Anxiety in Public Speaking
By Doug Staneart

"I can't believe I agreed to do this speech. Look at all those people out there! My knees are shaking, and my stomach feels like I just went over the top of a roller coaster. My heart is beating so fast and hard my tie is jumping. I just want to scream and run away!"

Speaking in public is often cited as the number one fear of adults. The Book of Lists places the fear of death in fifth place while public speaking ranks first. Jerry Seinfeld said, "That would mean at a funeral, people are five times more likely to want to be in the casket than giving the eulogy.”

Let's look at some techniques to deal with the anxiety and give an excellent presentation. The methods are divided into the acronym P.R.E.P.A.R.E.

Preparation – The foundation of a good speech is built on the 6 “W’s” of effective journalism. You must determine:
Who is your audience?
What are your key points?
When are you speaking; how long?
Where is the speech; physical surroundings?
Why should the audience listen to you?
How are you going to present?

In an effective speech your audience will only remember 3 to 4 main ideas. Decide on the essential ideas vital for their understanding your topic. These are your key points. Make a brief outline with supporting details, quotes and graphics.

Rehearse – Practice is essential. Try delivering your talk without using any notes and check your timing during this rehearsal. If you have to use notes, then just jot down your key points. Don’t attempt to memorize the entire speech word for word. Mark Twain said, “It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.” That is the effect you are working toward – a conversational, impromptu style, but with thorough knowledge of the material.

Entry – Launching your presentation is as important as the takeoff of an airplane. If the liftoff fails, the rest of the trip becomes irrelevant. Determine how you are going to start your speech and commit the first several lines to memory. An excellent beginning includes telling the audience why they want to listen. What is the benefit to them?

If you are particularly nervous, look for a sympathetic face and talk to that person for several moments. Do not begin with an apology... “I didn’t have much time to prepare this talk.” Or “I’m not really very good at giving speeches.” Starting with a negative makes the audience uncomfortable. Remember you feel more anxious than you look. Convert your nervous energy into enthusiasm and launch your speech positively.

Posturing – Your body is a tool. Learn to use it effectively. Find your center of balance. Your feet should be firmly planted about shoulder width apart. Hold your shoulders back and chin up. Stand calmly, being careful not to fidget or sway. Let your hands rest by your sides.
Make your movements purposeful. If you make a gesture with your hands, let them return to the resting position by your side. Don’t wander around the room. If you want to go to a different location – go there and then stop. Speak to one person at a time and maintain eye contact.

Your voice has volume, tone and pace. Realize you will speak faster and at a higher pitch than you did when you were rehearsing. Be aware of this tendency. Speak loudly enough so everyone in the room can hear you, but not so loudly the people in the front rows are covering their ears.

**Audience** – Know your audience. Don’t be like William Safire who said, “Is sloppiness in speech caused by ignorance or apathy? I don’t know and I don’t care.” What does your audience know about the topic? Try and anticipate their questions. During the presentation, seek reactions, questions and concerns. This makes you appear accessible and allows you to move through the topic with your audience following along closely.

If possible greet audience members as they arrive. Ask why they came or about their interests in the topic. Adjust your presentation plans to better meet their needs. Finally keep in mind the audience is not your enemy - they want you to succeed. Nobody came to watch you flail or fail. Engage people and make them partners in your successful talk.

**Relax** – Remember the physical reactions you experience in front of a group are normal. When confronted with a stimulating situation the body resorts to the “fight” or “flight” response. Your pulse increases. Adrenaline releases into your bloodstream. Your body prepares for a physical response but you have to stay put!

Sometimes your mind generates negative thoughts. Michael Pritchard said, “Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.” Deal with the fear by building a solid foundation (know your topic!) and feeling confident in your message. Take a few deep breaths. Mild exercise or stretching can disperse some of the anxious energy. Smile.

**Ending** – Like the touchdown of an airplane, your presentation must be landed correctly. Begin the end by summarizing your key points. Next ask for audience questions and clarify any remaining issues. Then make your closing statement, which should encourage some action. What do you want the audience to do? Memorizing the last few lines ensures a strong close. Finally smile and nod your head.

If the thought of speaking in public makes you anxious, you probably will be. However if you P.R.E.P.A.R.E., the level of your anxiety will be lower and you will deliver a better, more effective speech. Who knows, you may find you like giving the eulogy better than being in the casket!

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