

Lesson 3

Becoming a Better Speaker



Key Terms

constructive criticism
coping strategy

What You Will Learn to Do

- Present a speech for a specific purpose

Linked Core Abilities

- Communicate using verbal, nonverbal, visual, and written techniques

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Identify ways to improve speaking skills
- Develop a plan to improve speaking ability by avoiding common mistakes
- Develop coping strategies for stressful speaking situations
- Define the key words contained in this lesson

Introduction

Most individuals spend seven out of every ten waking hours communicating; three-fourths of this communication is through speech. The average person speaks some 34,020 words a day. That is equal to several books a week, more than 12 million words a year. With all that speaking, the likelihood of an individual being asked to give a public speech is high.

When you were younger, being the center of attention was probably fun. Now that you are older, you are probably much more concerned with your appearance and what people think of you. You may be much more nervous about public speaking. With the right knowledge and practice, you can minimize this nervousness.

Speeches are not made alone in a room. When you give a speech, there is always an audience. You and the audience have a two-way relationship. You give the speech to the audience. In turn, the audience gives you their attention and reaction, which is called feedback. The advantage of oral communication is that it is a face-to-face process of mutual give and take.

At some point, you will be asked to speak in front of your class, at a family gathering, at a club group, or some other public environment. Perhaps you have already experienced these situations. If so, you know that being nervous can be the hardest hurdle to overcome.

Note

“The human brain is a wonderful thing. It operates from the moment you are born until the first time you get up to make a speech.” – Howard Goshorn

Coping with Nervousness

Recent studies show that speaking in front of a group is by far the greatest fear of most people. It ranks ahead of the fear of dying, riding in an airplane, or failure in other areas of one's personal life.

You have probably already had to talk in front of a group of people. You may have felt one or more of the following common symptoms of nervousness:

- **Shaking knees**
- **Dry mouth**
- **Quivering voice**
- **Stomach pains**
- **Loss of memory**

Coping Strategies

One of the most important concepts on which you should focus when you are nervous about speaking in public is that you are not alone. Whatever group you are facing, look around and realize that you have something in common with everyone there. Every person you see has been, or will be, in your situation at some time. In many cases, such as classroom speaking, you are all members of the same group.

Note

“There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars.”
– Mark Twain

Another **coping strategy** to deal with nervousness is to realize that you look more confident than you actually feel. Think about all the newscasters you have seen on television. Many of them have said that they feel stage fright, yet it is rarely noticeable. Look how many instructors must stand before a classroom and keep the attention of their students. For many individuals, being in the spotlight is their profession or career. For other individuals, presenting a speech is an occasional event, such as in speech classes. For everyone, feeling the symptoms of nervousness is ordinary, but it rarely shows.

Keep in mind that your listeners are there to hear what you have to say. Assume they are a friendly crowd. They are not “out to get you.” They are waiting to learn some interesting information.

Another important point to remember is to concentrate on your speech content. Do not concentrate on how you are saying it. If you are discussing a subject in which you are interested, the audience will perceive this. If you are more focused on your gestures and your emphasis on certain words, both you and the audience will be distracted.

Be aware of your nervousness before you begin and deal with it. Take some deep breaths and perhaps even do some stretches. Give yourself some time to collect your thoughts.

The best way of all to overcome nervousness is to know that you are prepared. Proper preparation and rehearsal can help to reduce fear by 75 percent. Practice your speech in front of a mirror. Try to practice enough so that your use of notes will be minimal. If you know your subject very well, and are solidly prepared, you will balance your nervousness with a strong feeling of confidence. The audience will see your level of confidence. Whether speaking to a small group or several hundred people, most people feel nervous. Accomplished speakers like the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as seen in Figure 6.3.1, overcome their nervousness by proper preparation and practice.

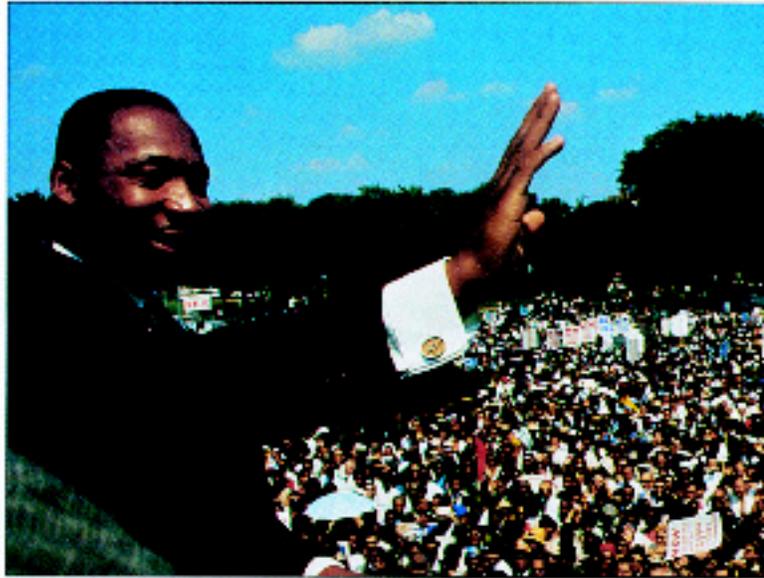
To review, the following are some strategies for coping with and overcoming nervousness:

Key Note Term

coping strategy – technique used for dealing with a difficult situation

Figure 6.3.1: Martin Luther King Jr. giving a speech to a large audience.

Courtesy of Miller Francis/Life Magazine © 1963, Time, Inc./Getty Images.



- **Look at the audience and know that they all feel nervous when giving a speech.**
- **Remember that the audience is there to hear what you have to say.**
- **Concentrate on the subject.**
- **Keep in mind that your nervousness does not show.**
- **Prepare, prepare, prepare.**
- **Practice, practice, practice.**
- **Breathe deeply.**

Tips for Presentation

After you have gathered the necessary information for your speech, you are ready to present it. When you stand before your audience, remember the strategies for dealing with nervousness. Take a few seconds, breathe deeply, and begin your presentation. Proper breathing techniques can reduce fear by 15 percent.

Remember to be yourself. Think positively while you are in front of the audience. Know that the audience is there to learn and listen.

Establish eye contact with members of the audience. Some members of the audience may not return the eye contact. The solution is to establish eye contact with the individuals who are returning your interested look. Remember, this is the way to begin talking with your audience and not just to them. You are communicating with both your words and your eyes.

When you are giving a speech, you should not read from your notes. Only glance at your notes occasionally to be sure that you are following the outline and format of your speech.

Try to avoid a lot of body shifting. The movements and gestures you make can be very distracting to the audience. Shuffling your feet or scratching your ear will cause the audience to lose concentration.

Also avoid those interrupting pauses such as, “Uh,” “You know,” “I mean,” “Well,” and “So.” Adding these phrases is a very common habit for speakers. It can also be a hard habit to break, and one that will take some effort and concentration.

Everyone makes mistakes when they are speaking. If you accidentally say a wrong word or you suddenly lose track of where you are, do not panic, but attempt to smile. Smiling through your fumbles tells the audience that although you made a slight mistake, you are still in control of the situation. Correct it if it is an important point. If it is not, disregard your blunder and continue with your presentation. Go a little more slowly and take your time, maintaining your concentration.

What is equally important in giving a speech is concluding it. When you are finished, do not rush back to your seat. Be professional and ask if anyone has any questions. Look around with composure and if there are no questions, politely say, “Thank you” and go sit down. If there are questions, answer them as well as you can. If the information has already been covered in the speech, do not give an extensive explanation. Be brief. Remember, you are the expert on the subject.

Basic Speech Structure

All types of speeches basically have a beginning, middle, and an end. They use a standard format for organization. You tell the audience what you are going to say, you say the main part of your speech, and then you tell the audience what you told them.

While preparing your speech, follow the six basic steps to effective speech writing.

- 1. Analyze the purpose of the speech and the audience.**
- 2. Conduct research and gather information.**
- 3. Support your ideas.**
- 4. Organize all the material.**
- 5. Draft and edit the speech.**
- 6. Practice and get feedback.**

Types of Speeches

There are several major categories of speeches:

- **Informative**
- **Persuasive**
- **Actuating**

- **Argumentative**
- **Entertaining**
- **Impromptu**

The purpose of each speech varies, depending on what you are attempting to accomplish as a speaker.

The Informative Speech

The speech to inform does exactly what it says; it informs or tells the audience about something. It delivers information so that the audience can grasp and remember important data about the subject. The goal is for the audience to accomplish understanding of the subject. An example is a presentation on how to gain rank in JROTC.

The Persuasive Speech

The speech to persuade attempts to change the audience's minds and/or behavior toward something. An example is persuading other students to become cadets.

The Actuating Speech

The speech to actuate is a motivating speech similar to the persuasive speech, but the difference is that the speech to actuate calls for immediate action. For example, suppose your school principal announces that the school team needs to be encouraged about a big upcoming game. The resulting action may be in the form of a school pep rally.

The Argumentative Speech

The argumentative speech must be structured as most other speeches. It must rely on logical appeals. This type of speech is also known as a kind of reasoned persuasion. Many debates in social and political fields are based on this kind of speech. Another common example is the closing argument an attorney makes during a courtroom trial.

The Entertaining Speech

The speech to entertain is used to relay a message in an entertaining manner. Humor plays an important part in this speech. For this reason, the entertaining speech can be difficult to present because humor is of a personal nature. If an entertaining speech is presented well, however, it can be very effective. When someone is being honored, very often another person will make a humorous speech about the honoree, perhaps telling a funny story about the person.

The Impromptu Speech

The impromptu speech is something a little different because most impromptu speeches are presented without elaborate preparation. The word *impromptu* means "to do something without preparation or advance thought—off-hand." Here are some tips, benefits, and techniques related to impromptu speaking.

Note

"It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech."
– Mark Twain

Practicing

For beginners, impromptu speeches are necessary in helping the individual to gain self-confidence and the ability to “think on your feet.” Impromptu speaking is an effective training device. The more practice you have in giving impromptu speeches, the better qualified you will be to deliver prepared talks. Suppose your instructor asks you to stand up and give an impromptu presentation on why you decided to join the Army JROTC. Pause for a few seconds before you begin and collect your thoughts.

Benefits

If you sound smooth and polished when giving an impromptu speech, both you and your audience will be impressed. By practicing, you will be capable of putting your thoughts into logical order. You will talk clearly and convincingly to your audience without any notes. Remember that your audience will not be expecting an elaborate speech, but they are there to hear you tell them something of interest.

Techniques

The best way to be prepared for the “unprepared” is to stay up-to-date in your field of interest. Clipping and saving articles and reading newspapers or news magazines are ideal ways to do this. Communicating with people who share your area of interest also helps you broaden your understanding.

Imagine a storehouse in your mind where you will file these different bits of information. When you stand to speak impromptu, you will be prepared to pull out the needed data from your mental file. For example, reading up on Army JROTC and discussing your future in it with your instructor will add to your ability to discuss this subject with your audience.

One way to organize your thoughts for an impromptu speech is to use a “past, present, future” format. Speak first about the past of the subject, such as the history of the Army JROTC and what has been done to increase the number of cadets; then, speak about the organization and the role it plays today by considering what is happening now and what kind of learning takes place. Finally, contemplate the future. Consider what things may change, what improvements may be made, and where Army JROTC may be ten years from now.

Another procedure to use in your presentation is to support your ideas with examples or statistics. In addition, try to find experiences from your past that will add to your speech and make your points believable. For example, suppose your instructor asked you to make a speech about seatbelts and whether or not you favor a mandatory law for wearing them. You could talk about how you feel wearing seatbelts is a wonderful idea. But, most people already know that. You would not be

telling them anything they did not already know. Instead, state why a mandatory law is a good idea by attaching it to something you have seen, heard, or read in the news. You could say something like the following: “I read in the newspaper the other day that a family of four survived a car accident because they were wearing seatbelts. The report said that if it were not for that, they would have been thrown violently from their car. More than likely, they all would have died.”

Also, always be sure to take your time. Of course, some situations require a minimum or maximum time. Remember that you will need to collect your thoughts and to wait for the audience to quiet down. Most important, do not rush head-on into your presentation. Concentrate on what you are saying and what you want to say.

Finally, try to stay on the subject. Keep focusing on the topic in your mind so that your examples or stories are extended from that basis. Practicing at home will help you be prepared in the classroom or anywhere the impromptu situation arises. Pick any object in your room or any story in the newspaper. Contemplate what you could say about it. Speak about the item while timing yourself.

Tips for Impromptu Speaking

Remember the following techniques to improve impromptu speaking:

- **Stay knowledgeable on a variety of topics.**
- **Try a format such as “past, present, future.”**
- **Support your ideas with examples or statistics.**
- **Add personal experiences.**
- **Do not rush. Collect your thoughts.**
- **Concentrate on what you are saying.**
- **Stay on subject.**
- **Practice giving impromptu speeches.**

Constructive Feedback

Sometimes you will be called on to provide feedback on another person’s speech. It is important to realize that feedback need not always be negative or destructive. It should be **constructive criticism**.

The purpose of giving feedback is to improve someone’s performance in some way. In its most effective form, it provides constructive advice, direction, and guidance in an effort to raise performance levels.

Effective feedback stresses both strengths and suggestions for improvement. In giving constructive feedback, you must be straightforward and honest; you must also respect the speaker’s personal feelings. Feedback is pointless unless the speaker profits from it; however, praise just for the sake of praise has no value unless the only goal is to motivate or improve self-concept.

Key Note Term

constructive criticism – feedback that is helpful and productive

Effective feedback reflects your consideration of the speaker's need for self-esteem, recognition, confidence, and the approval of others. Ridicule, anger, or fun at the expense of the speaker have no place in constructive feedback.

To give constructive feedback, listen carefully to the speaker. Focus on the following:

- **The actual content of a speaker's effort**
- **What actually happened during the speech**
- **The observed factors that affected performance of the speech**

Conclusion

Speech is the most widely used medium of communication. The main purpose of any speech or presentation is to deliver clear and specific ideas to the listeners. Practicing the impromptu speech is an ideal way for many individuals to gain self-confidence and the ability to communicate “on their feet.”

Although fear of speaking is common, studies show that one of the most admired qualities in others is their ability to speak in front of a group.

Similar to writing, speaking is a skill. After you grasp the basics, the rest is practice, polish, and style. You may be embarrassed by initial mistakes, but you will survive. Few of us will become great speakers, but all of us can become more effective speakers if we take the time to practice the basics.

This concludes Chapter 6, “Presenting Skills.” In the next chapter, you will learn to manage conflict.

Lesson Review

1. **Explain one of your coping strategies that work for you when you're nervous.**
2. **What is the basic speech structure?**
3. **List the six different types of speeches covered in this lesson.**
4. **Compare and contrast constructive and destructive criticism.**