

# The Worst Public Speaking Tips

By Alan Matthews

## **Learn the speech by heart or read it from a script.**

This is meant to be a way of making sure you don't forget what you're going to say. Instead, it's usually a way of making sure you don't connect with your audience.

Most people who use a script end up reading it out, and unless you're a professional actor or a very experienced speaker, this will come across as unnatural and stilted and it will stop you looking at your audience.

If you try to memorize a script, you may find you are under even more pressure to remember what you want to say because, if you go off the script, there's no way back.

It's better to prepare some notes which can be a guide should you need one. By the time you've prepared the speech, you will know the main areas you want to cover. Put these down as headings on paper or cards in LARGE PRINT so you can see them when you're standing up. You may then need only a couple of key words to add to these to remind you of the main points you want to make in each area.

If you need more than this, you may be trying to cover too much information. You may also think of a couple of really good ways of saying something or a good story to use to illustrate a point. Jot these down so you don't forget.

## **Rehearse in front of a mirror.**

This may be a bit controversial because I know several books and trainers give this tip. All I can say is I have never found I could do this.

I do rehearse (sometimes) and sometimes I tape myself to hear what it sounds like. But I can't watch myself in a mirror and think about what I'm saying; it's just too distracting. If you want to see what you look like, ask someone to watch you or use a video camera. However, don't get bogged down with worrying about how you look.

The main purpose of rehearsing is to reinforce the talk in your memory, check how long it takes, and help you spot those areas where what you want to say doesn't sound right or where you might get confused. Then you can think of some effective phrases to use to help get your point across. You can do this without a mirror.

### **Use plenty of slides.**

This is sometimes offered as a “tip” for taking attention from yourself. Give the audience something else to look at. Another tip is to give them a hefty handout at the start so they have something to read.

The problem is - YOU should be the center of attention. People want to hear what you’ve got to say, and the best way to communicate your message is by speaking effectively. By all means use visual aids if they will help, but they should complement what you’re saying, not just reproduce your own notes.

Similarly, handouts can be very helpful, but you need to know why you are using them. If they have backup information, give them out at the end. If they contain some key ideas you want to refer to as you go along, give them out at the start, but make sure they don’t distract people from what you’re saying.

### **Wear a cartoon tie to show you have a sense of humour.**

This is linked to a couple of the other “tips” that are meant to give you a helping hand in getting the audience on your side. Wearing a funny tie is saying, “ Look, I’m really a nice guy. Give me a chance. “

I won’t go into detail here for fear of alienating all of you who might, even now, be wearing such attire, but I have to say, that’s NOT what most people think when they see someone wearing a cartoon tie.

In terms of dress, wear something you feel comfortable in and which seems appropriate. That’s a bit vague, but it depends on your audience. The usual approach is to dress slightly smarter than you expect the audience to dress. Too much of a difference between you and them can cause problems with credibility. Just think about the impression you want to give and, in general, avoid anything that could be a distraction.

### **Start off with a joke.**

This is a bit like the previous “tip.” Break the ice, show what a good sense of humor you have, get them on your side.

Please don’t do this. Not unless you’re a good joke-teller and this joke is absolutely guaranteed to get a laugh. And, even then, only if it’s appropriate in some way. One of the best ways to kill your chances from the start is to begin with a joke that has nothing to do with your subject and watch it flop. Believe me, you’ll wish you were somewhere else and your audience will too.

Use humor if you can. It will help get your message across, and it will get the audience on your side, but be careful with it. You can use stories, things that have happened to you

or to other people that relate to your talk. Being a bit self-deprecating can be a good way to gain an audience's trust, but don't overdo it. If in doubt, leave it out.

### **Tell them you're nervous to get them on your side.**

Like some of the others, this is a plea for support to the audience. You know most people hate the idea of speaking in public, so you appeal to their sympathy by telling them how bad you feel. Another approach is to apologize --"I don't know why I was asked to do this. I've never done this sort of thing before."

This NEVER works.

One thing you can generally be sure of is that, at the start of a talk, your audience will want you to succeed. You should remember this when you feel nervous. They will give you a chance to do well, and they will mainly be prepared to listen ( and they will probably be really glad it's not them doing it ).

But they are also expecting something in return for the time they are giving up. If you start suggesting that, in some way, this is going to be a lousy speech, they'll believe you. And they'll switch off. You will have lost any sympathy they had.

To get over your nerves at the start, have a clear and positive opening worked out. This is one part of the speech you can memorize to get you through the first few moments. Just tell them who you are, what you are talking about and what they will gain from listening. Then get on with it.

### **Stand still and don't move your hands about.**

A lot of people who are inexperienced at public speaking try their utmost to stop themselves moving about. They seem to have some fear that their bodies will go out of control and they'll do something totally ridiculous or embarrassing. So they try to keep absolutely still, often by holding onto a lectern like the survivor of a shipwreck clinging to a piece of driftwood on the ocean.

The best way to make contact with an audience and to keep their attention is to behave as if you are speaking to them in a normal conversation. So you move about, you use gestures, you look at them. When speakers try to stop themselves doing these things, they become unnatural, distant from the audience.

So don't get too hung up about any mannerisms you think you may have. It's usually better to look natural than to try to deliver a talk as though from a straightjacket. Just avoid some obvious distractions, like playing with something in your hands, pushing your hands in your pockets and juggling your change ( a male thing ), shifting back and forth on one leg. But if what you are saying is interesting, people will listen.

### **Stare over the heads of the audience.**

This is a way of pretending to establish eye contact without really doing so because some people feel awkward about it. They don't really want to look at the audience. The idea is that, if you look out over their heads, they will think you are looking at them.

Actually, they won't. They'll think, "Why is this person looking over my head?"

To my mind, the key factor in gaining an audience's attention and keeping it (apart from the fascinating content of your talk) is eye contact. If you were talking to someone who never looked at you, what would you think?

Chances are you'd think "This person isn't interested in me. He's not listening." Or, if the person was speaking but not looking at you, you may think he or she was a bit shifty, perhaps dishonest. In any event, you wouldn't find it a pleasant experience.

The same goes for speaking in public. If I am in an audience and the speaker doesn't look at me, I can't feel that person is interested in me or whether I am listening. So I stop listening. On the other hand, if the speaker makes a point of keeping eye contact with me, it gives me the feeling that he or she cares about making some connection with me, and I'll feel less inclined to switch off.

So look at your audience while you speak, and keep your eyes moving around the room so you engage everyone there. If it's a very big audience, you can look at a section at a time, but with a small audience, you will need to look at individuals. Not for too long, but glance at everyone as you speak so no one feels left out.

### **Imagine the audience naked.**

This is supposed to be another way to deal with nerves. I have actually seen it in guides to presentations.

The best answer to this is one I found in the book *Successful Presentations for Dummies* by Malcolm Kushner: IDG Books. He says there is probably half the audience who you wouldn't mind seeing naked. The other half you certainly would never want to see naked. Either way, it's not a calming thought.

Another "tip" I have come across is to pretend the audience isn't there. This probably works in a way because I can guarantee, if you pretend the audience isn't there, pretty soon it won't be.

I mentioned eye contact above. You can't just ignore the people out there and expect your talk to have any impact. There are lots of ways to tackle nerves, but they come under three categories:

► preparation: Think through what could go wrong and prepare for it, and know your subject and be clear about why you are giving the talk. Also, keep things in perspective – what's the worst that can happen? You're not performing brain surgery.

► relaxation or deep breathing exercises.

► positive self-talk: Visualize the talk going really well, tell yourself it will be a success, know that you have prepared and that you can do this, and stop yourself when you start to think it will all be a disaster.

Above all, remember that everyone gets nervous when they have to speak in public. If you don't feel nervous, you should ask someone to check your pulse. The nerves themselves are not the problem. You can carry on and give a great talk even though you feel nervous at the start.

Have a drink beforehand to calm your nerves.

No, no, no. Alcohol and nerves are a lethal combination. Have you ever sat through a Best Man's speech at a wedding? Then you'll know what I mean. Don't do it.

Incidentally, if you want to have a glass of water at hand in case your mouth gets dry – use still, not sparkling. Belching into a microphone is not recommended.

There you are – the top 10 things to avoid when speaking in public. Keep away from these, follow my simple rules, and you won't go far wrong.

Good luck.

About the author: Alan Matthews is author of " Do You Come Here Often? How To Get More Clients Bu Successful Networking " and " Secrets Of A Professional Speaker". He is a trianer, coach and speaker, specialising in helping people develop their communication skills.

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