexpectedly into the front seat as King, he was very soon a monarch at war. Armed only with a radio microphone, he learned how to deal with his fear of reading out loud, and indeed of free conversation.

Fortunately, most people asked to give a talk in public do not suffer from such serious handicaps. Nor, however, can they call on the services of George VI’s brilliant speech therapist. (Or want to contact his present-day successors). But fortunately for those who need advice rather than therapy, plenty of help is available. Numerous books*, films, websites and courses provide tips and the opportunity to practice better public speaking.

As any of us who have sat through many presentations know, speakers’ quality nonetheless varies enormously! Whether your “public” talk is in front of a few work colleagues, a class of local school children or a huge audience at an international conference, a few small changes can make all the difference between a successful presentation and a flop. Whatever the topic, it can always be presented even better.

2020 Update: COVID-19 has shoved many presentations from live to online. Some people find speaking at webinars much harder. In fact, most of the same advice applies to the screen or the conference hall. But there are also some additional aspects to consider. The internet is full of tips. Here is one helpful set: <https://blog.sli.do/9-tips-engaging-webinars/> . Like my suggestions below, they’re not limited to rhetorical skills. But one essential piece of wisdom that strangely doesn’t feature there is “look at the camera”. Sounds obvious, but most people tend to peer at something on the screen instead!

Anyway, let’s hope that the future holds more than just webinars. Below – without any claim to having all the answers – are my personal Top Ten Tips for the “live” setting. (They’re valid online, too!)

Prepare for the best

Good speeches don’t just happen. They need LOTS of preparation. Even the greatest rhetorical talents in history did their homework. Start writing the speech, or the bullet points, good and early. Practice in front of a mirror – or a teddybear. Practice in front of somebody you trust to give you useful feedback. Change things that haven’t quite worked. Practice again. Feel good about speaking without reading a text. And remember that it will anyway be different on the day!

Prepare for the worst

On the technical side, whatever can go wrong, will go wrong (sooner or later). So be absolutely sure that you could also give the talk without a microphone, USB stick, laptop or any other device that can fail. Don’t rely on a manuscript or even notes – they can all get lost. Make sure in advance that you can reach the organizers if you see you are going to be late. And ideally have a fallback option if you wake up on the Big Day with serious bowel trouble or no voice.

Know your audience

“How can I? I’ve never met them!” Well, yes, that’s true of some audiences. But if you’re presenting for the first time to the European Radish Growers’ Association or the Hanoi Academy of Astronomy, you can still find out a lot about them in advance. Visit their website. Ask the organizers to send you a list of participants. Talk the list through with the person who invited you. Try and connect with the audience. What do they want to get from your talk? What special interests will they have? (Apart from radishes or astronomy). How well do your listeners really (!) understand the language in which you will be presenting? Which of their functions or activities could you usefully highlight? But be careful about mentioning particular delegates in your talk: not everybody who says they’re coming actually turns up – and if you mention Director A, Directors B and C may be insulted not to hear their names.

Know the others

At many events, you will (thankfully) not be the only speaker. Ensure that the organizers tell you about the others in advance, and who will present what. This should help prevent overlap and repetition – but it’s no 100% guarantee! So if you can, be there to listen to the speakers before you. And be ready to change your presentation at very short notice – for example by not repeating X, building on Y, or making clear that Z really does need mentioning.

Choose your tools carefully

Ever wondered how the Ancient Greeks managed without Powerpoint? Sometimes, slides are a useful tool. But keep them few, uncluttered and pictorial. (Better three photos than 20 bullet points!) Sometimes, anything fancy can just get in the way (and you are lost when the technology fails – see *“Prepare for the worst”*). Think of other ways to support the spoken word. I once helped 40 first-time, largely non-mother-tongue presenters to talk freely just using a single object as their “visual aid”. They all performed superbly! And remember that the words you use are also tools. So keep them easy to understand (also for international audiences) and ideally also “pictorial” – leave clear images in your audience’s head(s). And wherever appropriate, tell a story.

Be there first

Actors rehearse in the theater where their play takes place! So see beforehand where you are going to talk. If you can’t visit the Mumbai Conference Center in advance, ask the organizers to describe the room you’ll be using, and send a photo. How big is it? What are the acoustics like? Do pillars obstruct anybody’s view? How will people be seated? (Lunch tables or cinema-style, for example). Where will the session chairperson be? Where is the clock? (!) What noise will you hear from outside? How much can you move around? And when you arrive at the university / sports club / company meeting room or Mumbai Conference Center, take time to check the room out in person, ideally with the responsible technician.

Be you

Sounds a bit obvious? It should be – but it’s strange how many speakers try to be somebody else! If you’re naturally a quieter type, don’t suddenly start trying to shout. Use the quietness to your advantage, for example by getting the audience to do the shouting for you. (Run a digital poll or ask for suggestions you can note on a flipchart). If you feel the need to walk around, don’t hide behind the lectern. If it’s hot under the lights, take your jacket off. When you’re first asked to be a speaker, make

sure the topic is one on which you feel at home. Answer questions authentically and admit honestly when you don't know the answer. (But try and follow up with it soon afterwards).

Watch the humo(u)r

Danger country! Not only does English spelling vary around the world, so does what makes people laugh. And the differences multiply with multicultural listeners. However, speeches that are too dry can get very boring. Depending on the topic, a funny photo can help break the ice, and with a homogenous audience you can often afford a humorous comment. But adapt your style according to whether it's the local Boy Scouts or the College of Cardinals. And ("*Be you*") don't try and play The Joker if you aren't one.

Watch the watch

Why do so many academics find it so hard to tell the time? (Professors are not alone here, however!) If your hosts have asked you to speak for 20 minutes, don't wander on for 40. When you practice ("*Prepare for the best*") and find your talk is far too short, beef it up. If, like me, you don't normally wear a watch, make sure that you take one along, or can see the clock on your computer. ("*Be there first*" preparations include wall-clock-hunting, too). If you are speaking out of doors, you'll probably have to ask somebody in the front row for a discreet time signal – but be prepared to adapt your speech-length to the weather!

Public speaking is an athletic performance

Positive energy is enormously important – and not just for the first presentation after lunch on a hot day. Whether you stand at the lectern or bounce around the room, whether your topic is cancer therapy, smallholder agriculture or Spanish guitars, and whether your audience is in a disco, a warehouse or a cemetery, your speech is a demanding physical and mental performance. So follow the professionals, and prepare like an athlete. Get enough sleep, dress appropriately, eat carefully. Look after your voice (avoid coffee, milk or nuts just before speaking, as well as coleslaw and people with coughs) and do a proper warm-up – there are lots of good exercises for breathing, jaw-loosening and hitting the right tone. Also check your equipment, keep water nearby, remember what your coach said, focus on the task in hand, and if you need it, ask for quiet – including from mobile phones.

And like an athlete, also show the spectators that you enjoy what you are doing!

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**On the subject of books: One concise and amusing read is by Peter Sandbach. It's called "How to get your TED Talk banned (and other lessons in public speaking)". Reassuringly, Part II agrees with a lot of my Top Ten Tips. Peter takes them further, however, and adds experienced thoughts of his own. Part I is more a personal story, some of it pretty worrying. First edition 2018, ISBN 978-19-80586-10-4.*