

# **Ways to Improve Your Presentation Skills**

## **1. Practice!**

Naturally, you'll want to rehearse your presentation multiple times. While it can be difficult for those with packed schedules to spare time to practice, it's essential if you want to deliver a rousing presentation. I'm famous around the office for staying up late the night before a big presentation, practicing over and over. If you really want to sound great, write out your speech rather than taking chances winging it – if you get nervous about speaking, a script is your best friend.

Try to practice where you'll be delivering your talk. Some acting strategists suggest rehearsing lines in various positions – standing up, sitting down, with arms open wide, on one leg, while sitting on the toilet, etc. (OK, that last one may be optional.) The more you mix up your position and setting, the more comfortable you'll feel with your speech. Do a practice, run for a friend or colleague, or try recording your presentation and playing it back to evaluate which areas need work. Listening to recordings of your past talks can clue you in to bad habits you may be unaware of, as well as inspiring the age-old question: "Is that what I really sound like?"

## **2. Transform Nervous Energy Into Enthusiasm.**

It may sound strange, but I'll often down an energy drink and blast hip-hop music in my earphones before presenting. Why? It pumps me up and helps me turn jitters into focused enthusiasm. Studies have shown that an enthusiastic speech can win out over an eloquent one, and since I'm not exactly the Winston Churchill of presenters, I make sure that I'm as enthusiastic and energetic as possible before going on stage. Of course, individuals respond differently to caffeine overload, so know your own body before guzzling those monster energy drinks.

## **3. Attend Other Presentations.**

If you're giving a talk as part of a conference, try to attend some of the earlier talks by other presenters to scope out their presentation skills and get some context. This shows respect for your fellow presenters while also giving you a chance to feel out the audience. What's the mood of the crowd? Are folks in the mood to laugh or are they a bit more stiff? Are the presentations more strategic or tactical in nature? Another speaker may also say something that you can play off of later in your own presentation.

## **4. Adjust to Your Surroundings.**

The more adjusted to your environment you are, the more comfortable you'll feel. Make sure to spend some in the room where you will be delivering your presentation. If possible, practice with the microphone and lighting, make sure you understand the seating and be aware of any distractions potentially posed by the venue (e.g., a noisy road outside).

## **5. Meet and Greet.**

Do your best to chat with people before your presentation. Talking with audiences makes you seem more likeable and approachable. Ask event attendees questions and take in their responses. They may even give you some inspiration to weave into your talk.

## **6. Remember That Most Audiences Are Sympathetic.**

One of the hardest fears to shake when speaking in public is that the audience is secretly waiting to laugh at your missteps or mistakes. Fortunately, this isn't the case in the vast majority of presentations.

The audience wants to see you succeed. In fact, many people have a fear of public speaking, so even if the audience seems indifferent, the chances are pretty good that most people listening to your presentation can relate to how nerve-racking it can be. If you start to feel nervous, remind yourself that the audience gets it, and actually wants to see you nail it.

## **7. Take Deep Breaths.**

The go-to advice for jitters has truth to it. When we're nervous, our muscles tighten--you may even catch yourself holding your breath. Instead, go ahead and take those deep breaths to get oxygen to your brain and relax your body.

## **9. Start Strongly**

**The beginning of your presentation is crucial. You need to grab your audience's attention and hold it.** They will give you a few minutes' grace in which to entertain them, before they start to switch off if you're dull. So don't waste that on explaining who you are. Start by entertaining them.

## **10. Smile.**

Smiling increases endorphins, replacing anxiety with calm and making you feel good about your presentation. Smiling also exhibits confidence and enthusiasm to the crowd. And this tip works even if you're doing a webinar and people can't see you.

## **11. Work on Your Pauses.**

When you're nervous, it's easy to speed up your presentation and end up talking too fast, which in turn causes you to run out of breath, get more nervous, and panic!

Don't be afraid to slow down and use pauses in your speech. Pausing can be used to emphasize certain points and to help your talk feel more conversational. If you feel yourself losing control of your pacing, just take a nice pause and keep cool.

## **12. Use your Body Too**

**It has been estimated that more than three quarters of communication is non-verbal.**

That means that as well as your tone of voice, your body language is crucial to getting your message across. Make sure that you are giving the right messages: body language to avoid includes crossed arms, hands held behind your back or in your pockets, and pacing the stage.

Make your gestures open and confident, and move naturally around the stage, and among the audience too, if possible.

## **13. Don't Try to Cover Too Much Material.**

Yes, your presentations should be full of useful, insightful, and actionable information, but that doesn't mean you should try to condense a vast and complex topic into a 10-minute presentation.

## **14. Actively Engage the Audience.**

People love to talk and make their opinions heard, but the nature of presentations can often seem like a one-sided proposition. It doesn't have to be, though.

Asking the audience what they think, inviting questions, and other means of welcoming audience participation can boost engagement and make attendees feel like a part of a conversation. It also makes you, the presenter, seem much more relatable. Consider starting with a poll or survey. Don't be put off by unexpected questions – instead, see them as an opportunity to give your audience what they want.

## **15. Be Entertaining.**

Even if your presentation is packed with useful information, if your delivery bombs, so will your session.

I find that including some jokes and light-hearted slides is a great way to help the audience (and myself) feel more comfortable, especially when presenting them with a great deal of information. However, it's important to maintain a balance – after all, you're not performing a stand-up routine, and people didn't come to your presentation with the sole intention of being entertained. That said, don't be afraid to inject a little humour into your talk. If you're not sure about whether a presentation is “too much,” run through it for a couple of friends and ask them to tell it to you straight.

## **16. Drink Water.**

Dry mouth is a common result of anxiety. Prevent cottonmouth blues by staying hydrated and drinking plenty of water before your talk (just don't forget to hit the bathroom before starting). Keep a bottle of water at arm's reach while presenting in case you get dry mouth while chatting up a storm. It also provides a solid object to hurl at potential hecklers.

## **Your presentation needs to be built around what your audience is going to get out of the presentation.**

As you prepare the presentation, you always need to bear in mind what the audience needs and wants to know, not what you can tell them.

While you're giving the presentation, you also need to remain focused on your audience's response, and react to that.

You need to make it easy for your audience to understand and respond.

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