

Fourteen Life Saving Rules for the Terrified Public Speaker

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Public speaking is as old as life. It all started around a campfire in a cave, bragging about the day's hunt. Or maybe it started earlier, with wolves howling to each other under the moon. Or even sooner, in their own way, with bees dancing this way and that to explain the way to the flower patch.

Public communication is nothing new to mankind. But if it's new to you, it can be terrifying. Let's talk about getting past that-- I promise that you can.



Rule 1: Realize you're not the first to be terrified

As soon as you understand that you're just the latest in a long line of terrified speakers, the battle is half-won. Everybody suffers fear. Even famous actors and seasoned trial lawyers admit to fear-- in fact, they relish it to keep them sharp.

Rule 2: Understand that the audience wants you to succeed

Assuming that your subject matter is not poisonous to them, the audience will arrive prepared to listen politely, take notes, and leave. That's a good baseline, and it's not hard to improve upon it. Those people will be confined with you in the same room for half an hour or more, and they are hoping you're going to be interesting. They want you to succeed.

Rule 3: Make sure your subject matter is relevant to the audience

If you plan to spend forty minutes explaining Latin declensions to the National Heavy Equipment Dealers Convention, you need to convince them pretty early why they need to listen to you. It's not that heavy equipment folks aren't sensitive or curious people, it's just that they all got together to learn more about big yellow machines and the fine points of Latin grammar just doesn't, somehow, seem to have any relevance to their interests. They'll likely slip out to the hospitality suite.

Perhaps when you are highly in demand you might take some flyers, but let's not do that in the early stages. Start your success by selling what your audience wants to buy.

Rule 4: Map the route

Every time you speak in public, you have to know these three things: (A) What the audience already knows, (B) What new thing you want the audience to know when they leave the hall, and (C) How to get from A to B. The better you plan route, the more successful you will be.

Rule 5: Prepare, then prepare again. And then prepare some more.

If you have mapped the route well, moved logically from one point to the next, developed a fitting and satisfying conclusion, then gone back and polished the whole thing, you can pretty well guarantee you will survive the ordeal even if your delivery leaves much to be desired.

One important point: preparation is not a solo sport. The value of a faithful proofreader and critic cannot be overstated.

Rule 6: Be a tour guide for your audience

The human mind loves patterns, rhythms and rhymes. Everybody can remember “The ABCs of Photography”, “The Seven Mortal Sins”, “The Five R’s of Long Distance Running”. By giving your talk a logical, memorable pattern, you help the audience follow you easily along your trail. The more you just tell stories, give examples and ask questions, the more likely your audience will be engaged and figure things out for themselves. Remember, the good teacher doesn’t lecture, he just sets up the student to learn!

Rule 7: Get interesting!

Twenty minutes of monotone is a long time, forty is like a bad eternity. If you bore an audience, they will make you pay. A little humour, especially of the self-deprecating kind, works wonders. Use storytelling-- everybody loves a story, and there’s no surer way to make a point. Take time, when you’re preparing, to insert examples, stories, pictures, mnemonics-- make it fun!

Rule 8: Reading your notes is deadly. Stop it. Now. Break the habit-- go cold turkey

Because you’re terrified, you want to write out every word, then read your notes to the audience. Nothing could be deadlier. They will hate you, and you will hate you.

Here’s how to break the bad habit. Reduce your notes to a series of points on a few recipe cards-- the fewer, the better. The very exercise of reduction will get the outline clearly in your mind and you will not need your notes. As long as you have the points on the map you will find your way.

Rule 9: Rehearse

Rehearse until you’re confident that you’ll rarely, if ever, look at your cards. When you can pace back and forth in a private place giving your talk, you’re well on your way to a really good speech. The confidence of knowing that you own your speech allows you to concentrate what really matters-- engaging your audience.

Rule 10: Visualize

Seriously-- visualize yourself on stage, looking out over the audience, moving confidently, gesturing openly, giving your talk in its entirety. Silly? Corny? Maybe, but it works.

Rule 11: Arrive early, because Murphy was right

Something is sure to go wrong- the sound system will be glitchy, the MC will forget your name, the room won't look like you had imagined-- Arriving early allows you to acclimatize, share a laugh with the MC and make sure he gets your name right, make sure a sound check occurs..... Ask for glass of water before you start, even if you never touch the stuff. The life of a speaker is tough enough without ambushes!

Rule 12: Breathe

Seriously! Your enemies will be a tight chest, too much adrenaline and a rigid body. Find time to stretch your limbs, breathe deeply into the bottom of your belly, stand tall. If you have any pre-game rituals (that are dignified) now is the time. You've worked hard for this moment, don't let your body betray you.

Rule 13: Love their eyes!

If this is your first time in front of a group of any size, you're likely to think they're all staring at you as if you were a rhino in the zoo. Making eye contact is perhaps the last thing you want. You want to stare at the floor, the lectern, your notes, the back of the hall-- anywhere but those eyes!

Fortunately there is a trick. From the stage, or the front of the room, if you look at the imaginary marshmallows stuck to their foreheads they won't know that you're not looking at their eyes. Move your gaze around from one marshmallow to another, forcing yourself to let your eyes move around the room at a comfortable pace.

At some point, magic will happen-- you will begin to realize they don't hate you, in fact they kind of like you! As they respond to you, you'll watch the brows furrow, the heads tilt, the eyes squint-- hundreds of little signals that tell you that they're loving your story around the campfire.

Rule 14: End well

You've put yourself and your reputation on the line, you've devoted hours to preparation and then you realize your speech is winding down. But, like a runaway train, you realize you hadn't planned how to end it, so you just stop in mid-flight, pause, and say, "Well, that's it."

Ending a strong speech on a weak note is like ending a hot date with a handshake. Leave them laughing or leave them crying, but never leave them unsatisfied. Plan your ending with great care.

Conclusion

Powerful public speaking is the subject of hundreds of books, YouTube videos and TED Talks. You could spend your life learning and polishing, and perhaps you will. But if you follow these few simple rules faithfully, you will find yourself quickly becoming a strong and convincing speaker, changing the lives of others, and your own. I wish you the best.

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