



## Tips for tongue tied and terrified speakers

By Heather Carine, Carine Research

If the thought of public speaking fills you with dread, you are not alone.

It is said that 85 percent of people feel nervous before they speak to an audience—and the other 15 percent are lying.

Seven years ago, when I started Carine Research, I joined a public speaking group in Australia called The Penguin Club ([www.thepenguinclub.asn.au](http://www.thepenguinclub.asn.au)) to learn some tricks of the trade to improve my public speaking and communicate with confidence. I continue to meet twice a month with my speaking group and also lead a Penguin Club group for young women—teaching them speaking skills.

It is a pleasure to share some tips that I have gained from The Penguin Club on dealing with speaking nerves.

Recently, reading Matt Abrahams's book, *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, made rethink the way I acknowledge speaking nerves. I was guilty of advocating what Matt Abrahams calls the PB&J approach to getting over nerves—Practice, Breathe, & Just get over it.

### Why do I feel so nervous?

Knowing why you feel so nervous before speaking in public is a good start to taming your nerves.

Feeling very nervous about speaking in public is called communication apprehension. It is a double whammy feeling: you feel anxious about the presentation you will be giving and then there is the real-time anxiety when you are presenting.

There are three distinct phases when communication apprehension is likely to be felt:

Anticipation stage – Before speaking,

Confrontation stage – The first minute or so of presenting,

Adaptation stage – The last minutes of speaking.

We have all felt, at varying levels, communication apprehension in leading up to speaking: anxiety, nervousness, and dreading the speaking engagement. Then, when you get up to speak, you feel a rush of nerves, shaky hands, dry mouth, and you are perspiring.

We all feel nervous when we are anxious about a situation, audience, or goal. In public speaking, the situation, audience, and goal can all coincide—which naturally leads us to feel anxious about speaking at some events, in front of some audiences, or trying to achieve a goal (such as winning a client) with our speaking.

Here are five tips that will help you to stare down your nerves in the face of feeling very anxious about speaking:

### Tip #1: Talk with a friend

When we are preparing for speaking, we tend to retreat and prepare in isolation, where it is easy to get ourselves in knots. Simply talking about your upcoming presentation to someone is a good way to start preparing, and taming your nerves. You find you aren't nervous in one-to-one conversation, and it is a way of starting to approach your speaking subject and start testing the water on the reaction of the audience to your presentation.

### Tip #2: Deal with PPP (Procrastination, Perfectionism, PowerPoint)

Procrastination, perfectionism, and messing about with PowerPoint slides all add to our communication apprehension.



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### **Procrastination:**

When we are feeling anxious about speaking, we sabotage our opportunities to speak confidently by procrastinating when we should be preparing. Public speaking coach Emma Ledden, in her book *The Presentation Book*, recommends 10 hours preparation for every hour of speaking—if you are preparing a presentation from scratch.

### **Perfectionism:**

We often worry ourselves senseless about talking in front of an audience, especially an audience of our peers. It is easy to get caught up with worry that you might look silly or be caught out by not knowing something. The end result is that anxious speakers set the bar very high and aim for perfectionism.

Perfectionists think the presentation is about the speaker. It's not. Effective speaking is about the audience and what they want or need to hear. Focusing on the audience and starting with their needs in mind means you don't need to deliver a flawless presentation to be an effective speaker.

### **PowerPoint:**

There are three simple rules when it comes to PowerPoint:

- Rule 1:** Focus on your talk first, and then, if necessary, add some visuals to support your talk.
- Rule 2:** There is no hard and fast rule about how many visuals. If the visual doesn't enhance the point you are making, omit it.
- Rule 3:** Allow extra time. Preparing strong visuals or graphs takes extra time in preparation, rehearsal, and contingency planning.

### **Tip #3: Prepare out loud**

One of the big anxiety issues for speakers is the beginning and ending of presentations.

In day-to-day conversation, we don't have to think about the beginning and ending in our conversation—conversation just flows.

Rehearsing out loud helps to tame your nerves as you get a chance to practice:

- *your introduction (over and over again),*
- *moving from the first point, to the second point,*
- *the timing of your presentation, so you don't feel rushed on the day,*
- *your language, and fine tune any words that you stumble on,*
- *the ending of your presentation (over and over again).*

Importantly, rehearsing out loud also gives you an opportunity to imagine presenting in front of an audience—to picture your presentation going well and receiving an encouraging round of applause.

### **Tip #4: Have a contingency plan**

To help keep your nerves in check on the day of presenting, you want things to run smoothly and be “okay on the day.” It pays to have a simple contingency plan for things that can go wrong:

### **Arrive with plenty of time to check out the venue.**

You want time before the audience arrives to get the feel of the room, check the microphone, set up the room, and be prepared for the presentation. For big events, I like to arrive at least an hour before; for interstate events, the day before, if possible.

### **Don't assume your technology and PowerPoint will work.**

If using PowerPoint, send a copy to the organiser in advance and take another copy on a thumb drive.

Get to the venue in plenty of time to see how your presentation looks on the big screen at the venue and how to use the PowerPoint flicker.

If showing a video, check that the audio works and the video works on the venue's computer.

## Take a hard copy back-up of speaking notes.

Make sure there is someone available who can load your PowerPoint show, if you are speaking in a group of speakers.

There is always something that doesn't go as planned, but if you have a contingency plan, you have allowed yourself time and thought to deal with the issue so you won't be flustered and nervous in front of your audience.

### Tip #5: Fake it

Your heart can be racing, but fake it by how you stand, how you look at the audience, and how you project.

Take a moment before you start to talk to claim your space and look at the audience with confidence.

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart. In fact, step slightly forward with your preferred foot.

If your feet are slightly apart, it stops you from crossing your legs or swaying, which are things we do when we are nervous.

You don't have to look your audience in the eye. You can look at their foreheads and they will think you are looking at them.

Using your hands for gesture helps to calm your nerves and also makes you look more at ease.

To encourage yourself to use natural gesture, if you are using notes, keep your notes small and in one hand.

You may be feeling nervous but the audience won't know.

### Enjoy your speaking gig

It's easier to enjoy speaking to an audience if you can confidently think that everything will be okay on the day—using the five simple tips. To reiterate:

1. Talk to friends about your upcoming speaking gig.
2. Don't procrastinate too much. Focus on your audience's needs. Use PowerPoint sparingly.
3. Rehearse your presentation out loud.
4. Have a contingency plan.
5. Use a few fake-it tips to look calm and cool.

### Along with these five tips, enjoy some suggested resources:

**Matt Abrahams, Speaking Up Without Freaking Out: 35 Techniques for Confident, Calm, and Competent Presenting (2012) ([www.nofreakingspeaking.com](http://www.nofreakingspeaking.com));**

**Emma Ledden, The Presentation Book: How to Create It, Shape it, and Deliver it! (2013)**

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