

Public Speaking a Skill Every Writer Should Embrace

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Some people would rather jerk out one of their teeth than speak before a live audience. Once upon a time, I felt this way, too.

Each time I was assigned to make a presentation, my knees knocked so loudly they drowned out my quavering voice. Making any kind of eye contact with the audience intimidated me so I gawked at the note cards shaking in my hand.

I did not conquer my fear of public speaking until I had worked for years at the Oak Ridge Operations Office, Department of Energy. Since my job required me to do presentations and workshops for a variety of audiences, it was imperative that I improve my speaking skills. Along with several friends, I joined Toastmasters International. Through weekly meetings I learned to present different types of speeches as I gained confidence and ability while experienced speakers mentored and evaluated me. It was an invaluable experience.

Of course, I was not a perfect speaker and often mixed up my words. At one Toastmaster's meeting, I ended my talk by asking who needed the latest copy of the "nudist membership list." Every hand flew up in the air. The group was disappointed when I corrected myself to say the "newest membership list."

Eventually, I grew more comfortable talking in front of an audience, even though I didn't always make sense. I learned to speak slowly and tell anecdotes every two to three minutes to keep people from falling asleep. I also learned to project myself with energy and to enjoy myself while giving the talk. As I grew more proficient at speaking, I began giving numerous workshops, briefings, and presentations. I learned to stay focused no matter what interruption occurred.

Nowadays I am quite comfortable speaking in front of most audiences because I realize the audience is composed of people just like me who occasionally wear their sweatpants backwards or their tee shirts inside out.

I still get nervous. I still make mistakes. Nevertheless, the panic and terror I experienced in my youth have faded. Learning to become a better speaker has helped me in marketing my books and also brought in some extra income from speaking engagements.

If you want to improve your own speaking skills, follow Lee Iacocca's advice: "Be yourself, stay natural, and dammit, smile once in a while!"