



“Making Your Point”

Building Public Speaking Skills

Introduction

Have you ever had an important idea to share? Do you expect to ever be in a leadership position? Do you think you’ll want to have a great job someday? If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” then public speaking is one of the most important communication skills you need to develop! This guide covers the skills you’ll need for various public speaking situations.

If you have ever felt nervous or anxious about speaking in front of a group, you are *not* alone. Most people are not “naturals” at speaking in public. Some studies even suggest that most people are less afraid of death than they are of public speaking! With this in mind, it’s easy to see that building public speaking skills can give you a big competitive advantage in life. Fortunately, as a 4-H’er you have access to tools that will help you do just that.

Being Successful

Think about some of the best public speakers you’ve seen. What do you notice about them when they’re speaking? They are probably doing some of the following things:

- Speaking slowly and clearly,
- With their hands folded or at their sides (unless gesturing purposefully),
- Making good eye contact with the audience,
- Having good posture (not slouching),
- Sitting or standing still (not rocking or shifting),
- Using words everyone understands, and
- Appearing calm, relaxed and glad to be there!

Public speaking requires us to be aware of several things, including those listed above. Good public speakers make it look so easy that we often don’t realize how much work they’re putting into it! However, as you admire the skills of the best public speakers, remember that they were probably not born with these skills. They had to learn them at some point in their lives, just like you are doing now, and practice regularly.

Point of Discussion

How could strong public speaking skills help you with:

- Being a student in a class?
- Building a strong 4-H club?
- Representing your Club, School, Church or other group?
- Getting a job?
- Communicating about things that are important to you?

A Moment for You *What are three things you want to accomplish with your public speaking skills?*

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____



Delivering a Speech There is a lot of information on this topic, and most covers the same territory. Below are the most important things to know for delivering a speech:

- Stand up Straight – Put your chin up, your chest out, shoulders back, and don't slouch. Your posture should be good, but also comfortable for you. If you are rigid, in pain, or losing consciousness, you're probably overdoing this a bit.
- Speak Clearly, Slowly and Distinctly – The audience must be able to understand you. As a speaker, it's very easy to not realize when you are talking too fast. Be aware.
- Body Language: Avoid folded arms, rocking, shifting, fidgeting and swaying. Stand with your arms to your side. If you must, lightly clasp your hands in front or behind you.
- Vary the Volume and Pitch of Your Voice – It is common for members of an audience to find their minds wandering as they listen, perhaps thinking about something you just said. Subtly changing the pitch and volume of your voice during your speech, and speaking just a little faster or slower, can usually keep their attention and interest.
- Eye Contact – Make eye contact across and around the room. Eye contact should be respectful and appropriate...for example, don't lock eyes with one person and accidentally bore a hole in their skull with your intense gaze! "Locking on" is a surprisingly easy mistake to make. It's okay to look just over the audience's heads at the wall behind them, but remember to pan left and right.
- Smile! – This is very important for putting your audience and yourself at ease, as long as it is appropriate to your topic and event. For example, this could be good at a 4-H meeting but a bad idea at a funeral.
- Use Humor – Adding humor can help you make your speech more interesting and keep the attention of the audience. Keep it appropriate to your audience and event, and be careful not to overdo it.

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

Notes to Self

Many people outline their speech on 3x5-inch cards. In addition to the outline of their speech, the cards are a great place to write little reminders to yourself:

Smile! Look Up!

Make Eye Contact!

Stand up Straight!

SLOW DOWN

There are always three speeches, for every one you actually gave. The one you practiced, the one you gave, and the one you wish you gave.

~Dale Carnegie

Hot Button Issues

What issues can you think of that could be an unwise choice for a speech topic?

- Choose Words Carefully – Always speak the language of the audience, in the most *inclusive* way possible. Don't use slang, acronyms, or other words that the audience might not understand. That said, be yourself. Don't use words that you aren't comfortable saying to appear more cool or intelligent.
- Be Sincere and Enthusiastic – Being yourself and finding the joy in your topic will maximize your effectiveness. Be enthusiastic about your topic, while also being respectful of other viewpoints.
- Avoid Advocating Personal Views – This includes your personal political beliefs, religious biases, and other emotional "hot button" issues. It can create a rift between yourself and members of the audience (or judges) with different perspectives, undercutting your message.

As with most rules, this one has exceptions. They include:

- When these topics represent the values and/or positions of the organization you are there to represent, such as speaking at a political rally.
 - When the *topic* being presented is one of individual personal views, etc., such as a religious function.
 - When you feel sure this is appropriate to the setting you'll be speaking in and are certain that you can present your thoughts and ideas in a respectful, inclusive way.
- Appearance – Your appearance should be clean, appropriate to the event and respectful of the audience. As a general rule, it's good to dress a bit nicer than the people (audience) you are hoping to impress.
 - Have fun! – If you are enjoying yourself you will be more relaxed, and your audience will respond in kind. If you are too anxious to do this, try to *appear* as if you are enjoying yourself and know it will all be over soon!

Preparing for Success

Thoughts

People who are new to public speaking find it's best to start with small groups, rather than large audiences.

Different situations call for different speaking styles: casual or formal, funny or serious, passionate or light-hearted.

Right now, what group size and speaking style best fits *you*?

The single most important way to be successful in giving your speech is to *practice*. This will help you manage any nervousness, handle the unexpected, and get the most success out of all your hard work.

- Practice *beforehand*: Don't wait until the last minute to start practicing. You will need plenty of time to get comfortable with your material and work the kinks out.
- Practice *many times*: Once or twice is not enough. Do not embrace failure by deciding to "wing it."
- Practice *in different environments*: Go through it a few times in a busy lobby, a quiet room, in front of friends, by yourself, inside, outside, etc.
- Practice *receiving questions*: This will help you to know when you have sufficient knowledge about your topic, and what areas of additional study are needed. Friends and family can help you with this. In some contests, a Q&A session is part of the experience.
- Practice *fielding abrasive comments*: Little brothers and sisters are usually more than happy to help with this. It will help you be prepared to respond in a calm and respectful manner if this should occur at your speech.
- Practice *dealing with the unexpected*: Sometimes things tip over, your animal relieves itself, or equipment fails to work. Practicing beforehand will help you handle these things calmly and efficiently at speech time.

How to Handle Anxiety and Other Problems

An old musician's joke is, "I get lots of requests...but I keep playing anyway!" It is very normal to feel anxious when preparing to speak in front of a group and often our bodies express this anxiety with "requests", or physical symptoms. The most important thing is to "keep playing anyway" by going ahead with your speech, and not giving in to the feelings and symptoms of nervousness. Below are examples of common symptoms of anxiety, and things you can do to deal with them:

Symptoms

Nervous Stomach

Vomiting, Nausea,
or Diarrhea

“Jelly Legs”

Trembling Hands

“Tongue tied and
Twisted”

Shortness of Breath

Blushing

Extreme Sweating

Cold or Cough

Solutions

Breathe slowly. Do not eat prior to speaking.

Avoid eating ahead of time.

Move around. Shaking rarely shows to the audience (which is some distance away), so don't worry about it!

Use rings to connect your 3x5 cards, or use a small notebook, to avoid dropping your notes. Again, the audience will most likely not even notice.

Don't apologize or make excuses. Instead, just stop, take a breath and begin the sentence again.

Slow down, swallow, inhale then exhale. Then smile and make eye contact with a friendly face.

Ignore it. If the audience can even see it, a blush will just appear to be a “healthy glow.”

Wear light colors, which show circles less. Use antiperspirant (not just deodorant). “Dress shields” pinned under the arms may help with appearance, if necessary.

Take tissues and a cough drop to the lectern with you.

Adapted from Public Speaking...4-H Style. Texas Agricultural Extension Service, COM 1-2.050, 6-99

Anyone can quit and be plagued by anxiety for years to come, but “playing through” the nervousness is a far better approach. By going ahead with your speech each time, you will eventually be rid of the nervousness – in public speaking and in many other areas of your life!

Now that you know *how* to be successful as a public speaker, let's explore *why* these tips work.



When faced with public speaking, some people feel confident while others are...less so.

Public Speaking: A Social Contract

Have you ever attended a speech where the speaker was easy to understand but clearly did not want to be there? When an audience member sits down to listen to a speaker they have certain expectations about what the role of a speaker entails. This “social contract” is usually not a conscious process, but meeting those expectations is critical to a speaker’s success. Without this knowledge, a speaker may be technically proficient and still fail. When the contract is violated, audience members may feel betrayed, angry, annoyed, confused, and even devalued. Knowing the pieces of this social contract can help a speaker prepare, and help them understand *why* common public speaking guidelines help them to be successful.

To understand the social contract, think back to the best public speakers you’ve seen. As you listened to them speak, you probably felt that each speaker was

- *Competent*: They knew enough about their topic to be worth your time.
- *Appropriate*: They represented the ideals and values of the organization they were speaking for.
- *Relevant*: The speaker’s topics related well to why you came to the event (or turned to that station).
- *Appreciative*: They valued you as a member of the Audience.
- *Content*: They wanted to be there.

Fulfilling the Contract

Now let’s revisit the key points of giving a speech and dealing with anxiety to consider some of the reasons *why* these things are effective. Everything you do as a speaker sends a message, which may be recognized consciously or unconsciously by the audience. Remember, speakers are usually *far* more aware of any problems they may be having than the audience is.

Good Posture

- Message: You are confident (and thus more credible)
- Message: You are in command (so you are surely where you wish to be).
- Message: You respect the audience.

Speak Clearly, Slowly and Distinctly

- Message: This topic is important for the audience to understand
- Message: If the audience listens, they will be able to understand

Make Eye Contact

- Message: You value the audience.
- Message: You care how they react.
- Message: You are confident.
- Message: You are credible.
- Message: You want to be there.

Smile and Have Fun

- Message: You want to be there.
- Message: You value the audience.
- Message: You are confident.
- Message: You are receptive.

Be Sincere and Enthusiastic

- Message: You truly wish to be there.
- Message: Your topic is very important.
- Message: You are credible.

Speak in the most *inclusive* way possible

- Message: You value the audience.
- Message: You are tuned in to the audience.

Don't Apologize for Getting Tongue Tied

- Apologizing can send the message that you believe you're less than competent.
- Apologizing can send the message that you don't want to be there.
- Apologizing can convey that you are unsure and asking for their approval.
- Please note that apologizing is a valuable skill in every other area of your life!

Sitting in Front of a Group

Often a speaker may find themselves seated up front and facing the audience at an event, waiting their turn to speak or afterwards. The following are general guidelines for success when seated in front of an audience while someone else speaks:

- 1) Pay rapt attention to the speaker – Laugh at their jokes, smile at their comments, and give them your full attention. They will not see you, but this sends the message to the audience that the speaker's message is worth listening to, and you will be more likely to receive the same respect when it's your turn to speak.



Components of the Contract

The speaker:

...is competent enough to be worth the time of the audience.

...represents the ideals and values of the organization they represent.

...will speak on topics relevant to why the audience came to the event.

...values the audience.

...wants to be there.

- 2) Sit with your forward foot flat on the floor, feet touching.
- 3) Do not scan the audience with your eyes or communicate with them in any way when you are in front of a group. Understand that every move you make is amplified to the audience.
- 4) Avoid distracting body language -- No rocking, shifting, scratching, etc. Keep hands away from your face and your hair. Do not cross your legs.
- 5) If awaiting your turn to speak and nervousness sets in, *breathe!* Slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth can help to reduce tension.

Additional Public Speaking Tips

- If using a flip chart – Write notes to yourself lightly in pencil on the pad. No one from the audience will see it, and you will have the benefit of your notes!
- Have strips of masking tape already cut and taped to the legs of the flip chart stand, ready for quickly posting a sheet from your flip chart to the wall.
- Watch the tone of your voice at the end of your sentences – sometimes nervous speakers will end every sentence with a distracting lilt to their voice.
- Find the friendly faces in the audience and visit them often, without locking on.
- Like avoid the word “like,” dude...

Conclusion

Public speaking is a skill that will benefit most every area of your life and contribute to your overall success. Being aware of the expectations the audience has of you as a speaker will help you leverage these skills to meet the terms of this “social contract” and be successful. Nervousness and anxiety are common, but never let that stop you from gaining the valuable speaking experience that every public speaker needs.

Sometimes that experience takes awhile to manifest. It’s not uncommon for a student to struggle for an average grade in a public speaking class, only to find that knowledge and experience “kicking in” sometime later as they suddenly make big strides in his/her speaking ability! Experience is the biggest component of communications success, and in public speaking no experience is ever wasted.

