

A Crash Course in Public Speaking

You have landed that new job, but there is just one catch. In your new role you are going to have to get up on a podium and speak at company meetings, conferences and the like. Apart from the fact that the thought of this fills you with dread, your voice may sound like a nasal whine or you can never think of what to say!

Follow these suggestions on how to get up and speak in front of people.

Seek Help

This is one area where coaching really helps and you could do worse than consult a public speech coach. Finding your best voice is largely a matter of mechanics, but you need somebody to watch, listen and tell you where you are going wrong.

Plan It

Sound obvious, but start by deciding your key message. This enables you to make a structure (e.g. tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them what you told them), which is a first step to dispelling your nerves. A clear structure to your speech is the skeleton which keeps the whole thing together.

Relax

Start with breathing – it provides the power behind your voice and enables you to achieve what is called 'active relaxation' i.e. nervous, but still in control. It helps to slow down your delivery and take the time to enjoy the words.

Give your voice a workout

It's purely a physical thing, a bit like going to the gym – just talk loudly over breakfast, shout in the shower or sing in the car. The aim is to get your voice firing on all cylinders, so you achieve good communication, projection, variety of expression and so on. You want to engage the audience, not sound boring.

Put in points

Now you need to write what you are going to say, but put it in points. Avoid having your speech scripted down to the last word, the audience will switch off. Bullet points, mnemonics and cards are useful devices. It helps to learn the first three sentences off by heart, which will avoid you 'um-ing' and 'er-ing'. After three sentences you should be relaxed enough to use your pointers and talk comfortably through the remainder of the speech.

Cut out the funny stuff

Unless you are a natural comedian and you know the audience well, it's best to stay clear of jokes. If your joke falls flat it's very difficult to recover and continue confidently through the speech. Also you run the risk of offending someone with a joke. You will have more success if you use examples, they add colour and engage the audience's imagination.

Practice, practice, practice

You can't rehearse too many times. Get used to speaking in front of people by recruiting the help of your partner or friends as an audience.

And on the day?

Arrive early and familiarise yourself with the space. Don't drink alcohol beforehand, but make sure you have a drink of water to hand. When you step up onto the stage don't think about how you are feeling just concentrate on the job you have to do. And if you panic, remember the golden rule 'when in doubt, breathe out'.

Do say

'First, let me tell you what I am going to talk about today.'

Don't say

'Before I start, has anyone heard the one about the Muslim, the Christian and the Jew who went to a lap dancing club?'