How Anyone Can Become a Good Public Speaker

Quora | April 1, 2015

If you can talk to one person, you can talk to an audience of thousands

Answer by Jim Moore on Quora.

What qualities are needed to be a public speaker? I have observed the following attributes common to most successful speakers:

- Confident
- Organized
- Outgoing
- Engaging
- Flexible
- Unflappable
- Light-hearted
- Gracious

Here are some of the tips I shared with speakers I’ve coached over the years:

To begin with, do not for a moment think you cannot give a speech. You give speeches every day to your family, friends, colleagues, and, yes, even to strangers. Your daily conversations are nothing more than mini-speeches in casual clothes. If you can talk to one person, you can talk to an audience of thousands. Really.

When you are speaking to a large crowd, you are still talking to one person at a time, just as if you were chatting to the cashier at the food store or a fellow passenger on a plane. Whether the topic is the weather or a description of a favorite camping trip or an answer to the airborne time-passing question, “What do you do?” you are giving an abbreviated speech, complete with a beginning, a middle, and an end.
You may have given an “elevator” speech—a short (usually no longer than 30 seconds) statement of purpose or plans to a colleague, boss, or client that conveys key information in a few moments to a captive audience while in transit. Or you may have delivered a “cocktail” party speech (assuming cocktail parties are still in vogue), which is really nothing more than a three-minute burst of information sufficient to enlighten, but short enough to stay within the attention span of an easily-distracted listener. In both instances, sans podium, you have already given many speeches. Now, wasn’t that easy?

Okay, maybe not so easy when you envision a conference room filled with people whose attention is focused on you, up there on that stage, and you wonder in sleepless nights leading up to the big day, “How in the world did I get myself into this?”

So let’s start with some preparation:

1. **Know your audience.** I cannot stress this enough with my clients or employers for whom I have written or coached. You don’t have to have expert knowledge of the audience, but you should know enough to reference their interests, or mission, or leadership, if, for example, you’re speaking to a trade association. You should have some audience-centric remarks that show you are not just showing up to speak, but that you actually considered the audience’s perspective. There is nothing wrong with calling your host and asking questions about the group. You might learn about an important member of the organization who will be in the audience and can be singled out for podium praise; perhaps there is a charity that has benefited from the group’s work—always a good point to mention. The bottom line: Do your homework!

2. **Keep your remarks brief and to the point.** In speech writing, we have a mantra:
   - Tell them what you are going to say;
   - Say it;
   - Tell them what you told them;
   - Say thank you and sit down.

3. **Do not attempt humor** unless you are, a) a noted humorist, b) an experienced toastmaster or, c) well-acquainted with the humor that will make your audience laugh and not wince. Poking a bit of fun at yourself is fine; sharing a light moment with the audience is good; just keep in mind that pulling off a comedy shtick, even a single joke, is a lot harder than it looks when coming from an experienced speaker.

4. **Keep your sentences short, your words shorter.** This simply means you should not tax your audience by forcing them to follow a long, convoluted sentence, or interpret a fancy, but unnecessarily long word. Apply the KISS principle: Keep It Simple, Short.

5. **Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.** The more you rehearse, the less likely you are to shuffle your notes, look down at your speech, stumble on key phrases, or “um and ahh” as you try to recall the order of your words. Some people rehearse in front of a mirror, some go over their speeches with a spouse or friends, some record their speech and play it back over and over. You don’t have to memorize your remarks, but you should know them well enough to just glance at your notes or papers. Whatever works for you, do it.

Once you know your audience and know your remarks, and you’re about to step up to the podium, consider these points:

- **The audience is actually rooting for you** to succeed; the fear of public speaking is second only to the fear of death, and most people, when faced with a microphone and a crowd, usually wish they were dead. No one in the audience wants to take your place. So, you have lots of company in front of you.
- **Take a deep breath** and don’t push yourself; take your time, organize your thoughts. A good speech is not a sprint or even a marathon; it should be a pleasant, calming walk—for you and for the audience.

- **The podium is not a crutch**: don’t cling to the sides of the podium as if you are on a storm-tossed ship. Use the podium as a base of operations, staying in touch with it, but giving yourself some room for movement. Think of “one hand on the wheel” as a way to keep from becoming a rigid speaker.

- **Give your audience—and yourself—a break** from time to time. You needn’t give all your speech all at once. Think of how you normally converse at a small party; there is a natural give and take, pauses in thoughts, breaks for breathing. The same applies when giving a speech. Build in a few quiet moments in your speech, places where you can step back for a few seconds to give yourself and the audience a moment to contemplate what you just said, and to regroup for the next part.

- **The “eyes” have it.** The old rule about looking over the heads of the audience to avoid eye contact is rubbish. It only makes you look aloof and disengaged. Before you start speaking, find a few faces in the crowd that you can cycle through as you speak. Return to each one as the speech progresses—only a glance is needed.

- **Be gracious.** At the end of your speech, be sure to thank the audience, the host, and the organization.

There are many more tips and strategies for speech makers and speechwriters, but if you apply these tips to your next speech, you will have a foundation for a more enjoyable podium presence. Good luck!

*This question originally appeared on Quora: What qualities are needed to be a public speaker? How do I speak among a huge crowd?*

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