

Guide to Public Speaking by Paul J. Croce, History and American Studies, Stetson University
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Suggestions for Oral Presentations—ways to prepare before and things to do during....

Speaker apprehension, or fear of public speaking, is normal and very widespread. Psychologists put it right up there with fear of snakes among common human fears! There are steps you can take to minimize any speaker apprehension you may have, and even to make use of them to become a better speaker!

- Not only is this fear normal, some of it is actually helpful because it is a way that attention gets focused—fear (within limits) can energize you.
- No one can see the way you feel at the start of public speaking, unless you say or do something to show it. But at the very least, you need not be nervous about being nervous.
- If the nervousness comes over you, you need to control yourself enough to begin; then after you start, the tensions may dissipate.
- It helps, therefore, to plan an introduction very carefully—to relax you and your listeners. Have your opening lines down cold, but do not memorize the whole talk.
- Before beginning, many people find it helpful to take a few deep breaths and clench the fists firmly; you may find your own “body signals” to stay calm and focused.
- Once in front of the audience, pause for a few seconds, look in a responsive way at the people in front of you, and wait for them to give you their attention. This shows respect for them, and your responsiveness invites reciprocation.
- Better than reading to your audience is to remember the main ideas and realize that if you are focusing on creating an understanding in your audience (and with them); you will find the exact words while speaking. This fosters a conversational style.
- Concentrate on communicating your meaning and engaging in dialogue with your audience.
- Use body, gesture, facial expression, and purposeful movement. This will not only help in your communication, but also it will ease any nervousness you may still be feeling.
- While speaking, you can focus on individuals that seem particularly receptive. Try to pick out a few of these at different places. As you speak to the whole audience, these few will be you anchors, and talking to them will reinforce the conversational style. Finding people in different parts of the room will keep your eyes sweeping over the whole audience rather than looking to one side and ignoring another.
- As you look for individuals to talk to, their reactions (nods, smiles, frowns, etc.) will give you “real time” feedback so you can make small adaptations to your message and clarify particular points, and all of this will reinforce your sincerity and the smoothness of your communication.
- As with the introduction, have your conclusion down cold. This way, no matter what happens, you will have a strong ending. That is better than ending with “thank you” or “that’s all.”
- When done, pause and stand in place for a few seconds; this shows your audience that you have enjoyed the exchange and feel poised enough to keep from having to run away back to your seat. This pause before questions also shows respect for the people in front of you because it gives them a chance to think before asking questions.

Speaking in public is not easy, but it does get easier over time and with experience. Doing is the best way to learn, and learning to do your best when speaking in front of a group is a skill that you can use in uncountable places for the rest of your life.

--adapted from Beatriz Durán McWilliams, “Oral Communications 101”