

## Reasons for Nervousness

Is it ridiculous to be afraid to give a speech? I used to think so, back when I first began public speaking. I was a nervous wreck, and I would often chide myself by saying, “Come on, there’s no good reason to be scared.” But I was wrong. There *is* good reason to be scared; in fact, there are many good reasons, including the five below.

1. **Fear of being stared at.** If you haven’t had experience being the center of attention, it can be unnerving to have all eyes in a room focused on you.
2. **Fear of failure or rejection.** If you are like most people, you are afraid of looking stupid. You ask yourself, “What if I make a fool of myself?” or “What if I say something really dumb?”
3. **Fear of the unknown.** New events, such as your first job interview, can be scary because you cannot anticipate the outcome. Fortunately, this fear usually eases in public speaking as you gain experience. You develop enough confidence to know that nothing terrible will happen.
4. **A traumatic experience in the past.** You may have painful memories of a humiliating event in a classroom or a presentation that flopped.
5. **Social anxiety.** Because of your genetic makeup or temperament, you may be awkward, uneasy, or apprehensive in public. You may feel defensive around other people and fearful of being evaluated and judged.

All of these reasons are understandable, and you do not need to feel ashamed if any of them apply to you. Recognizing them is an important step in learning how to manage your nervousness.

## The Value of Fear

In the first hour of my public speaking class, many students tell me that one of their goals is to eliminate all traces of nervousness. My response may surprise you as much as it surprises them: *You should not try to banish all your fear and nervousness. You need a certain amount of fear to give a good speech.*

You *need* fear? Yes. When accepted and managed, fear energizes you; it makes you think fast. It gives you vitality and enthusiasm. Here is why: When you stand up to give a speech and fear hits you, your body’s biological survival mechanisms kick in. You experience the same feeling of high alert that saved our cave-dwelling ancestors when they faced hungry wolves and either had to fight or flee to survive. Though these mechanisms are not as crucial in our day-to-day lives as they were to our ancestors, this system is still nice to have for emergencies: if you were walking down a deserted street one night and someone threatened you, your body would release a burst of **adrenaline** into your bloodstream, causing freshly oxygenated blood to rush to your muscles, and you would be able to fight ferociously or retreat quickly. The benefit of adrenaline can be seen in competitive sports; athletes *must* get their adrenaline flowing before a game begins. The great home-run slugger Reggie Jackson said during his heyday, “I have butterflies in my stomach almost every time I step up to the plate. When I don’t have them, I get worried because it means I won’t hit the ball very well.”<sup>4</sup>

Many musicians, actors, and public speakers have the same attitude. Singer Garth Brooks says, “If I ever stop getting nervous before a performance, it’s time for me to quit.”<sup>5</sup> In public speaking, adrenaline infuses you with energy. It enables you to think with greater clarity and quickness. It makes you come across to your audience

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### adrenaline

a hormone, triggered by stress, that stimulates heart, lungs, and muscles and prepares the body for “fright, flight, or fight.”

as someone who is alive and vibrant. Elayne Snyder, a speech teacher, uses the term **positive nervousness**, which she describes in this way: “It’s a zesty, enthusiastic, lively feeling with a slight edge to it. Positive nervousness is the state you’ll achieve by converting your anxiety into constructive energy . . . . It’s still nervousness, but you’re no longer victimized by it; instead you’re vitalized by it.”<sup>6</sup>

If you want proof that nervousness is beneficial, observe speakers who have absolutely no butterflies at all. Because they are 100 percent relaxed, they usually give speeches that are dull and flat, with no energy, no zest. There is an old saying: “Speakers who say they are as cool as a cucumber usually give speeches about as interesting as a cucumber.” One speaker, the novelist I. A. R. Wylie, said, “I rarely rise to my feet without a throat constricted with terror and a furiously thumping heart. When, for some reason, I *am* cool and self-assured, the speech is always a failure. I need fear to spur me on.”<sup>7</sup>

Another danger of being too relaxed is you might get hit with a sudden bolt of panic. A hospital official told me that she gave an orientation speech to new employees every week for several years. “It became so routine that I lost all of my stage fright,” she said. Then one day, while in the middle of her talk, she was suddenly and inexplicably struck with paralyzing fear. “I got all choked up and had to take a break to pull myself together,” she recalled.

I have had a similar experience, and so have many other speakers. We get too relaxed, and then we get blindsided by sudden panic. For this reason, if I find myself overly calm before a speech, I tell myself to be alert for danger. I try to encourage “positive nervousness,” and this helps me to avoid being caught off-guard.

**positive nervousness**  
useful energy.

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## Guidelines for Managing Nervousness

A complete lack of fear is undesirable, but what about the other extreme? Is *too much* nervousness bad for you? Of course it is, especially if you are so incapacitated that you forget what you were planning to say, or if your breathing is so labored that you cannot get your words out. Your goal is to keep your nervousness under control so that you have just the right amount—enough to energize you, but not enough to cripple you. You can achieve a good balance by following the tips below.

### In the Planning Stage

By giving time and energy to planning your speech, you can bypass many anxieties.

#### Choose a Topic You Know Well

Nothing will unsettle you more than speaking on a subject that is unfamiliar to you. If you are asked to do so, I suggest you decline the invitation (unless, of course, it is an assignment from an instructor or a boss who gives you no choice). Choose a topic you are interested in and know a lot about—or want to learn more about. This will give you enormous self-confidence; if something terrible happens, like losing your notes, you can improvise because you know your subject. Also, familiarity with the topic will allow you to handle yourself well in the question-and-answer period after the speech.

#### Prepare Yourself Thoroughly

Here is a piece of advice given by many experienced speakers: *the very best precaution against excessive stage fright is thorough, careful preparation*. You may have heard the expression “I came unglued.” In public speaking, solid preparation is the “glue” that will hold you together.<sup>8</sup> Joel Weldon of Scottsdale, Arizona (who quips that he



## Examining Your Ethics

Mick was nervous and lacked confidence in his ability to choose a good topic, so he gave a speech about meteors that his friend Aditya had created. Aditya was quite knowledgeable about astronomy and had created a good speech, but Mick himself did not know much about meteors. Which of the following are valid arguments against Mick's behavior?

- A. His delivery might be shaky because of unfamiliarity with the subject matter.
- B. He is guilty of plagiarism, passing off someone else's work as his own.
- C. Not knowing his topic very well, he risks embarrassment if he is unable to answer simple questions during the question-and-answer period.

*For the answer, see the last page of this chapter.*

used to be so frightened of audiences that he was “unable to lead a church group in silent prayer”), gives his personal formula for managing fear: “I prepare and then prepare, and then when I think I’m ready, I prepare some more.” Weldon recommends five to eight hours of preparation for each hour in front of an audience.<sup>9</sup>

Start your preparation far in advance of the speech date so that you have plenty of time to gather ideas, create an outline, and prepare speaking notes. Then practice, practice, practice. Don’t just look over your notes—actually stand up and rehearse your talk in whatever way suits you: in front of a mirror, a video camera, or a live audience of family or friends. Don’t rehearse just once—run through your entire speech at least four times. If you present your speech

four times at home, you will find that your fifth delivery—before a live audience—will be smoother and more self-assured than if you had not practiced at all.

### Never Memorize a Speech

Giving a speech from memory courts disaster. Winston Churchill, the British prime minister during World War II who is considered one of the greatest orators of the twentieth century, learned this lesson as a young man. In the beginning of his career, he would write out and memorize his speeches. One day, while giving a memorized talk to Parliament, he suddenly stopped. His mind went blank. He began his last sentence all over. Again his mind went blank. He sat down in embarrassment and shame. Never again did Churchill try to memorize a speech. This same thing has happened to many others who have tried to commit a speech to memory. Everything goes smoothly until they get derailed, and then they are hopelessly off the track.

Even if you avoid derailment, there is another reason for not memorizing: you will probably sound mechanical. Your audience will sense that you are speaking from your memory and not from your heart, and this will undermine your impact.

### Visualize Yourself Giving an Effective Speech

Let yourself daydream a bit: picture yourself going up to the lectern, a bit nervous but in control of yourself, and then giving a forceful talk to an appreciative audience. This visualization technique may sound silly, but it has worked for many speakers and it may work for you. Notice that the daydream includes nervousness. You need to have a realistic image in your mind: nervous, but nevertheless in command of the situation and capable of delivering a strong, effective speech.

This technique, often called **positive imagery**, has been used by athletes for years. Have you ever watched professional golf on TV? Before each stroke, golfers carefully study the distance from the ball to the hole, the rise and fall of the terrain, and so on. Many of them report that just before swinging, they imagine themselves hitting the ball with the right amount of force and watching it go straight into the cup. Then they try to execute the play just as they imagined it. The imagery, many pros say, improves their game.

**positive imagery**  
visualization of  
successful actions.

Positive imagery works best when you can couple it with *believing* that you will give a successful speech. Is it absurd to hold such a belief? If you fail to prepare, yes, it is absurd. But if you spend time in solid preparation and rehearsal, you are justified in believing in success.

Whatever you do, don't let yourself imagine the opposite—a bad speech or poor delivery. Negative thinking will add unnecessary fear to your life in the days before your speech and rob you of creative energy—energy that you need for preparing and practicing.<sup>10</sup>

### Know That Shyness Is No Barrier

Some shy people think that their temperament blocks them from becoming good speakers, but this is erroneous. Many shy introverts have succeeded in show business: Nicole Kidman, Elton John, Amanda Seyfried, Blake Lively, Robert Pattinson, Johnny Depp, and Keira Knightley, to name just a few.<sup>11</sup> Many less-famous people also have succeeded. “I used to stammer,” says Joe W. Boyd of Bellingham, Washington, “and I used to be petrified at the thought of speaking before a group of any size.” Despite his shyness, Boyd joined a Toastmasters club to develop his speaking skills. Two years later, he won the Toastmasters International Public Speaking Contest by giving a superb speech to an audience of more than 2,000 listeners.<sup>12</sup>

### Shift Focus from Self to Audience

Before a speech, some speakers worry about whether listeners will like them. This is a big mistake, says Johnny Lee, a specialist in preventing workplace violence who manages his nervousness by focusing on his audience rather than on himself. To worry about yourself and your image, he says, “is a kind of vanity—you are putting yourself above your audience and your message.”<sup>13</sup>

Some experienced speakers say that focusing on yourself is an act of inexcusable selfishness. Instead of worrying about whether listeners like you, focus on the audience and try to fulfill their interests, needs, and desires.

One good way to shift the focus from self to audience is to change your “self-talk.” Whenever you have a self-centered thought such as, “I will make a total idiot out of myself,” substitute an audience-centered thought such as, “I will give my listeners information that will be useful in their lives.” This approach eases your anxiety and also empowers you to connect with your audience.

### Plan Visual Aids

In addition to adding spice and interest to a speech, visual aids reduce anxiety because you can shift the audience's stares from you to your illustrations. Also, moving about as you display your aids siphons off some of your excess nervous energy. Your aids don't have to be elaborate, and you don't need many—sometimes one or two will suffice.

### Make Arrangements

At least several days before you give your speech, inspect the location and anticipate any problems: Is there an extension cord for the multimedia projector? Do the windows have curtains or blinds so that the room can be darkened? Is there a whiteboard and a marker? Some talks have been ruined and some speakers turned into nervous wrecks because, at the last moment, they discover that there isn't an extension cord in the entire building.

### Devote Extra Practice to the Introduction

Because you will probably have the most anxiety at the beginning of your speech, you should spend a lot of time practicing your introduction.



Robert Pattinson is shy introvert.

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Most speakers, actors, and musicians report that after the first minute or two, their nervousness eases and the rest of the event is relatively easy. German opera singer Ernestine Schumann-Heink said, “I grow so nervous before a performance, I become sick. I want to go home. But after I have been on the stage for a few minutes, I am so happy that nobody can drag me off.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps happiness is too strong a word for what you will feel, but if you are a typical speaker, the rest of your speech will be smooth sailing once you have weathered the turbulent waters of the first few minutes.

## Immediately before the Speech

Here are a few tips for the hours preceding your speech.

### Verify Equipment and Materials

On the day of your speech, arrive early and inspect every detail of the arrangements you have made. Is the equipment you need in place and in good working order? If there is a public-address system, test your voice on it before the audience arrives so that you can feel at ease with it. Learn how to adjust the microphone.

### Get Acclimated to Audience and Setting

It can be frightening to arrive at the meeting place at the last moment and confront a sea of strange faces waiting to hear you talk. If you arrive at least one hour early, you can get acclimated to the setting and chat with people as they come into the room. In this way, you will see them not as a hostile pack of strangers but as ordinary people who wish you well.

If possible, during your talk, refer to some of the audience members with whom you have chatted: for example, “I was talking to Gabriela Ramirez before the meeting, and she told me about the problems you have been experiencing with getting customers to pay their bills on time.” In this way, you make your listeners feel valued, and you make yourself seem connected to them.

Danielle Kennedy of Sun Valley, Idaho, says that when she began her speaking career, she was so nervous she would hide out in a bathroom until it was time for her to speak. Now, she says, she mingles with the listeners as they arrive and engages them in conversation. “This reminds me that they are just nice people who want to be informed. I also give myself pleasant thoughts. Things like: ‘Can you imagine, these people drove 100 miles just to hear me. I am so lucky. These people are wonderful.’ I get real warm thoughts going by the time I get up there.”<sup>15</sup>

### Use Physical Actions to Release Tension

Adrenaline can be beneficial, providing athletes and public speakers with helpful energy, but it also has a downside. When your body goes on high alert, you get pumped up and ready for action, but you also get a racing heart, trembling hands, and jittery knees. If you are an athlete, this is no problem because you will soon be engaged in vigorous play that will drain off excess nervous energy. As a public speaker, you don’t have that outlet. Nevertheless, there are several tension releasers you can use:

- Take three slow, deep breaths and hold them. To prevent hyperventilating, be sure to inhale slowly and exhale slowly.
- Do exercises that can be performed without calling attention to yourself. Here are some examples: (1) Tighten and then relax your leg muscles. (2) Push your arm or hand muscles against a hard object (such as a desktop or a chair) for a few moments, and then release the pressure. (3) Press the palms of your hands against each other in the same way: tension, release . . . tension, release . . .



Greet listeners as they arrive.

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## During the Speech

Here are proven pointers to keep in mind as you deliver a speech.

### Pause before You Start

All good speakers pause a few seconds before they begin their talk. This silence is effective because (1) it is dramatic, building up the audience's interest and curiosity; (2) it makes you look poised and in control; (3) it calms you; and (4) it gives you a chance to look at your notes and get your first two or three sentences firmly in mind.

Many tense, inexperienced speakers rush up to the lectern and begin their speech at once, thus getting off to a frenzied, flustered start. They think that silence is an undesirable void that must be filled up immediately. To the contrary, silence is a good breathing space between what went before and what comes next. It helps the audience to focus.

### Deal Rationally with Your Body's Turmoil

If you are a typical beginning speaker, you will suffer from some or all of the following symptoms as you begin your talk:

- Pounding heart
- Trembling hands
- Shaky knees
- Dry, constricted throat
- Difficulty breathing
- Quivering voice
- Flushed face

You are likely to suffer the most during the first few minutes of a speech, and then things get better. However, if your symptoms get worse as you proceed, it might be because your mind has taken a wrong path. Examine the two paths diagrammed in Figure 1. If you take Route A, you are trapped in a vicious circle. Your mind tells your body that disaster is upon you, and your body responds by feeling worse. This, in turn, increases your brain's perception of disaster.

You can avoid this rocky road by choosing Route B, in which your mind helps your body stay in control. The mental trick is to remind yourself that nervousness is an ally that can help energize you. Tell yourself that your symptoms, rather than being a prelude to disaster, are evidence that you are energized enough to give a good speech.

### Think of Communication, Not Performance

Regard your challenge as *communication* rather than *performance*. Dr. Michael T. Motley of the University of California, Davis, says that speakers who suffer from excessive anxiety make the mistake of thinking of themselves as *performing* for listeners, whom they see as hostile evaluators. Such people say, "The audience will ridicule me if I make a mistake. I'll be embarrassed to death." But in fact, says Dr. Motley, audiences are more interested in hearing what you have to say "than in analyzing or criticizing how [you] say it." Audiences "usually ignore errors and awkwardness as long as they get something out of a speech."<sup>16</sup>

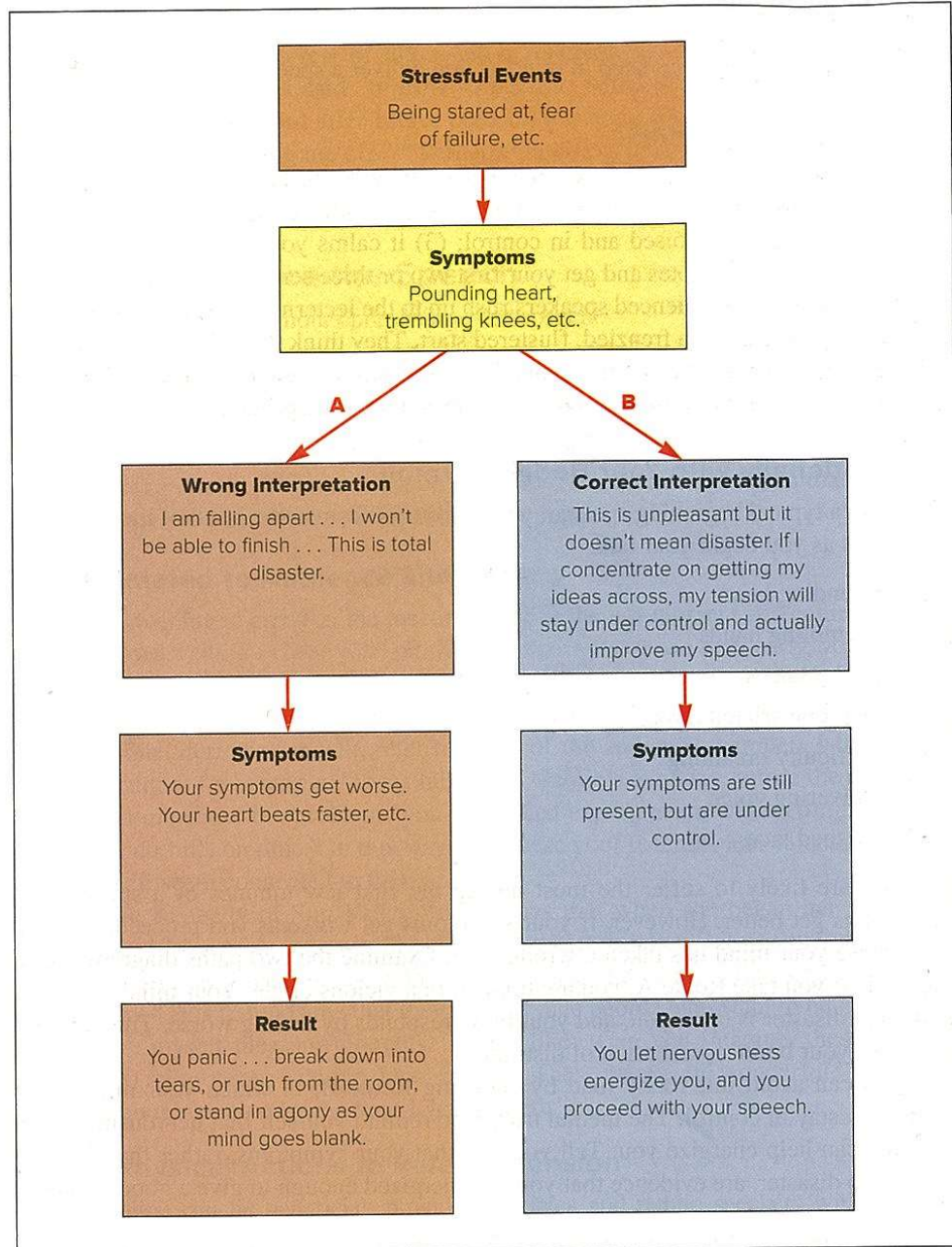
When you stop worrying about "How well am I performing?" and start thinking about "How can I share my ideas with my audience?" two things usually happen: (1) your anxiety comes down to a manageable level and (2) your delivery improves

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**Figure 1**

The alternative paths that a speaker feeling stressed might take.



dramatically. If you treat speechmaking as a dialogue with your listeners rather than as a performance, you will tend to talk *with* them instead of *to* them; you will tend to speak conversationally rather than in a stiff, unnatural way.

When one of my students, Maxine Jones, began her first classroom speech, her voice sounded artificial and cold; but after a few moments, she sounded animated and warm, as if she were carrying on a lively conversation. This caused her to become more interesting and easier to follow. Later she explained her transformation: "At first I was scared to death, but then I noticed that everyone in the room was looking at me with curiosity in their eyes, and I could tell that they really wanted to hear what I was saying. I told myself, 'They really *care* about this information—I can't let them down.'

So I settled down and talked to them as if they were my friends. I got so involved with explaining things to them that I didn't worry too much about being scared."

What Jones discovered is confirmed by athletes. Most tennis players, for example, are gripped by nervous tension before a match, but if they concentrate on hitting the ball, their tension recedes into the background. Likewise, public speakers may be filled with anxiety before a speech, but if they concentrate on communicating with the audience, their anxiety moves to a back burner, where it provides energy for the task.

### Know That Most Symptoms Are Not Seen

Some speakers get rattled because they think the audience is keenly aware of their thumping heart and quaking hands. You, of course, are painfully aware of those symptoms, but—believe it or not—your audience is usually oblivious to your body's distress. Remember that people are sitting out there wanting to hear your ideas. They are not saying to themselves, "Let's see, what signs of nervousness is this person displaying?"

I have had students tell me after a speech that they were embarrassed about their jittery performance, yet I and the other listeners in the class saw no signs of nervousness. We were listening to the ideas and failed to notice the speaker's discomfort. Various studies have found the same thing to be true: audiences are unaware of the symptoms that the speakers think are embarrassingly obvious.<sup>17</sup> In other words, you are probably the only one who knows that your knees are shaking and your heart is pounding.

TV talk show host Dick Cavett notes that a TV performer's level of stage fright "varies from night to night. The best thing to do is tell yourself it doesn't show one-eighth as much as you feel. If you're a little nervous, you don't look nervous at all. If you're very nervous, you look slightly nervous. And if you're totally out of control, you look troubled. It scales down on the screen." People who appear on a talk show, says Cavett, should always remind themselves that everything they are doing *looks* better than it *feels*. "Your nervous system may be giving you a thousand shocks, but the viewer can only see a few of them."<sup>18</sup> The same thing holds true for a speech: you look better than you feel.

### Never Mention Nervousness or Apologize

Though most signs of nervousness are not visible, there may be times when an audience does notice your nervousness—when, for example, your breathing is audibly labored. In such a case, resist the temptation to comment or apologize. Everyone knows that most people get nervous when they talk in public, so why call attention to it or apologize for it?

Commenting about nervousness can create two big dangers. First of all, you might get yourself more rattled than you were to begin with. I remember listening to a teacher who was giving a talk to a PTA meeting one night. In the middle of her remarks, she suddenly blurted out, "Oh my god, I knew I would fall apart." Up to that time, I had not been aware of any discomfort or nervousness. She tried to continue her talk, but she was too flustered. She gave up the effort and sat down with a red face. I don't know what kind of internal distress she was suffering, of course, but I am certain that if she had said nothing about her nervousness, she could have dragged herself through the speech. When she sat down, I felt irritated and disappointed because I had been keenly interested in her remarks. How selfish of her, I thought, to deprive me of the second half of her speech simply because she was nervous. I know that my reaction sounds insensitive, but it underscores an important point: your listeners don't care about your emotional distress; they only want to hear your message.

The second risk of mentioning symptoms is that your audience might have been unaware of your nervousness before you brought it up, but now you have distracted

## Tips for Your Career

TIP 1

### Prepare for Memory Lapses

A psychologist tells of the time when he was speaking at a convention as the presiding officer. At one point, he wanted to praise an associate who was sitting next to him at the head table for her hard work in planning the convention. “As I began my words of tribute,” he said, “my mind suddenly went blank, and I couldn’t remember her name! It was awful. This was a woman I had worked with for years. She was like a sister.”

Fortunately, he said, everyone was wearing name tags, so he leaned over, saw her name, and used it in his remarks—without the audience suspecting his memory lapse.

Such lapses are common, but don’t be alarmed. There is a simple solution: prepare a card with all basic information—names, dates, websites—and keep the card with your other notes for easy access.

This “card trick” is used by many ministers, politicians, and other public speakers. “When I perform weddings, even if I’m an old friend of the couple,” says one minister, “I have their names printed in big letters on a card that I keep in front of me.”

Use a card for any familiar passages, such as the Lord’s Prayer or the Pledge of Allegiance, that you are supposed to recite or to lead the audience in reciting. You may never need to read the card, but it’s nice to have a backup in case of emergency.

Please don’t misinterpret this tip to mean that you should write out an entire speech. Brief notes—a few words or phrases—are still recommended. Use the “card trick” only for names, numbers, and wordings that must be recalled with complete accuracy.



At public ceremonies, like this wedding, many ministers avoid embarrassment by having key information (such as the names of the bride and groom) on a card in front of them.

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them from your speech and they are watching the very thing you don’t want them to scrutinize: your body’s behavior. If you say, “I’m sorry that my hands are shaking,” what do you think the audience will pay close attention to, at least for the next few minutes? Your hands, of course, instead of your speech. Keep your audience’s attention focused on your ideas, and they will pay little or no attention to your emotional and physical distress.

### Don't Let Your Audience Upset You

If you are like some speakers, you get rattled when you look out at the audience and observe that most listeners are poker-faced and unsmiling. Does this mean they are displeased with your speech? No. Their solemn faces have nothing to do with you and your speech. This is just one of those peculiarities of human nature: in a conversation, people will smile and nod and encourage you, but when listening to a speech in an audience, most of them wear a blank mask. The way to deal with those stony faces is to remind yourself that your listeners want you to succeed; they hope that you will give them a worthwhile message. If you are lucky, you will notice two or three listeners who obviously appreciate your speech—they nod in agreement or give you looks of approval. Let your eyes go to them frequently. They will give you courage and confidence.

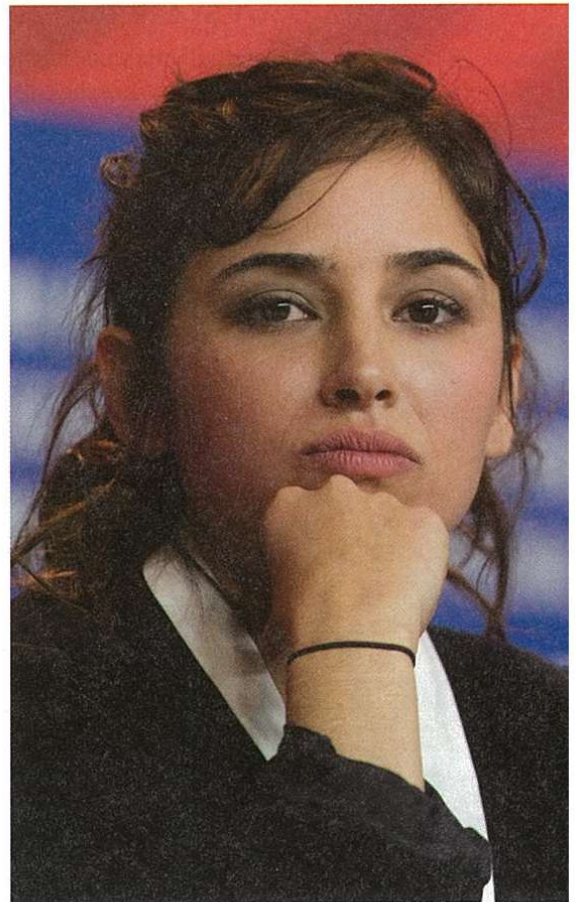
If you are an inexperienced public speaker, you may get upset if you see members of an audience whispering to one another. You may wonder, “Are these people making negative comments about me?” If the listeners are smiling, it’s even worse: you ask yourself, “Did I say something dumb? Is there something wrong with my clothes?” If this happens to you, keep in mind that your rude listeners are probably just sharing some personal gossip. If they *are* whispering about something you’ve said, it’s not necessarily negative. They may be whispering that they agree with you 100 percent.

What if you see faces that look angry or displeased? Don’t assume the worst. Some people get a troubled look on their face whenever they concentrate on a speaker’s message. Michelle Roberts, a defense attorney in Washington, DC, studies the facial expressions of every juror when she addresses the jury during a trial, but she has learned that frowning faces do not necessarily signify disapproval. She says about jurors, “Sometimes they seem like they’re scowling and actually they’re with you.”<sup>19</sup>

What if a listener stands up and walks out of the room? For some inexperienced public speakers, this feels like a stunning personal defeat. Before you jump to conclusions, bear in mind that the listener’s behavior is probably not a response to your speech: he or she may have another meeting to attend or may need to use the rest room or may have become ill suddenly. But what if the listener is indeed storming out of the room in a huff, obviously rejecting your speech? In such a case, advises veteran speaker Earl Nightingale, “don’t worry about it. On controversial subjects, you’re bound to have listeners who are not in agreement with you—unless you’re giving them pure, unadulterated pap. Trying to win over every member of the audience is an impossible and thankless task. Remember, there were those who disagreed with wise, kind Socrates.”<sup>20</sup>

### Act Poised

To develop confidence when you face an audience, act as if you already are confident. Why? Because playing the role of the self-assured speaker can often transform you



Actress Moran Rosenblatt listens to a speaker at a film festival in Berlin. Is she displeased with the speaker’s remarks? Is she bored? Don’t jump to conclusions. Perhaps this is just a habitual expression when listening to an interesting topic.

© John MacDougall/AFP/Getty Images.

into a speaker who is genuinely confident and poised. In various wars, soldiers have reported that they were terrified before going into combat, but nevertheless they acted brave in front of their buddies. During the battle, to their surprise, what started off as a pretense became a reality. Instead of pretending to be courageous, they actually became so. The same thing often happens to public speakers.

### Look Directly at the Audience

If you are frightened of your audience, it is tempting to stare at your notes or the back wall or the window, but these evasions will only add to your nervousness, not reduce it.

Force yourself to establish eye contact, especially at the beginning of your speech. Good eye contact means more than just a quick, furtive glance at various faces in front of you; it means “locking” your eyes with a listener’s for a couple of seconds. Locking eyes may sound frightening, but it actually helps to calm you. In an article about a public speaking course that she took, writer Maggie Paley said, “When you make contact with one other set of eyes, it’s a connection; you can relax and concentrate. The first time I did it, I calmed down 90 percent, and spoke . . . fluently.”<sup>21</sup>

### Don’t Speak Too Fast

Because of nervous tension and a desire to “get it over with,” many speakers race through their speeches. “Take it slow and easy,” advises Dr. Michael T. Motley of the University of California, Davis. “People in an audience have a tremendous job of information-processing to do. They need your help. Slow down, pause, and guide the audience through your talk by delineating major and minor points carefully. Remember that your objective is to help the audience understand what you are saying, not to present your information in record time.”<sup>22</sup>

To help yourself slow down, rehearse your speech in front of friends or relatives and ask them to raise their hands whenever you talk too rapidly. For the actual delivery of the speech, write reminders for yourself in large letters on your notes (such as “SLOW DOWN”). While you are speaking, look at your listeners and talk directly to them in the same calm, patient, deliberate manner you would use if you were explaining an idea to a friend.

### Get Audience Action Early in the Speech

While it’s a bit unnerving to see your listeners’ expressionless faces, in some speeches, you can change those faces from blank to animated by asking a question. (Tips on how to ask questions will be discussed in the chapter on introductions and conclusions.) When the listeners respond with answers or a show of hands, they show themselves to be friendly and cooperative, and this reduces your apprehension. When they loosen up, you loosen up.

### Eliminate Excess Energy

For siphoning off excess energy during the speech, you can use visual aids (as mentioned earlier) and these two tension releasers:

- Let your hands make gestures. You will not have any trouble making gestures if you simply allow your hands to be free. Don’t clutch note cards or thrust your hands into your pockets or grip the lectern. If you let your hands hang by your side or rest on the lectern, you will find that they will make gestures naturally. You will not have to think about it.

- Walk around. Though you obviously should not pace back and forth like a caged animal, you can walk a few steps at a time. For example, you can walk a few steps to the left of the lectern to make a point, move back to the lectern to look at your notes for your next point, and then walk to the right of the lectern as you speak.

In addition to reducing tension, gestures and movement make you a more exciting and interesting speaker than someone who stands frozen to one spot.

### Accept Imperfection

If you think that you must give a perfect, polished speech, you put enormous—and unnecessary—pressure on yourself. Your listeners don't care whether your delivery is perfect; they simply hope that your words will enlighten or entertain them. Think of yourself as a package deliverer; the audience is more interested in the package than in how skillfully you hand it over.

Making a mistake is not the end of the world. Even experienced speakers commit a fair number of blunders and bloopers. If you completely flub a sentence or mangle an idea, you might say something like, "No, wait. That's not the way I wanted to explain this. Let me try again." If you momentarily forget what you were planning to say, don't despair. Pause a few moments to regain your composure and find your place in your notes. If you can't find your place, ask the audience for help: "I've lost my train of thought—where was I?" There is no need to apologize. In conversation, you pause and correct yourself all the time; to do so occasionally in a speech makes you sound spontaneous and natural.

If you make a mistake that causes your audience to snicker or laugh, try to join in. If you can laugh at yourself, your audience will love you—they will see that you are no "stuffed shirt." Some comedians deliberately plan "mistakes" as a technique for gaining rapport with their audiences.

### Welcome Experience

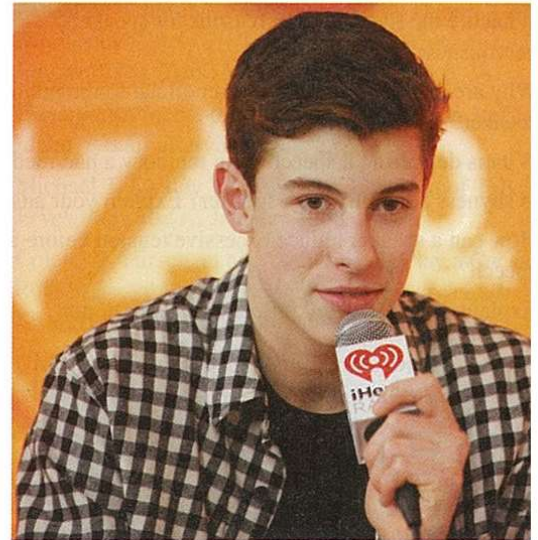
If you are an inexperienced public speaker, please know that you will learn to manage your nervousness as you get more and more practice in public speaking, both in your speech class and in your career. You should welcome this experience as a way to further your personal and professional growth.

One of my students told me at the beginning of the course that she just *knew* she would drop out of the class right before her first speech. She stayed, though, and developed into a fine speaker. She later got a promotion in her company partly because of her speaking ability. "I never thought I'd say this," she admitted, "but the experience of giving speeches—plus learning how to handle nervousness—helped me enormously. Before I took the course, I used to panic whenever I started off a talk. I had this enormous lump in my throat, and I thought I was doing terrible. I would hurry through my talk just to get it over with." But as a result of the course, she said, "I learned to control my nervousness and use it to my advantage. Now I'm as nervous as ever when I give a speech, but I make the nervousness work *for* me instead of *against* me."

In your career, rather than shying away from speaking opportunities, seek them out. An old saying is true: experience is the best teacher.

### connect

Insight reports provide visualize data to instructor making it possible to quickly confirm early signals of success or identify early warning signs regarding student performance or concept mastery.



Like most public speakers, singer Shawn Mendes sometimes makes mistakes. Regarding a concert in Philadelphia, he says, "I fumbled my words on stage. I was between songs and meant to tell the fans 'sing along if you know the words,' but it came out as an entirely jumbled sentence of gibberish."

## Resources for Review and Skill Building

### Summary

Nervousness is a normal, understandable emotion experienced by most public speakers. There are many reasons for jitters, but five of the most common are fear of being stared at, fear of failure or rejection, fear of the unknown, a traumatic experience in the past, and social anxiety. There is no reason to be ashamed if any of them apply to you.

Instead of trying to eliminate nervousness, welcome it as a source of energy. Properly channeled, it can help you give a better speech than you would deliver if you were completely relaxed.

The best way to avoid excessive, crippling nervousness is to pour time and energy into preparing and practicing your speech. Then, when you stand up to speak, deal

rationally with your nervous symptoms (such as trembling knees and dry throat); remind yourself that the symptoms are not a prelude to disaster but instead are evidence that you are energized enough to give a good speech. Never call attention to your nervousness and never apologize for it; the listeners don't care about your emotional state—they just want to hear your message. Concentrate on getting your ideas across to the audience; this will get your mind where it belongs—on your listeners and not on yourself—and it will help you move your nervousness to a back burner, where it can still simmer and energize you without hindering your effectiveness.

### Key Terms

adrenaline, 22

positive imagery, 24

positive nervousness, 23

### Review Questions

1. What are the five common reasons for speakers' nervousness?
2. Why are fear and nervousness beneficial to the public speaker?
3. Why is delivering a speech from memory a bad method?
4. Is shyness a liability for a speaker? Explain your answer.
5. How can a speaker reduce excessive tension before a speech?
6. Explain the idea "Think of communication, not performance."
7. Does an audience detect most of a speaker's nervous symptoms? Explain your answer.
8. Why should you never call attention to your nervousness?
9. Why should speakers not be upset when they see the unsmiling faces of their listeners?
10. Why should a speaker act as if he or she is confident?

### Building Critical-Thinking Skills

1. In an experiment, psychologist Rowland Miller asked college students to do something embarrassing, such as singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," while classmates watched. Those students who reported a great degree of embarrassment thought that their classmates would consider them fools and like them less, but Miller found just the opposite: The classmates expressed greater regard for the easily embarrassed students after the performance than before. What lessons can a public speaker draw from this research?
2. Imagine that while you are speaking to an audience, you notice that (a) everyone is very quiet, (b) a man in the front is rubbing his neck, and (c) a woman is looking in her purse. Using two columns on a piece of paper, give a negative interpretation of these events in the left column, and then give a positive interpretation in the right column.
3. Many musicians make a distinction between "good nervousness" and "bad nervousness." What does this distinction mean? How does it apply to public speakers?
4. Is it a good idea for speakers to focus during their speech on whether their clothes and grooming and overall image are pleasing to the audience? Defend your answer.

# Resources for Review and Skill Building

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