

Guidelines for Public Speaking

Being able to speak in front of both small and large groups is a skill you will use throughout school and quite possibly in your career. Sometimes your ability to speak well makes the difference between being admitted to the college of your choice or not or being offered a job or not. Once you are working, opportunities for advancement and leadership will come more readily to people who are well spoken. For some people, the ability to speak well comes naturally; others must work to be effective and eloquent speakers. The best way to become a polished speaker is to practice, practice, and practice some more.

Tips:

- While what you say is important, how you say it is equally important.
- Vocally, you need to be aware of your volume, speed, enunciation, and use of pause words or silence fillers.
 - The people in the back of the room need to be able to hear you as clearly as those in the front of the room. If you have difficulty with volume you may want to use a microphone. When speaking into a microphone speak at a normal volume. Let the microphone do the amplifying. If you must rely on yourself for amplification, use your diaphragm to push the air into your lungs. Do not speak from your throat or you risk damaging your vocal cords.
 - If you feel as if you are speaking too slowly, you are probably speaking at a good pace. The audience hears you after you hear yourself. It takes time for the sound to travel to the back of the audience and for them to process what you have said therefore you should not speak too quickly. Be aware that nervousness sometimes causes people to speak more quickly therefore be conscious of speaking at an appropriate pace.
 - Enunciation refers to how clearly you speak each word and how well you separate words. It is not “I’m gonna” it is “I am going to.” It is not “I hafta” it is “I have to.”
 - Pause words or silence fillers are words like “um,” “like,” “well,” and others. These words are usually used unconsciously by speakers who do not like silence. Silence is not necessarily bad, and the filler words will make you sound unprofessional. The best way to avoid these fillers is to be prepared by knowing what you will say and to practice.
- It is important to connect with the audience by making eye contact. You should make eye contact with the entire audience, not just the front or back of the room. Some public speaking coaches recommend looking at the back wall if you are too nervous to look at the audience members, but this is not really good advice because the audience will be able to tell you are not looking at them. It is also important to look at the audience as often as possible, this means you will need to know your material well so you do not need to read from a piece of paper or spend time searching your note cards for your next point.

- Physically, it is acceptable to move while you are speaking as long as the movement is purposeful rather than distracting. If you are using a podium, do not do the podium dance or lean on the podium. Also avoid “sniggling” and the “teen lean.” Try to keep gesturing with your hands to a minimum unless you feel a specific gesture enhances your verbal point. It is best to plan these gestures because unplanned gesturing can lead to unnecessary hand waving and flailing.
- For a professional presentation it is best to wear professional looking clothing that fits well and is comfortable. It is unprofessional to be adjusting your skirt, jacket, or tie while speaking. If you are uncomfortably fidgeting with your clothing the audience will feel your discomfort. Wear your hair out of your face so you can be seen by the audience and so you will not need to brush your hair out of your way or make distracting movements with your head.
- Your speech should have a clear introduction, body, and conclusion just as an essay does.
- In order to practice, use a mirror so you can see what you are doing as you speak. Also practice in front of an audience of people who like you, but who will be honest about where you need to make improvements. Also consider videotaping a practice session so you can see and hear yourself.
- If you are using a visual aid, make sure it is large and clear enough for the entire audience to see. Make sure it is professional looking. Also be sure to use the visual, do not just let it languish at the front of the room beside you without ever making reference to it.
- If you make a mistake, simply say “Excuse me.” and move on with your presentation. Do not spend time on elaborate apologies, giggling, or muttering. These are unproductive and will only further delay your speak and detract from your message.
- Most importantly, relax. No one has ever died from giving a speech. Most audiences want you to do well and will therefore not be highly critical if you make minor mistakes.