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Speaking in Public

Public speaking is being practised increasingly as a broader range of people are being called upon to 'say a few words' before an audience. Many speakers are seized with stage fright as they rise to their feet. The way to conquer this is also the way to make good speeches: Be prepared!

More and more people these days are finding themselves having to speak in public. In addition to the usual occasions when they may be asked to address a club or other social body, the number of situations in which they may be obliged to face an audience has grown.

For instance, the gracious custom of delivering eulogies at funerals has been revived, and participants in new-style wedding ceremonies are often expected to say a few words or give a reading. Whereas at one time only senior managers made presentations or speeches as part of their jobs, almost anyone in today's workplace may be called upon to talk to a quality circle or similar group.

Executives who once thought they could spend their lives quietly administering affairs are now summoned before gatherings of financial analysts, regulators, and community leaders to explain corporate policies and promote the interests of their industries. Public speaking has been included in their job descriptions whether they like it or not.

And many people don't like it at all. Often the most insincere line in a speech comes when the speaker attests to what a pleasure it is to be there, when in fact he or she would sooner be almost anywhere else on earth at that moment. Yet it is an absolute fact that public speaking can be a pleasure for both the speaker and the audience if it is approached with due care.

The first step to making good speeches is to subdue one's fear of appearing in public. This trepidation is as old as the Old Testament, in which Jeremiah protested that he was too young to be a preacher, and Moses was reluctant to assume the leadership of the Israelites because "I am slow of speech, and of slow tongue."

Modern psychologists have a rational explanation for the phenomenon known as "stage fright."

What people are really afraid of, they say, is the possibility of humiliation resulting from criticism or failure. Being on guard against such psychological harm provokes an instinctive "fight or flight response."

As our bodies prepare to fight or flee in the face of a threat, our muscles become so taut that we begin to tremble. Our faces grow pale as blood leaves the skin so that we will not bleed so much if wounded; our hearts pound as blood pumps more quickly through our systems to lend us extra strength.

At the same time, our glands shoot adrenalin into our blood to add to our alertness and energy. Our mouths go dry so that we will not choke on our saliva — which explains why public speakers so frequently clear their throats.

All of these conditions are classic signs of stress. As Dr. Hans Selye and his disciples have declared, stress can be a strong positive force if we know how to capitalize on it.

In the context of public speaking, stress provides an edge of tension which brings out a dynamic performance. Legions of veteran actors and actresses have testified that they could never perform as well as they did if chronic stage fright had not kept them at a high pitch of intensity.

Perhaps the first thing a prospective speaker should know about stage fright is that almost everybody in a like situation has it. Shy people tend to think that their shyness is "worse" than anyone else's even as they try to hide it. In fact, many others are just as shy, and are hiding it just as well.

Some of the most outwardly masterful speakers in history have felt their knees knock when they first faced an audience. The eloquent Welshman David Lloyd George was known as one of the most able parliamentary debaters of the 20th century, an

orator whose charisma on election platforms helped to carry him to the British prime ministership. Yet, he recalled, "The first time I attempted to make a public talk I tell you that I was in a state of misery. It is no figure of speech, but literally true, that my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth; and, at first, I could hardly get out a word."

Experience enabled Lloyd George to overcome his stage fright eventually, but some public figures never do: they simply learn to control it. If you are like the latter, it may be reassuring to remind yourself that the audience is naturally less conscious of your nervousness than you are.

The tremor in your voice might sound like a jack hammer in your own head, but ask friends in the audience about it afterwards, and they probably never noticed it.

*Be yourself, but
be a little
better than usual*

Even if your nervousness shows, your listeners usually are unlikely to object to it. As Arnold Zenker wrote in his 1983 book *Mastering the Public Spotlight*, "Au-

diences want you to be a winner. If you doubt this, think of the last presentation you attended. Did you wish the speakers failure? Of course not."

Once you resign yourself to a certain degree of nervousness, then you can start practising some of the physical techniques for controlling it. Chief among these is deep breathing. The extra oxygen is soothing, and the deliberate pacing of your breaths causes your heart-beat to slow down.

The physical actions entailed in loosening up before a public speaking appearance resemble the warm-ups athletes go through before entering a game: You wiggle your toes and fingers, rotate your head and stretch your neck, move your jaw from one side to the other.

Athletes also "psyche" themselves up to hit the playing field. When they charge out aggressively, they are unconsciously putting into practice psychologist William James's theory that actions can evoke feelings. James wrote that if we deliberately act as if we are brave, "a courage fit will very likely replace the fit of fear."

The above was quoted with approval by Dale Carnegie in his *How to Develop Self-Confidence and Influence People by Public Speaking*. Carnegie's title is instructive. Many men and women who have suffered agonies of shyness have found the self-assurance they needed to get along in the world by taking public-speaking courses.

People accustomed to talking to groups develop an air of poise which can be invaluable in meeting strangers, participating in gatherings, and exercising leadership.

In any case, Carnegie advised speakers to take a bold stand though they may be quaking inside: "Stride forth bravely, stop, stand still and act as if you loved it. Draw yourself up to your full height, look your audience straight in the eyes, and begin to talk as confidently as if every one of them owed you money. Imagine that they do. Imagine that they have assembled there to beg for an extension of credit."

If you remain nervous despite this inspiring stance, try not to show it. You can relieve the tension unobtrusively by doing things like twisting your fingers behind your back, wiggling your toes, or clasping a coin in your fist.

In public speaking more than in most other pursuits, appearances are important. This begins with physical appearance. "Had Cicero himself pronounced one of his orations with a blanket about his shoulders," Joseph Addison observed, "more people would have laughed at his dress than admired his eloquence."

You should "dress" for a speech in the same way as you would dress for wedding or any other social event. Your clothes should be suited to the occasion. A speaker's dress should never be so incongruous, flashy or glamorous that it distracts attention from what he or she has to say.

People who are inclined to make flamboyant gestures should try to curb them slightly, mindful that they can also take the audience's mind off their basic message. Gestures, of course, are a highly individualistic feature of a personality, and you would look and feel awkward if you tried to suppress them totally.

*A speech must
turn over fresh
interest as it
moves along*

But you should not just let yourself go — instead, you should be aware of your gestures, and try to use them to your best advantage. If truth be told, some of

the most apparently passionate orators at religious and political rallies have their gestures under complete control.

Unless you are a comedian or a demagogue trying incite a riot, you are best-off to try to give yourself an air of quiet dignity. The degree of respect you elicit for your personality is bound to affect your audience's respect for what you have to say.

So be yourself, but be a little better than your normal self. If you normally tend to slur your words, for instance, take care to pronounce every word precisely and clearly. If you ordinarily talk fast, slow down.

You may be an inveterate slouch in your daily life, but this is the time to hold your chest high, tuck in your stomach, and press the back of your neck against your collar. Apart from enhancing your physical presence, this stance deepens the chest cavity, allowing you to bring your breathing under better control.

An old preacher once said that, for a man in his profession, the next best thing to the grace of God was oxygen. The first act of a prudent speaker as he or she looks out at an expectant audience is to take a deep breath. One of the most common faults in speech delivery is trying to talk with insufficient air in the lungs. It can be terribly embarrassing to run out of “wind” in the middle of a flight of oratory.

Breathing is a prime factor in the creation of a tone of voice. That tone is created by forcing air through the larynx. Controlling the flow of air — which presupposes that you have plenty of it stocked up in your lungs — is the way to produce resonance, regardless of the pitch of an individual’s voice.

People cannot do much about their pitch, but they can learn to use their voices more expressively. As in singing, breath control helps them to do this by permitting variations in volume and intonation. Nothing turns an audience off more completely than the featureless droning of a voice speaking in a monotone.

It was somewhere around 600 B.C. that a Greek philosopher first commented to the effect that timing is everything. As far as public speaking is concerned, it still is.

Talk as if you were explaining something to your own family

Pauses at psychological moments, speed-ups and slow-downs, abrupt changes of pace — these can make the difference among the audience between stimulation and

stupification. Even a long speech can be riveting if it is delivered with dramatic panache.

As a rule, however, the quality of speeches is in inverse proportion to their length. Oratory is like a plough which, to do its job properly, must keep freshly turning over the audience’s interest as it moves along. There always comes a point when it has gone on so long that people begin to lose that

interest. Professional speech-writers maintain that anything longer than 20 minutes stretches an audience’s attention span.

“What too many orators want in depth, they will give you in length,” wrote Montesquieu. More often than not, a long shallow speech is inadequately prepared. Abraham Lincoln once said that it took him two weeks to prepare a 20-minute speech, and one week to prepare a 40-minute one. But he could talk for an hour off the top of his head.

“There are three things to aim at in public speaking,” the American bishop Alexander Gregg wrote; “first to get into your subject, then to get your subject into yourself, and lastly to get your subject into your hearers.” Note that only the third item refers to the actual delivery. A good speech is like an iceberg in which the small proportion that shows is underlain by a great mass of preparation in the form of research, writing, and rehearsal.

“In composing, think much more of your matter than your manner,” wrote the eminent American lawyer William Wirt. Writers find that the more material they have to work with, the easier it is to make something out of it. In doing research, they will always opt for too much rather than risk having too little. They know that “overkill” makes their task easier in the long run. If they are dealing with ideas as opposed to hard facts, the rule is that the

Ideally, one should memorize every word, but who has the time?

more they read and think about an idea, the more effectively they will be able to write about it.

The only disadvantage to a speech packed with solid facts and ideas is that it might be too

heavy. One way to lighten it up is to put your thoughts into colloquial language, as you would if you were explaining something to your own family. Wherever appropriate, you might add a humorous touch, although amateurs should be warned to leave stand-up comedy to the professionals. Since nothing fails so miserably as a botched joke, it is advisable to aim for warm smiles rather than belly-laughs.

In writing a speech as in writing anything else, one should strive to make one’s points absolutely clear by using language that matches the vocabulary of the audience — the plainer, the better. Professional jargon should be avoided unless it is certain that everyone present will understand every word of what is being said.

There is at least one marked difference between



writing for a speaker's platform and writing for print. In the latter, authors take great pains to avoid repeating themselves. Because of the ephemeral nature of the spoken word, this does not apply to a speech.

*The confidence
gained can reach
into the rest
of your life*

A reliable old saying about to how give a speech runs: "Tell them what you are going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you told them." Actually, though, it is not a matter

of saying the same thing over and over; you should add new facts, ideas, insights and perspectives each time you return to the basic theme.

"A speech is like a love affair. Any fool can start it, but to end it requires considerable skill," wrote the witty Lord Moncroft. It is hard to tell which speakers are worse — those who quit abruptly, or those those who do not know when to quit.

The ending of a speech is vital because the final few sentences are the ones the listeners are most likely to retain as they walk away. A good peroration, then, is a summary of main points you want to make wrapped up in a rhetorical crescendo designed to leave your message ringing in the listeners' ears.

There is no set formula for preparing an ending to a speech, but it always pays to labour over it until you are satisfied that it delivers your message with maximum impact. The last paragraph or so should then be committed to memory, so that you can look the audience in the eye at that critical psychological point.

Ideally, every single line of every speech should be memorized and the speaker's performance thoroughly rehearsed with the help of a tape or video recorder. "How-to" manuals on the subject advise that, if a speaker has not been able to memorize a speech entirely, he or she should deliver it extemporaneously, using brief notes to jog the memory and keep the speech moving in an orderly manner, point by point.

These manuals are prone to deplore the practice of reading a speech. The main reason for their objection is that it takes the spontaneity and the naturalness out of the occasion. The authors present an image of the speaker standing there, head bowed over a sheaf of paper, stumbling over the words like a child in school.

The truth is, however, that ordinary mortals do not have the time, training, or talent to memorize

long stretches of prose. Nor do they have the quick-wittedness to ad lib without humming and hawing, resorting to trite language, repeating themselves, and straying from the subject. On the whole, they will do a far better job of speaking if they write out and read their words.

As a practical matter, any speech which contains a lot of detail or explains a carefully thought-out policy should be put on paper for the sake of accuracy. The reading of a speech need not detract from its impact. No less powerful an orator than Winston Churchill wrote out his complete text on small pieces of paper. He even included stage directions like "stammer;" "correct self;" "grope for word."

Churchill used what is known as the "power shovel method" of delivering a speech. A power shovel scoops up earth in large batches and dumps it into a waiting truck. In the same way, a person reading a speech can memorize a few phrases at a time from a written page and deliver them while looking in a natural manner at the audience. It takes practice, but speakers can learn to deliver whole paragraphs without looking as if they were reading them.

But just because a speech is designed to be read, that does not mean that it does not require careful preparation. It should be thought out, backed up with facts, and written as with as much rigour as an academic paper.

And it should be thoroughly rehearsed — aloud, and not only in one's head — to make it sound right. The written and the spoken word are two different things, and revisions are usually needed before a text can be read aloud to its best effect.

The greatest cause of failure among speeches is not stage fright or delivery technique or the appearance of the speaker. If a speech fails, it is usually because it was written at the last minute and delivered without ever being rehearsed.

The speaker most likely to succeed is the one who has put many long hours into preparation. The public platform should hold no terrors for the person who knows the subject and knows what he or she wants to say.

Self-confidence is half the battle in the public arena, and it cannot be gained without hard work and forththought. But it makes the effort all the more worthwhile when you realize that the confidence gained in making successful speeches can extend into every aspect of your life.

