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# Overcoming Speaker Anxiety

Further than Figures

Overcoming Speaker Anxiety

**Glossophobia:** the fear of speaking in public...

FROM: NOV-DEC 2004 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

If you've ever experienced sweaty palms, a rapid heartbeat, or a cold feeling in the pit of your stomach just before you had to stand up in front of a group of people and make a speech, then you should know that you are not alone. Various surveys suggest that glossophobia is experienced by 75 to 80 per cent of people. In fact, a now-classic study conducted in 1973 discovered that people are more afraid of public speaking than of death. Ironically, that literally means most people at a funeral would prefer to be lying in the casket rather than giving the eulogy. Yet despite its much-hated status, the ability to speak publicly is a necessary skill for professional success. Whether it's delivering an address to a large group of employees, making a sales presentation in front of a purchasing team, or just persuading a small group of colleagues over to your point of view, the skill of speaking out confidently, respectfully, and convincingly is essential to business success.

Overcoming a fear of public speaking begins by asking yourself what exactly you are afraid of. Is it the words not coming out; forgetting what you have to say; having someone in the audience who knows more than you do; or the presentation being so bad and embarrassing that your social and career relationships will be ruined forever? While it is true that each of these possibilities *could* occur, it is extremely unlikely. And recognizing this improbability is the first step. The truth is that dealing with speaker anxiety, like virtually every other skill that is critical in a professional environment, is a learned ability. Consider the following seven strategies to teach yourself to banish the butterflies:

## 1. Think positively

Despite what your queasy stomach may tell you, your audience wants you to succeed. The odds are high that every single one of your audience members, at some time or another, has been in your position. They know how it feels, and they want you to do well. Even in situations where your message is not a popular one, rarely does your audience want you to fail. Instead of thinking about everything that could go wrong, focus on creating a positive image of your successful presentation in your mind. Remind yourself that you are speaking on a subject in which you are knowledgeable. Repeat silently to yourself: "I know that I am qualified to give this presentation. I have prepared and practised, and I am going to do a great job."

## 2. Be prepared

The key to confidence is preparedness. Take the time to organize your ideas logically and script out the main outline of your presentation. If you use notes, they should contain no more than this main outline. Practise your speech, particularly the opening and closing, in front of a colleague or friend. Research shows that people who experience high speaker anxiety spend less time rehearsing than those who report lower anxiety.

While rehearsing, imagine that you are giving your presentation to the audience you will actually address. Practise walking to the front of the room. Stand up while rehearsing if that's what you'll be doing in the actual presentation. Don't practise silently; speak out loud. Your rehearsal should include your PowerPoint presentation and any other audiovisual aids or props you'll be using. Going through the process minimizes the natural fear of the unexpected and your level of confidence will go up.

### **3. Focus on your audience**

The more you know about your audience and how they are likely to respond to your message, the more comfortable you will feel about delivering your message. No matter what the situation, take the time to find out about your audience. Sometimes this will be easy — if they're your colleagues at work, for example. But often, it may take a little more effort on your part, particularly if you are making a presentation to people outside your organization or social circle. Ask questions about your audience's age, gender, education level, occupation, and background.

Find out if your presentation is scheduled in the middle of a series of speeches, or at the beginning or end. Is it first thing in the morning, or after a meal? Consider how the audience will respond to your subject — will they generally be in agreement, or are they likely to be against your point of view? The answers to these kinds of questions will reduce the unknown and lessen anxiety. When you finally deliver your presentation, focus on connecting with your listeners. The more you concentrate on your audience, the less you will be able to attend to your own nervousness.

### **4. Focus on your message**

Focusing on your message can also be a positive strategy to reduce anxiety. Just like focusing on your audience, it keeps you from thinking about how nervous you are. In the few minutes before you begin your presentation, think about what you are going to say. Review your main ideas, either mentally or by skimming through your outline notes. Silently practise your opening lines and your conclusion. Once you are speaking, maintain focus on your message and audience, rather than on your fears.

### **5. Use deep-breathing techniques**

Two of the physical symptoms of speaker anxiety are shallow breathing and a rapid heart rate. The best way to overcome these is to practise deep-breathing techniques. Stand or sit up straight, placing the palm of your hand just above your stomach and just below your ribcage. Breathe in deeply — you should feel your ribcage lift — and hold for three seconds. Let it out slowly, feeling your ribcage drop. While you exhale, focus on relaxing your entire body. Repeat four or five times.

### **6. Take advantage of opportunities to speak**

In your professional career as well as your personal pursuits, there will be many opportunities to deliver speeches or make presentations. If you suffer from glossophobia, you've probably shied away from these in the past. Don't. Actively seek them out and accept these opportunities, even if you don't want to. Challenge yourself to go one step further and join a local Toastmasters Club. These clubs offer a low-stress and inexpensive way to overcome public speaking fears in a supportive and self-paced environment. With more than 9,300 clubs located in more than 80 countries around the world, there's no excuse not to find one. In fact, one probably meets weekly less than one kilometre from where you work or live. To find the location closest to you, go to [www.toastmasters.org/find](http://www.toastmasters.org/find).

### **7. Develop a routine**

Comfort comes from routine, and public speaking is no exception. Develop and faithfully follow a routine before every public-speaking event. The routine itself can be anything. One speaker I know goes through a 30-second finger-flexing exercise before he starts; another takes one minute of quiet time to silently repeat positive affirmations to herself. Yet another takes a sip of water and a single deep breath, smiles broadly, and begins. It doesn't matter what the routine is, only that you have one.

If you suffer from glossophobia, you are at a disadvantage for professional and personal success. But you can overcome this common phobia by practising these seven proven strategies to help you speak out confidently, respectfully, and convincingly, every time.

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