

Myths and Realities of Public Speaking

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn some common public speaking myths and outline the guidelines you'll need to consider as you prepare to face your audience. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Public Speaking Is Not Inherently Stressful

From an evolutionary biology perspective, our bodies have developed to respond to stress in advantageous ways.

IN CONTEXT

When we needed to run from a bear, hunt a lion, or avoid a snake, our bodies predictably got us prepared with a surge of adrenaline. For many of us, our need to respond to threats and stress has shifted from our evolutionary roots to concern over our jobs, our relationships, and how we negotiate a modern economy.

Communication is a great resource and tool, and we can apply the principles and lessons to ourselves. We can create the perception that the speech is like defeating the lion and really get ourselves worked up, or we can choose to see it as a natural extension of communication with others.

Speaking in public itself is not stressful by nature, but our response to the stimulus can either contribute to or reduce our level of stress. We all will have a stress response to a new, unknown, or unfamiliar stimulus.

Nevertheless, the butterflies in our stomach are a response we can choose to control by becoming more familiar with the expectations, preparation, and performance associated with speaking in public.

2. You Don't Have to Be Perfect

Letting go of perfection can be the hardest guideline to apply to ourselves. It's also in our nature to compare ourselves to others and ourselves.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might forgive a classmate for the occasional "um" during a speech, but then turn right around and spend a lot of mental effort chastising yourself for making the same error in your

presentation.

We all have distinct strengths and weaknesses. Knowing yourself and where you need to improve is an important first step. Recognizing that Rome wasn't built in a day, and that you won't become a world-class speaker overnight, may be easier said than done.

It may help to recognize that your listeners don't want to see you fail; on the contrary, they want you to do well, because when you do, they will be able to relax and enjoy your presentation.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might be surprised to know that not everyone counts each time you say "um." However, if "um," "ah," or "you know what I mean" are phrases that you tend to repeat, they will distract your audience from your message.

Eliminating distracting habits can become a goal for improvement. Improvement is a process, not an end in itself; in fact, many people believe that learning to speak in public is more about the journey than the destination.

Each new setting, context, and audience will present new challenges, and your ability to adapt, learned through your journey of experience, will help you successfully meet each new challenge.

3. Productivity and Organization Are Key to Success



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever thought of a great comeback to something someone said awhile after they said it?

Wouldn't it have been nice to be quick and articulate and able to deliver your comeback right then and there?

Speaking in public gives you a distinct advantage over "off the cuff" improvisation and stumbling for the right comeback. You get to prepare and be organized. You know you'll be speaking to an audience in order to persuade them to do, think, or consider an idea or action.

What issues might your audience members think of while you are speaking? What comebacks or arguments might they say if it were a debate? You get to anticipate what the audience will want to know, say, or hear. You get to prepare your statements and visual aids to support your speech and create the timing, organization, and presentation of each point.



Productivity: Skill Tip

Productivity is the ability to strategize, organize, plan, and deliver results in various contexts and life situations.

Many times in life, we are asked to take a position and feel unprepared to respond. Speaking in public gives you the distinct opportunity to prepare and organize your ideas or points in order to make an impact and respond effectively.

4. Speaking in Public Is Like Participating in a Conversation

This may sound odd at first, but consider the idea of an "enlarged conversation" described by Julia Wood (2001) in her book, *Communication Mosaics: An Introduction to the Field of Communication*. Wood expresses a clear connection between everyday speech and public dialogue: Sometimes we take a speech turn, while at other times we remain silent while others take their turn.

We do this all day long and think nothing of it. We are often the focus of attention from friends and colleagues, and it hardly ever makes us nervous. When we get on a stage, however, some people perceive that the whole game has changed. It hasn't. We still take turns, and the speaker will take a longer turn as part of an enlarged conversation. People in the audience will still communicate feedback and the speaker will still negotiate their turn just the way they would in an everyday conversation. The difference is all about how we, as speakers, perceive the context.

Some people feel that the level of expectations, the need for perfection, or the idealistic qualities we perceive in eloquent speakers are required, and then focus on deficiencies, fears, and the possibility of failing to measure up. By letting go of this ideal, we can approach the challenge with a more pragmatic frame of mind.

The rules we play comfortably by in conversation every day are the same as we shift to a larger conversation within the context of public speaking. This viewpoint can offer an alternative as you address your apprehensions, and help you let go of unrealistic expectations.



BIG IDEA

Public speaking does not have to be a "fight or flight" experience; it can be like holding a half of a friendly conversation. This will especially be true if you do a good job of preparing and organizing your presentation ahead of time.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the actual elements of public speaking differ from commonly held misconceptions about it. Contrary to popular belief, **public speaking is not inherently stressful**. It creates a stress response in many individuals, but this response can be controlled and diminished through preparation and planning.

Letting go of expectations and accepting that **you don't have to be perfect** are other important ways of replacing stress and nerves with **productivity and organization, which are keys to success**. It can also be helpful to remember that **speaking in public is like participating in a conversation**. The context may be different, but the same elements of communication are in play.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott McLean. Copyright 2010. ISBN 978-1-4533-2742-5 (Licensee Product: Workplace Communication), reprinted

with permission from FlatWorld.