



Speech-Making Tips that Will Leave Your Audience Speechless (in a good way)

Has anyone ever given you “helpful” advice on how not to be nervous when you have to give a speech? Here are some suggestions I’ve heard—and why they don’t work—followed by some tried-and-true ones that will help you overcome those nerves.

WHAT NOT TO DO

1. **DON'T** practise in front of a mirror. This only makes you notice how funny your face looks when you're talking to yourself in a mirror. It's hard to be “natural” when you're staring at yourself, reading from notes, and trying to look relaxed and poised—all at the same time. Then you start to see that odd way your mouth looks when you say certain words. Before you know it, you're trying to give your speech without moving your lips and sounding like an alien.
2. **DON'T** imagine your audience in their underwear. That's just weird and creepy. Who can concentrate on making a good speech when all you can think of is people you know wearing their skivvies?
3. **DON'T** try to get the audience on your side by telling them how nervous you are. Way to make your audience nervous! Then they're just waiting for you to mess up. And you know they are, so you do. Then it spins completely out of control, till you're a jabbering, drooling fool. Is that the lasting impression you want to make on people before the floor swallows you up? (You wish!)
4. **DON'T** memorize your speech till you can do it by heart (unless you absolutely *have* to). Your brain likes to trick you by going blank, even on your own name, when you're faced with a room full of people. At which point you'll find yourself unable to speak and staring into space with a strange look on your face. Is that the lasting impression you want to make? (Hello floor, why aren't you opening up?)
5. **DON'T** only make a few notes and plan to improvise so you sound spontaneous and passionate (or because you don't want to write out a whole speech). This will only make you sound like you haven't prepared—which, by the way, you haven't! This leads to you being a jabbering, drooling fool or a statue staring into space. Your audience will wish they could yank the rope that opens the trapdoor under you. (Hello, bottomless pit!)

WHAT DOES WORK?

1. DO pick a topic you like. If you're interested, the audience will catch that feeling and want to listen to you. (Seriously, you want them to listen.)
2. DO write out your speech word for word. Keep your audience in mind and think about what they'd like to learn from your speech. But be yourself. Speak in whatever way comes naturally to you—no need to use big words or tell jokes if that's not you.
3. DO acknowledge that you're totally going to be nervous. It's your brain's way of making sure that you prepare. And here's the thing, you're also going to be excited—because you can imagine how impressed your teacher and classmates will be when they hear you speak. Before your speech, walk around a bit and breathe slowly and deeply. Think about how you'll feel when you're finished (hint: you'll feel proud). Picture the audience smiling and clapping at your brilliance.
4. DO rehearse. Practise in front of people and make eye contact with them. Read your speech to your friend, your parents, your dog, your friend's dog. Practise in different places and in the place where you'll be giving your speech, if possible. Focus on talking slowly—slower than you think you should . . . okay, even slower than that.
5. DO believe that everyone wants you to succeed (except maybe your sworn enemy from kindergarten who's always had it in for you anyway). Make eye contact with one or two interested-looking people in the audience and talk to them. Include more people as you go along. Imagine that standing ovation you'll get when you're done.

And if nothing keeps you from jabbering and drooling before it's even your turn to get up in front of the class, remember that everyone else is feeling exactly the same way. So be kind to your fellow speech-makers. Clap for them and show them your appreciation for that awesome thing they did.