



Effective—and Healthy—Public Speaking

BY DANIEL V. SCHIDLOW, MD, AND PAGE S. MORAHAN, PhD

You are very proud, excited...and nervous. You have been asked to present grand rounds at a prestigious university. This invitation followed the first presentation of your research data at the annual symposium of the major society in your field. As the day approaches, you get increasingly nervous—this is the first time that you have had to present your work at such a prestigious grand rounds format. You have so much material and they gave you only 45 minutes to present! And you know that one of the experts in the field, along with members of his research team, will be in the audience. Medical students, residents, faculty, and community physicians will be there as well, so you were asked to make the information interesting for all these people.

This column is for both junior faculty and seasoned faculty members. For the latter, does the above paragraph evoke any feeling of déjà vu? Although you undoubtedly have honed your presentation style by now, do you still have anxiety in certain speaking situations, and do you really know how to keep your voice vibrant and healthy when you have multiple speaking engagements? Remember the back-to-back interviews and talks to groups during interview marathons, and the multiple talks at your disciplinary meetings!

The Presentation

Because much has been written about the basics of presentations, we only briefly summarize here. First, contain your impulse to entertain by showing all sorts of wonderful visual effects, irrelevant pictures and cartoons, and frequent jokes. Insert a picture to make a point, but not as a “filler” or to appear entertaining. Beware of overuse of PowerPoint technology. Excessive color, movement of text, images interspersed throughout a slide, little moving figures on the corners of slides, and other such “gizmos” may end up making the audience admire your PowerPoint prowess—but miss the content of the talk. Well-lit rooms may make light texts on a dark background difficult to read. Generally, you are safest using

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light backgrounds with dark text, which show well in any lighting condition.

Do not read your slides line by line: your audience knows how to read. The slides are visual aids and they should not *be* your talk. In fact, you should be able to deliver your talk without slides (accidents can happen!). The slides are to highlight concepts or show diagrams otherwise not easily explainable, not to present reams of information. Have you ever watched motivational speakers on television? They keep their audiences transfixed but rarely use visual aids; when they do, these are short and to the point.

Avoid joking too frequently. Humor helps to alert the audience, but it can distract your audience from the educational objectives. You risk appearing flippant instead of eru-

dite, and in these days of increased diversity, you risk offending someone.

Do not pack your slides with information. Audiences recoil from very busy slides. A useful (albeit not universal) guide to presentations is “the rule of multiple of eights”:

- ❖ No more than 8 words per line.
- ❖ No more than 8 lines per slide.
- ❖ No less than 32-point font for text.
- ❖ No more than 40-point font for titles.
- ❖ No more than 48 content slides per hour.
- ❖ No changes after 48 hours before the talk.
- ❖ And, allow 8 weeks for your honorarium to arrive!

Use the “rule of multiples of three” as a general guide to distribute the components of your presentation in a standard a one-hour time slot. This approach allows for an on-time end and leaves time for questions (in spite of the very common delays at the start!).

- ❖ 3 minutes for greetings and objectives.
- ❖ 12 minutes for background information.
- ❖ 30 minutes to present the body of the talk.
- ❖ 3 minutes for three 60-second pauses throughout the talk.
- ❖ 12 minutes for questions.

Part of the first 15 minutes will be used to bring your audience to a more uniform level of knowledge on your subject. Remember, you must make your talk relevant to everyone in the room, regardless of their level of training. This is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of speaking to

DO	DO NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach the lecture with a plan • Highlight concepts (messages) • Stop periodically and summarize • Face the audience • Use voice inflections • Act enthusiastic • Speak in full sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slouch • Talk to the floor, the screen, your esophagus • Read your slides (the audience will) • Use excessive PowerPoint “gizmos” • Present excessive information • Use jokes or cartoons as “fillers” • Go over time

a “mixed” audience, but one of the most satisfying when successfully handled. Your audience may encompass both experts and novices in the subject matter, along with a variety of professionals. Spend a few minutes to explain basic concepts (especially with visual diagrams) to put your lecture in context and desired relevance. We have attended a national meeting where a famous scientist started by showing hand-drawn cartoons of molecular genetics concepts to make the subsequent novel therapeutic approaches understandable to an audience of thousands of attendees from very different professional fields. That is real talent in public speaking!

Conquering Performance Anxiety (the ‘Jitters’)

The big day has arrived. You seem to be experiencing an autonomic storm; your mouth is dry, your palms are sweating, your abdomen is growling. Your morning coffee and your anxiety have conjured up your stomach juices that now freely bathe your lower esophagus, causing you heartburn; your voice is getting hoarse. Your face feels flushed and your heart is racing. Yet there also is an element of excitement and anticipation. The performer and the proud academician in you are pushing to come out and tell the world about your accomplishments or knowledge. You want to be respected and admired—and you also want to be entertaining.

It may help you to know that even the most seasoned and popular public performers describe having many of these feelings before going on stage. It is said that Franco Corelli, one of the most outstanding tenors of his generation, had to be pushed onto the stage by his wife, only to go on to deliver electrifying performances with a ringing voice. Stage fright—also called performance anxiety—is very common. Experienced in small doses, this feeling is a necessary ingredient for successful public speaking or performance.

The best antidote against performance anxiety is preparation. Start by learning *who* will be in the audience and *what* the objectives of your presentation are. Follow with a *lecture plan* and identify the salient concepts (the proverbial “take-home messages”) that you wish to convey. Research your material and prepare your slides and handouts, leaving time for rehearsals and subsequent revisions.



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revisions. Mastery of the material is better than tranquilizers!

Try to arrive early and rested; fatigue will adversely affect your concentration. Some actors and singers, who have significant and uncontrollable autonomic responses to stress, resort to taking propranolol (60 mg the night before and one to two hours prior to performance) to curb their symptoms, but only if disabling symptoms tend to occur. Avoid caffeine, spices, and other stimulants in the 12 hours preceding your talk, especially if you are prone to developing gastroesophageal reflux, a common cause of hoarseness and discomfort. If you take medications, time their administration to avoid experiencing recurrence of symptoms or side effects during your talk.

Upon arrival at the auditorium (and, if possible, the day before), check the sound system, and become familiar with the podium, microphone, pointers, and all the technology associated with your talk. Test the microphone for your ideal speaking volume. Engage the help of the individuals in charge of audiovisual technology and go over any special aspects of the talk. Make a point to ask their names, shake their hands, and thank them in advance. They can help you immensely and they enjoy being part of

the process. Test the lighting so that the texts of your slides are visible (see below). Also, have a backup set of your materials on a memory stick, in case the slides you sent by e-mail were messed up.

Finally, remember that you are the expert on your topic, which you know more than anyone there. And—look at your audience as friends.

Healthy and Effective Speaking

Public speaking is a performance whose success is grounded on healthy speaking (“hygienic voice production”), clarity of expression, and connection with the audience. Remember to stay hydrated. Keep cold or room-temperature water on hand, especially if you have a cold or if the room is too hot. Avoid ice-cold beverages—they may induce hiccups or other disagreeable symptoms. Remember to go to the bathroom a few minutes prior to the start; you don’t want your bladder to become your timekeeper!

Immediately before getting to the podium, take a few deep breaths, get “within yourself” for a few seconds, collect your thoughts, and relax. Regard the people in front of you as friends who came to hear you, not as your adversaries. Once at the podium, or in front of the audience, take a few seconds to further collect yourself, look around to the audience, perhaps smile, and then begin with your greeting. If you have ever been to a classical music concert, you will notice that there is a brief silent pause prior to the beginning of the performance, during which performers collect themselves and “get into the mode.”

There are many “do’s and don’ts” to keep in mind. The most important rule to remember is that you will deliver “a talk” and what you *say* is more important than what you *show*. Thus, your delivery is very important. Stand straight (feel “regal”) and face the audience; this will align your larynx with the resonating cavities and avoid “pinching” your throat and your voice. It will also make you look good! Do not force your voice (do not yell), as this will cause hoarseness and diminish the efficiency of your voice production. Try to speak as slowly and as effortlessly as you can, so that sound will emanate easily as possible through the mouth without feeling that your entire body is at work. Keep under

control any tendency toward nasal speech; it interferes with diction, muffles sound, and decreases projection and proper reception of sound.

Stop periodically for a few seconds to regain your composure and take a breath. Breathe through your nose (mouth breathing will dry you out) before long sentences so you do not break them up or run out of air. Do not “eat” the end of your sentences into a mumble (do not “talk to your esophagus”). You want to be heard everywhere in the room.

Do not face the screen behind you, the computer on the podium, the floor, or anywhere other than the audience. In wide rooms you may have to sweep your head over a wide angle and change the direction of your head periodically in order to make contact with everyone.

Speak in full sentences and tell your story. Use voice inflections to highlight important points, and stop periodically to summarize and ask for questions or clarifications. If you do not feel comfortable with this format, specifically request that questions be asked at the end. Remember, once the session is started, you must take control. Pronounce your words slowly and articulate well, especially words that can be misunderstood.

Finally, never go over your allotted time: unlike in sports events, you do not get overtime for previous delays or interruptions! If you exceed your time, you will witness quick thinning among the ranks of your audience, especially in the clinical setting, where people have patient responsibilities, or situations where subsequent talks are being programmed elsewhere in the same building, such as national meetings. When the audiovisual technician, the department chair, and a medical student all congratulate you at the end, you know you have succeeded in making your talk relevant to all!

Special Issues in Speaking to Mixed-Language Audiences

If you have a foreign accent or you have problems with certain pronunciations, rehearse and ask for feedback. This applies not only to foreign-born individuals in the United States; a Brooklyn native can have as many problems in Augusta, GA, as a Latin-American in Boston. Accents and foreign words tend to creep in or accentuate when

the speaker gets tired or loses concentration. If you forget a word, ask someone in your audience! People will appreciate your effort.

- ❖ Speak as clearly as possible (articulate) and do not go too fast. These two points are equally important for US speakers speaking to a largely non-native English-speaking group, such as at an international meeting.



Page S. Morahan, PhD: “Public speaking is a performance whose success is grounded on healthy speaking, clarity of expression, and connection with the audience.”

- ❖ Rehearse difficult words if necessary.
- ❖ Be aware of what causes you difficulty, and develop strategies to work around it. For example, if you have a word that you know people have trouble understanding because of your accent, write it out so your audience can see it. Also, if you know you have trouble understanding a particular accent, let the audience know you will be doing your best, and to bear with you when you need to ask the person to repeat what he or she said slowly, because you really want to understand them.
- ❖ Ask for audience feedback if necessary.
- ❖ Be yourself.

We have discovered several specific practices that help when an English speaker gives a talk to people for whom English is their second language, and when using a translator. In addition to all of the above, remember that your audience is using three mental functions simultaneously while they

try to absorb your talk. This leads to tiredness and lack of “staying power” with your message. The audience members are:

- ❖ Using their *visual function* to read your English words on the slides, while translating the English into their language.
- ❖ Using their *auditory function* to listen to your English, trying to decipher your accent, and translating the oral English into their language. And they may also have confusion when your spoken English does not exactly match your written English.

And, finally, listening to the translator *go from English to the other language*. This isn't helped when there is also confusion because the translator's words do not exactly match either of the above modes. This too often occurs because either the translator is a scientist, not a professional translator, or the professional translator does not understand all the scientific terminology.

You can eliminate the need for the first function by using slides that are primarily visual images or diagrams that capture the concept (limiting the words). Its best when these images can relate to the culture of the audience. You speak the explanation in English, avoiding the need for the audience to mentally translate both written *and* oral English. This is counterintuitive—we tend to put *more* words on slides when speaking to audiences where English is a second language. Avoid excessive use of quotes or cartoons; consider whether the words will convey the same meaning when they are translated, or if the concept fits the culture of the audience. Also, articulate more clearly and speak much more slowly than you would for a native English-speaking audience. Finally, reduce the concepts you plan to present to no more than 60% of what you would normally cover.

In conclusion, public speaking is an art and a skill. As your knowledge and experience grow, so will your enjoyment and your reputation as a speaker. Get out there and enjoy the ride! ❖

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