



I'm so nervous when I make presentations... What can I do?

Actually, I want you nervous. Nervousness makes your heart beat faster; it produces that extra spurt of adrenaline that can make your talk exhilarating. The person who tells me that they are not nervous; that they don't feel some excitement, some trepidation, or some rush worries me because that person is overly confident. Being overly confident is your first step towards disaster. Nothing is guaranteed in a 'live performance' such as public speaking, acting, playing a musical instrument, or even participating in a game, such as football or hockey. [Some years ago, there was a professional hockey goalie who would be sick to his stomach before each game, which is not the same thing as having your stomach in knots. If you are 'losing your lunch' before walking up to that podium, I suggest changing jobs!]

What sells a presentation is your enthusiasm; and, part of that enthusiasm is directly dependent on your nervousness. So the answer lies not in eliminating nervousness but in controlling it. That is the secret.

There are many 'tricks' you can read about in other books or courses on presentation skills which promise the answer to 'stop' those nervous jitters, none of which I advocate. Voice Dynamic offers no tricks. What I teach is the best means for controlling the fear; and, that begins with knowing your material. If that means staying up the night before to practice, so be it. Your adrenaline will definitely keep you awake -- you can 'crash' afterwards. Incidentally, practice means giving your presentation out loud using note cards that contain a couple of words to keep you on target.

Do not read your presentation. Your audience did not come to hear you read unless you are presenting your book or your poetry to a group at the library;

they came to hear you speak. If you plan to read it, why not Xerox it, pass it out, and then everyone can go back to work or home!

Do not memorize your presentation. The biggest problem with memorization is the possibility of forgetting. And that is fearsome! If actors on stage forget, they have the rest of the cast to improvise. When you are alone on the podium, you have nothing to fall back on if you are relying on memory. In addition, presentations that are memorized often sound rote or sing-song. I do, however, suggest memorizing the opening 3 - 4 lines of your talk, by far the most difficult part of any presentation. Making a mistake is common but when it happens in your opening, it will throw you. Remember, too, you are being judged the moment you open your mouth to speak. Your audience is not sitting there saying, "Let's give him/her 5 minutes to warm up." Your job is to get your audience to listen to you. To do so, you must first capture them and then keep them interested.

So far the discussion has been about presentation; however, if you are giving a speech in which you need the words to be exact, i.e. when the President gives The State of the Union Address, then, by all means, read it. But you must read it as if you were talking to people in your living room. If your eyes are glued to your manuscript, you will put your audience to sleep. Practice reading your speech out loud so that you are comfortable enough with your words that you can make eye contact with your audience. You should be looking more at them, then at your script.

Eye contact is another very important part of controlling nervousness. When you can look your audience in the eye, you will discover that you are actually having a conversation with them. They will not talk back to you, but their body language and facial expression is their response to your words. They will nod if they agree; they will smile or laugh if you say something funny; they will frown if they don't understand. If your audience has no facial expression, neither do you which means you are putting them to sleep.

In making eye contact, you will discover the smilers. These are the people who smile no matter what you say. They make you feel good; they build your

confidence. There are also sleepers. An occasional sleeper is normal; an entire audience asleep is not!

Whether you are standing at the lectern or on the podium or if you are just at the head of the conference table, move a little. Your physical movement relaxes your audience as well as you. That doesn't mean to pace. Use your body to speak just as if you were talking to people in your living room. Stepping aside from the lectern, moving to the other side of it, walking away from the lectern – all of this is good. Again, it will help you relax. And, again, if you stand perfectly still, with nary a muscle moving (aside from your tongue), your audience will sit perfectly still in the beginning and then as your talk proceeds they will start to fidget or fall asleep.

I had a student at the Ivey School of Business in Canada who disagreed with me in this regard. A debater in her undergraduate studies, she told me that she had read that one should stand perfectly still, which she did, moving only to change the overheads. How boring to watch this student with no facial expression, no body language, no change in the tone of her voice. I questioned her research; she lost that debate!

The best advice I can give in respect to your 'physical' delivery is to be natural. Speak to your audience, not at them.

Do not expect perfection. If you are an A-type personality and you are 'sweating' because it must be perfect, you just lost the battle! What is perfection in a live performance? When I read something out loud or give a presentation, there are literally hundreds of ways of delivering that material. There are so many variables that will influence that delivery. Is one way perfect; the other way not? Yes, you can add figures perfectly; you can type something perfectly; you can iron a shirt perfectly; but, who is to say what is perfect in public speaking? You can be excellent at it, but perfect? No. Forget perfection. Do your best. That is all that is asked of you. If you make a mistake, so be it. Listen to the professionals: they all make the occasional mistake. We, as the audience, are often not even aware of it. Lots of mistakes, on the other hand, mean that you didn't practice, that you don't know your material. There is no excuse for that!

The final and most important aspect in any form of public speaking is breathing. Oddly enough, breathing is the one thing we don't do at the lectern, when indeed it the most important thing we should do at the lectern.

Supported breathing is the first thing we do in ***The Voice Dynamic Approach*** and it is the secret, not a trick or a tip, but a physical activity that allows you to *control nervousness on the podium*, project without shouting, control your volume, improve the sound of your speaking voice, eliminate breathlessness in public speaking, be more dynamic in your delivery, and handle stress much more effectively.



www.voicedynamic.com

daniels@voicedynamic.com

1-888-627-2824



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