

How to Improve Your Public Speaking Skills

Even if you don't make regular presentations in front of a group, public speaking is a useful skill to have from making a speech at a friend's wedding to inspiring a group of volunteers at a charity event. Developing your public speaking skills can increase your confidence and help you overcome speech-related anxiety you may have.

Even those who live with social anxiety disorder (SAD) can become confident speakers with traditional anxiety treatment and by working on public speaking skill development.

Voice Control

Your voice is the most important tool you will use as a public speaker. One simple way to improve your voice is by learning to breathe fully and deeply from your diaphragm.

Diaphragmatic breathing, or belly breathing, is essential for accessing your most powerful voice. It is the technique professional singers use to make their voices sound fabulous. It enables them to hold notes long after most people would be out of breath.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Practicing diaphragmatic breathing also reduces feelings of breathlessness caused by speech anxiety. This type of breathing will allow you to better control the following aspects of your voice:

- Tone (quality)
- Pitch (high or low)

- Volume

Before your speech, place one hand on your abdomen, and breathe into your hand. Count to 10 as you inhale and fill your stomach, then count to 10 again as you exhale. Remember to breathe from your diaphragm as you deliver your speech.

Body Language

Simply put, body language is your body's way of communicating without using words. It's the combination of facial expressions, gestures, and movements that convey what's going on in your mind. Practice strong, confident body language to fuel your presentation:

- **Stand up straight.** If you're physically capable of standing up straight, then make sure you stand tall and straight during your presentation.
- **Assume the [power] position.** If you're feeling stressed before your presentation, take a moment to stand in a powerful position. Doing this for just a few minutes will raise your testosterone and increase your self-confidence while reducing stress, anxiety, and cortisol.¹ One of the most popular power poses is the "superhero" pose: Put your hands on your hips, keep your chin up, and your chest out.
- **Be facially expressive.** Your facial expressions should match the message you are delivering. If you're giving an upbeat speech, try to have a relaxed and joyful look on your face.
- **Plant your feet.** Shifting your weight from side to side can lull your audience into a semi-hypnotic state (also known as sleep). Stand tall and firm.

If you feel that your stage presence is lacking, view clips of speakers you admire. Aim to imitate parts of their style that you feel could work for you. Then, "fake it until you make it." In other words, act confident until you feel confident.

Delivery

When it comes to public speaking, delivery is everything. Even if you have a great voice and good body language, your message will get lost if the audience can't easily follow what you say. Below are some tips for developing good delivery skills:

- **Speak slowly, but not *too* slowly.** Talk too fast and your audience will have a hard time understanding you. Talk too slowly and you risk putting them to sleep. When it comes to public speaking, talking at a conversational pace is your safest bet.
- **Pause between ideas.** Great public speakers often pause for two to three seconds or even longer. A well-placed pause gives the audience time to digest what you are saying. It also makes you sound more confident and in control.
- **Avoid filler words.** Words such as "um," "ah," "you know," and "like" diminish your credibility and distract from your message. Instead, replace these filler words with pauses.
- **Carefully articulate and pronounce your words.** A mumbling public speaker is hard to understand.

Audience Relations

Good public speakers are in tune with their audience. Public speaking is more than standing in front of a group and talking; you also need to engage your audience.

- **Acknowledge your audience as soon as you take the stage.** This helps to make you seem more like a "real" person and keeps a conversational tone.
- **Grab their attention immediately.** When you speak, you have about 60 seconds to capture your audience's attention and captivate them before they tune out.² Use this time to ask a rhetorical thought-provoking question, tell a captivating story, or share a shocking statistic—anything that will keep them intrigued.
- **Find a friendly face.** There's bound to be friendly people in the audience. Find those people and pretend that you're speaking to only them.
- **Make eye contact.** Regardless of how big your audience is, try to make eye contact with as many people as possible. It will make them feel like you are speaking directly to them

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