

Got the Presentation Jitters?

Try Some of These Techniques for Controlling Your Nerves

If you care about making a good presentation, it's natural to be a bit nervous. And presentations benefit from some nervous energy. It's just that we want those butterflies, as the old saying goes, to "fly in formation." Here are some techniques to help you.

AS YOU PLAN YOUR PRESENTATION...

- 1) Stimulate your creative juices. Start thinking about your presentation as far in advance as possible, and keep a notebook nearby to jot down facts and ideas that occur to you—even things that may seem "off the wall." Collect articles and cartoons that may be relevant. Start talking about your topic with friends. Don't feel that you need a full outline right away—it will emerge in time.
- 2) Find your POP ("Point of Passion") about the topic and introduce it early on—maybe as a bold and emphatic statement that serves as an "attention-grabber" (e.g., "Ladies and Gentlemen, the revolution has begun. People from across the city are turning in their cell phones...")
- 3) Know how you're going to begin and practice the opening lines of your talk. Once you do, you'll be comfortable varying them slightly, which will add spontaneity and an energy an audience will appreciate. As you get close to a "final draft" of the whole talk, practice it in front of a friend or two.
- 4) Plan to share a personal experience that relates to your topic and has emotional meaning for you (amusement, wonder, joy, relief, sadness, frustration, puzzlement, etc.). Choose a scenario you can express not only verbally but physically as well through facial expressions, gestures, body language, and vocal variety.
- 5) Keep the structure of your talk simple so you can almost visualize the outline of main points. If you forget a point during your presentation, chances are the audience won't know it, and you'll find it easier to get back on track.

"If it's true that the fear of public speaking is even greater than the fear of death, then the average person at a funeral would rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy."

—Jerry Seinfeld

- 6) Think of questions you might ask to encourage audience participation. A conversational approach with the audience will help relax you.
- 7) Consider showing a funny picture or cartoon (assuming some humor is appropriate). Laughter and the relaxation it brings are contagious.
- 8) Realize that a certain amount of nervous energy is good since it produces adrenalin that can enhance your presentation—just as the surge of adrenalin before a race helps a runner’s performance.
- 9) Remember that nervousness is often the result of focusing on ourselves rather than our audience. Tell yourself: "It's not that I have something they need to hear. It's that **THEY** will appreciate hearing what I have to say." It's a subtle difference, but notice who comes first.
- 10) Keep in mind that speakers seldom look as nervous to their audience as they may feel inside. If you don't believe this, ask your friends or colleagues who observe your practice talk, or watch a videotape of yourself giving a talk.
- 11) Worried about questions you may not be able to answer? Ask a friend or colleague to throw a wide variety of questions at you so you can figure out appropriate responses ahead of time. At times, the best answer may be admitting that you don't know but will try to find out. Or there are times when it's perfectly OK to ask other audience members if they know the answer.
- 12) Remind yourself that you don't have to be "perfect" to be effective and appreciated!

SOON BEFORE YOUR PRESENTATION...

- 13) Visit (or at least find out about) the place where'll you'll be speaking. It helps to visualize ourselves where we'll be speaking. Also anticipate and arrange for any equipment you may need—extension cords, a microphone, a flip chart. You may want to develop a written checklist, especially one that you can send to your host if you can't visit the location ahead of time.
- 14) Check the seating configuration for comfort and accessibility to your audience. Attendees tend to avoid the front rows—but that's where you want them if you want to feel connected.
- 15) Warm up to your audience in the minutes before your talk. Introduce yourself and chat with them as they arrive. You may even consider phone conversations prior to the event if possible and appropriate. By doing this, you won't feel like you're talking to complete strangers.

- 16) Take a brisk walk—preferably outdoors, but even indoors will help release some nervous energy.
- 17) Do some stretching and vocal warm-ups. (Hint: reading Dr. Seuss books aloud can be useful. Try one of my personal favorites: “If I Ran the Circus.”)
- 18) Have a glass of water within easy reach during your talk.
- 19) If someone will be introducing you, provide a statement he or she can use. Keep it light and add some humorous note that an audience will appreciate.
- 20) Look your best. Make sure your attire is appropriate for the occasion. If anything, dress a bit more formally than your audience. Men: shine the shoes, make sure everything is clean and pressed, wear a tie you like, check the grooming. Ladies: keep the jewelry simple, the shoes comfortable.

AS YOU GIVE YOUR PRESENTATION...

- 21) Smile, take a deep breath, and find a friendly face or two in the audience before you begin.
- 22) Use strong deliberate gestures that convey your points with more power and, at the same time, release some of your nervous energy
- 23) Remember to breathe! Nervousness can literally leave you breathless unless you make a conscious effort to slowly inhale and exhale.
- 24) Similarly, slow down and don't be afraid to pause—particularly after making major points you want to sink in. Nervousness can make you talk fast, which leads to “ums” and “uhs.” which in turn make you more nervous, cause you to talk faster and so on...
- 25) Take a sip of water if you get dry or need to slow down and collect your thoughts.
- 26) Look at individuals long enough to make meaningful eye contact-as if you were engaged in a “one on one” conversation. Don't try to look at everyone or merely scan the audience.

“There are two types of speakers. Those who get nervous and those who are liars.”
—Mark Twain

- 27) Pose questions to your audience about experiences related to the topic. In other words, get them to talk! While questions can be planned, they are sometimes more effective when spontaneous.
- 28) Keep a basic outline of your talk on a small card, a sheet of paper or a flipchart to reduce any anxiety you may feel about losing your place. But also remember that an audience won't know what you leave out. Better that you make a few points clearly and energetically and maintain eye contact than have your nose and eyes buried in a script!
- 29) Remove or minimize any physical obstacles between you and your audience. For example, do you really need a lectern? Step away from it if you can and move toward the audience. If you're nervous to begin with, standing behind a lectern or table tends to increase a sense of isolation, which in turn tends to create nervousness. Generally, audiences appreciate a speaker who removes such barriers and tries to connect with them physically and emotionally, as well as intellectually.
- 30) Worried about fidgeting? Some people find it helpful to form a steeple with their hands, which tends to funnel nervous energy out of their system. Eventually your hands will fall naturally to your side. Also, as you become aware of nervous and random gestures (e.g., rubbing your nose, playing with your jewelry), look for ways to substitute conscious, deliberate gestures.

“An audience will forgive a speaker almost any lack if he or she is manifestly earnest about his proposal. Earnestness moves our emotions, thaws our indifference, and gives us faith.”
—James Winans

Try out some of these tips and techniques, and you're bound to feel less anxious about your next presentation. But don't forget that some nervous energy—the excitement of anticipation—will give you power. Practice putting it to use!