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HOW TO GET READY FOR THAT BIG PRESENTATION

Practice Techniques That Guarantee Success

By Jenna Furdon

Your pulse is racing, your palms are sweating and your knees are knocking as you step up to the microphone. You clear your throat, glimpse down at your notes, and feel all eyes focused on you. Your mind goes blank. You can't remember how you wanted to start. Your heart pounds in your chest so loudly you're sure the audience can hear it, and you swear to yourself you'll never give a presentation again. And then you wake up.

Sound like your worst nightmare? You're not alone: A widely quoted national survey concluded that public speaking was Americans' number-one fear, even above death. Even successful business leaders, politicians and celebrities have anxiety throughout their careers. After 30 years on *The Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson's heart rate doubled every night before he walked on stage. Like most of us, Johnny never got over those familiar symptoms of anxiety, yet he still became a household name because he learned how to manage his nerves through experience and preparation.

Fear of speaking isn't a chronic, untreatable disease. While you may never avoid a flutter of nerves, you can learn to manage them at a comfortable level. The best, most fool-proof way to become comfortable and confident in the spotlight is to practice. Forget the old, inaccurate adage "practice makes perfect." Practice makes prepared.

And yes, it's true: The secret behind those speakers we label as "naturals" is preparation. There is no such thing as a born speaker, which means that you have the opportunity to improve your speaking skills no matter what your experience is. Our 15 highly effective tips will guide you in the right direction. Although you may feel silly or embarrassed at first when you are practicing, you will soon discover that these tips are an essential part of your preparation for a real, live audience.

Practice Techniques That Guarantee Better Presentations

1. Set aside practice time. Don't wait until the last minute. Depending upon the length of the talk, you may need to have a completed script a week or two in advance, so you can practice several times; put it onto your calendar as an appointment with yourself.
2. Practice out loud. You will become more comfortable hearing your own voice, an essential step in becoming a more powerful public speaker. This also commits the script to memory and allows you to make changes so it flows when you give the real presentation.
3. Use a mirror. Since you are your toughest critic, you will be able to recognize distracting gestures, awkward stances and wandering eye contact right away. Don't use this technique until you have already practiced without the mirror, so you already know the material reasonably well.
4. Record audio and/or video. Playing back a recording of your speech will help you identify areas that need improvement. With an audio recording, you'll be able to hear annoying vocal habits, areas of hesitation or uncertainty, and awkward sentence structures. A video recording is your best bet if you want.
5. Practice a minimum of 5-6 times. Everybody's different, but gauge your preparation as you go. Make sure you know your speech well enough to deliver it naturally and conversationally without relying on your notes too much. You don't want to go overboard—there is such thing as too much practice.
6. Don't memorize. You are in too much danger of forgetting what you want to say. Learn concepts, practice phrasing, but don't be a slave to saying it word for word the way it's written.
7. Use a script or outline. But don't be married to it. You should practice so much that the note cards, or loose script simply become a reference –start with a script, then bring the talk down to bullet points as you learn it. That will make you sound more natural.
8. Time your presentation. If you have a time requirement you must meet, timing your presentation will determine where you may need to eliminate or elaborate material.
9. Use a friendly test audience. Asking a trusted colleague or mentor to listen to your speech will help you begin to feel comfortable speaking in front of other people. Ask them for their observations—what they liked, what you might improve, if they understood your message.
10. Phrase for meaning. Learn how to speak in phrases, to change the pace and timing and make your voice more interesting by phrasing without using a sing-song voice. To know whether you are succeeding, record your talk and play it back, listening for phrasing.
11. Visualize success. As you practice learn how to see the audience in your mind's eye. The more you can imagine the room, the people, the smiles, the applause, and yourself at the podium in control, the more successful you will be when the day comes.

12. Use positive self-talk. We find this is a powerful technique when used in combination with steady, devoted practice. Don't tell yourself you're going to just "get up there and get it over with." Say, "I'm going to love this audience, I'm going to share something important, and they are going to get everything they wanted from this presentation!"
13. Practice eye contact, smiles and gestures. If you practice out loud only using the words, without the gestures, facial expressions and smile, you are bound to get up and fail to make the important non-verbal connections. This is as important to successful practice as learning your messages.
14. Avoid perfection. Audiences don't need you to be perfect – they need you to be interesting. Perfectionism can ruin your experience, and the audience's experience, too. If you beat yourself up over every little thing you didn't say, you will never feel successful. Go with the idea that you are going to make sure this audience understands and enjoys the experience. Focus on them, not you, and you'll succeed.
15. Reward yourself. After you give a presentation, give yourself a pat on the back. Do something you enjoy to anchor the experience as a positive one. Have a massage, treat yourself to lunch, buy a book or something you have wanted so that the next time you're asked to speak, your brain says "Sure—at the end of this is another reward!"

Your opportunity to become a better speaker begins today, with practice and preparation. Don't succumb to self-doubt or the belief that you weren't born to do this. Practicing your skills is the way to become great. If you put time into practice you will build confidence and poise, learn your material, and deliver it with panache.