Don’t Freak Out – SPEAK OUT
Public speaking with confidence

By Ruth Bonetti
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Foreword

The teacher said: “Now I want someone to come out the front and address the class about...” Do you remember freezing and praying “Don't pick me...don't pick me”. Funny how that fear of public speaking has been with us for so long!

“Fear no more,” I say. For Ruth Bonetti has written another book to help overcome those butterflies, fears and knots in your stomach.

The symptoms of stage fright are similar whatever the platform or audience. Ruth Bonetti learned to conquer them in her long international career as a professional musician. She has applied her wealth of presentation experience to her speaking and writing.

I commend Don’t Freak Out – Speak Out to both amateur and professional speakers. It’s a great book.

Max Hitchins
World President and Chair, World Federation of Professional Speakers 2000-2001
President, National Speakers Association of Australia 1995-1996

Some things to understand about stage fright

• It is no respecter of persons.
• Any-one can experience it at some time in their career.
• There are no have-s and have-nots.
• It’s not a personality trait or mental disorder, but a response to a pressured situation.
• The degree of anxiety is not related to the level of the person’s ability – or lack of it.
• Simple techniques will enable you to channel the adrenalin away from those jitters, into energy, so you will shine on the platform.
Introduction

It’s normal to be nervous about speaking in public. In fact, fear of public speaking tops the list of the most common anxieties – including flying, dying and bankruptcy.

If top performers like Nicole Kidman, Dustin Hoffman, and Peter Sellers admitted fear of live performance, why should we expect to be immune from freaking out when called upon to take centre stage? Even Winston Churchill worried before his speeches. Martin Luther King was sleepless the night before his “I have a dream” oration.

We can experience nerves in different ways and need a smorgasbord of solutions to fortify ourselves for the varied symptoms and situations we encounter.

This book takes a holistic approach, offering practical advice to arm the presenter with ways to combat the wide range of challenges we face – to help us help ourselves.

It will show you how you can turn the fears and worries that beset the novice speaker into positives that can free your imagination and empower your voice. You will learn that the panic that overwhelms us is, in fact, raw energy.

This book does not promise you will never feel nervous again. A little anxiety, anyway, will trigger your adrenaline to release that vitality, that charge of potent electricity, so necessary for communication on-stage. Rather, you will learn how to channel the adrenaline rush and turn it to positive use, and how to manage and alleviate the unsettling symptoms that make public speakers tremble.

Then you can anticipate, utilise, and even welcome the adrenaline rush as a source of power to lift your presentation from the merely mundane to an exciting and enriching performance.

You will take centre-stage with confidence and enjoy the art of communication.
Chapter 1

You are not alone

Fear of public speaking is as old as Moses and as topical as Jerry Seinfeld. It is a fear that tops dread of flying, dying and bankruptcy. As Seinfeld says, “At a funeral you're better off in the coffin than giving the eulogy”.

With any public speaking it is normal to be nervous sometimes. For some speakers, this is part of the thrill as the adrenaline starts pumping. For others, it’s all a fog, and the mind goes blank, as blank as a crashed computer screen.

Maybe you can relate to all this? You are on stage, totally exposed to row upon row of uplifted, squinting eyes of the audience who are staring ... waiting ... expecting ...

You wrench dry lips apart, force out that quavery first word. It stumbles, stutters and your frail confidence shrivels up like something nasty in the bottom of the refrigerator. Your speech skids downhill. Your thoughts tangle like spaghetti.

This book will help you learn ways to rise to the challenge of public speaking instead of inwardly dying a thousand deaths through your nerves.

Perhaps you think you are alone in your misery. Most sufferers of stage fright nurse their nerves as an embarrassing dark secret, imagining they alone experience them. They are afraid to admit their fears in case they appear incompetent.

The first thing to understand is that it is okay to be nervous and you’re normal if at some time you tremble while speaking in public.

Most presenters suffered nerves at some time or other. Many top speakers have felt paralysed at times. It is often the highly creative, thoughtful performers who suffer the most while matter of fact people may appear to cope better. The very depth, imagination and sensitivity that enrich exceptional speeches often take a toll on those who conceive them.

Sadly, many with significant speaking ability never realise their full potential because of nerves. Their vivid imaginations, capable of drawing out the sublime, can also predict numerous mishaps and stumbles, turning the minutes, hours, days, or weeks before a presentation into miseries of imaginings – many unlikely to eventuate.

To all of you who suffer from such agonies, take heart. You suffer because you are not a potato. Does a potato possess your abilities, your sensitivity, or richness of imagination? Do you want to present like a potato? Do people pay to hear potatoes speak? Your imagination makes your life harder but, when you have conquered your fears, it will set you apart.
**Such fears are as old as Moses**

Perhaps the first recorded instance of “presentation anxiety” occurred around 1300BC when God commissioned Moses to urge Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves. “Why me?” pleaded Moses to God. “I am a nobody. I am not eloquent. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

Poor Moses. As well as having to argue with God and Pharaoh – and convince the Hebrews they should follow him to the Promised Land – he had to overcome his insecurity as a speaker.

To this day, the same insecurities have beset many famous people until they conquered their nerves.

Actor Paul Newman: “After 10 months on Broadway, it got so that going to the theatre each night was like facing the dentist.”

Sir Winston Churchill was so nervous of a fledgling speech in the House of Commons that he fainted – yet he went on to become one of history’s most respected orators.

Actor Sir Laurence Olivier described his temporary phase of panic as “a catatonic state of gut-rotting terror”. Before live performances, Michael Douglas used to vomit off-stage. Jane Fonda at one stage came out in boils.

Actor-politician Glenda Jackson, winner of two Oscar awards, spoke of dreading the butterflies that invaded her stomach from late afternoon on performance days. By early evening, her palms sweated and fingers shook as she sat down to do her makeup. Before curtain-up, with heart palpitations, she feared she simply couldn’t go on.

All these people – and they are only a few examples – have suffered, and conquered, the fear of going before the public. We commonly call it stage fright.

How did these troupers conquer their stage fright? They just kept on facing their audiences.

**Experience breeds confidence**

It is far harder to stoke yourself up for occasional presentations than to face regular ones that become routine.

Forcing yourself into frequent performance opportunities develops confidence born from experience, and the knowledge that “Hey, I survived! I got to the end! I did it!”

So how did Moses fare? God convinced him he could do it. Moses fronted Pharaoh, at first politely (and nervously) with a respectful “please let my people go”. But with each meeting he grew more bold and confident until he thundered that God’s wrath would descend on Egypt.

Moses’ story reveals an important truth – the more we speak in public, the less our fears intrude and the more we grow in confidence.
If Moses, the self-confessed “nobody”, could find the strength to surmount his fears, so too can we.

**The No.1 phobia**
The Book of Lists reported that fear of public speaking is the number one phobia in the United States, ahead of flying, dying and bankruptcy.

A Canadian study (reported in Psychology Today, May-June 1996) found a third of Winnipeg residents reported excessive anxiety when speaking to audiences.

Their major concerns were:

80% – trembles and shakes.
74% – fear of their mind going blank.
64% – fear of doing something embarrassing.
63% – fear of being unable to continue.
59% – fear of saying foolish things, or not making sense.

http://www.psychologytoday.com/htdocs/prod/PTOArticle/PTO

**Go with the thrill of the moment!**
Many speakers and performers mistake normal tension for nerves. Heightened senses and feelings are natural when on stage. If we don’t feel this excitement, to some extent, we should not be there!

Without this adrenaline rush, a presentation is likely to be matter-of-fact and boring. We simply need to learn how to turn it to positive use.

Many less experienced speakers are alarmed by the tension that floods their bodies. They can reassure themselves that there are simple techniques to channel this into energy which enables powerful delivery – so they will shine on the platform!

Compare this with electricity. It has its hazards if mistreated. Yet, if we harness it, we have great resources of power available.

Similarly, if we fight the waves when surfing, we will struggle, swallow salt-water, and probably be roughly dumped. But ... wait for the next wave, watch it build up, catch it on the crest, go with it, and allow its power to sweep us along. Frightening? No. Exhilarating!
Chapter 2

Taming the tremors

The symptoms that afflict all performers, particularly public speakers, we will call the “Top Ten Tremors”. The anxiety which has been building up as the time of a public speech approaches is hit by the adrenaline rush in the moments before you take centre stage, causing you to feel like you are losing the plot.

Tick the “tremors” which you’ve experienced:

1. Wobbly knees, fidgets, shaky hands
2. Brain fog, memory lapses
3. Gasping for breath; short of air
4. Shrill, nasal, rushed or husky voice
5. Queasy stomach
6. Excessive perspiration and flushed face
7. Dry mouth, tight or ticklish throat
8. Shoulder, neck or back ache
9. Panic attacks
10. Frequent visits to the bathroom

How did you rate? If you ticked:
0-1 – Impressive! (Are you real? Or in denial?)
2-5 – You’re normal.
6-10 – You’re still normal, and there are solutions.

The root of the problem

“I’m flushed, sweaty, and I can’t hear myself think – or speak!” How often is this your feeling when you have to stand up and speak?

Many novice public speakers struggle with shakes, dry mouth, hoarse or ticklish throat, blocked brain. Their voices, delivered with cotton-wool tongues, sound wooden, dull monotones. Or they burst out with over-loud braying, giggling at their own jokes that fall inert into a leaden silence. They gabble, stammer. Sentences are littered with “ums” and “ers”. They are tongue-tied, confused and inhibited. What they planned to be an expressive flow is little more than a sludgy quagmire.

Even before their event tension escalates. In sleepless nights, fitful restless dozing merely reveals worst fears in nightmares. By day, they are overtired, irritable, can’t concentrate. In the countdown to the presentation, they haunt the bathroom with a
queasy stomach or diarrhea. On the launch pad backstage, they fidget, pace and shake.

Why do we suffer so? The answer is that all these symptoms are part of the fight or flight reaction to fear. And they’re as old as primitive man.

Imagine Fred Flintstone toasting a chunk of mammoth over the fire in his cave. He sees glinting through the flames the eyes of a sabre-toothed tiger. In a matter of seconds more than a thousand reactions charge through his body. His heart races, pumping blood to his vital organs and infusing strength to his arms and legs. This gives him incredible power to either grab his children and sprint, or to attack the tiger with his bare hands and fling it into the fire. This is the adrenaline rush that mobilises us for action and survival.

These powerful physiological changes are designed to protect us – from our own sabre-toothed tigers there in the front row – just as they have preserved the human race for millennia. Unfortunately such reactions overwhelm the unprepared. Then they seem to work against us instead of for us.

At the mere thought of a threatening situation, our body prepares to fight or flee, so that:

- **The body’s heart rate, and hence blood pressure, increases.**
- **Blood pumps urgently towards our brain, to maximise clarity of thought, and towards our muscles, to steel them for action.**
- **Simultaneously blood is pumped away from the digestive system, to conserve energy.**

**How does this translate for the public speaker?**

As our hearts beat faster, blood rushes to the brain and so it is not surprising that our face becomes flushed. But why do we simultaneously feel hot and yet have sweaty, clammy hands? Because the body in its wisdom has built in an air-conditioning system to cool down contracted muscles and protect delicate organs from the heat of increased blood flow!

Often our pounding heart seems so loud that we fear that the audience won’t hear our presentation.

Michael Caine said: “When you’re really nervous your heart beats so loud that it’s the only thing you hear. I was actually deaf with nerves. I could see the other actor’s lips moving and every time she stopped talking, I just said my lines.”

Meryl Streep, accepting an Oscar for Kramer vs Kramer: “I can’t hear what I’m saying because my heart’s beating so loud.”
As our innate sense of tempo is measured relative to our heart beat, it is not surprising that we tend to rush when under pressure. This increased heart rate and brain activity – things seem to happen quickly around us – combine to create confusion and overwhelm us. “I just can’t think straight,” we say.

Our body reacts to protect us from our particular tigers; we instinctively contract and tighten our shoulders into a hunched posture. Our neck muscles pull our head down and shoulders up. Our breathing becomes shallow and gaspy.

These adrenaline reactions are normal, in-built instincts geared to keep the human race intact by maximising strength and focus. They are a healthy response as long as you do not remain in a state of tension for prolonged periods or become overwhelmed by an excess of adrenaline.

The public speaker is likely to experience some, perhaps even many, of these natural fight or flight reactions. The secret of success on your feet is to anticipate these reactions, understand them and turn them to your advantage.

**Fear**

“I think I spent so much of the earlier part of my career afraid,” said actor Michelle Pfeiffer.

Fear can be a useful emotion when it causes us to protect ourselves, to take care, to avert catastrophe or problems. Normal fear, in reasonable proportions, is useful as it motivates us to take precautions and even lifesaving actions. If we fear an armed robber we can take sensible precautions like double-locked doors and burglar alarms to ensure better sleep.

Thus, a manageable degree of fear is valid, even helpful. Extremes manifest as panic (a sudden surge of acute fear) and irrational anxiety, when we act as if we were under great stress although there may be no apparent cause. Discuss these with a mentor, or a professional counsellor who may help with relaxation techniques, biofeedback, meditation, behavioural therapy, hypnosis and other techniques.

**Anxiety**

On the other hand, anxiety is a vague, nebulous, all-pervading malaise, in which we feel continually threatened but with no definite cause. We are bedevilled by lurking worries, which have no names, or specific sources.

These may build into a paralysing state of “high anxiety.” If you feel an overwhelming sense of panic or worry but there is no specific fear causing it, seek help from some form of counselling.

A most important initial step is to face, confront and admit our fears. Free flow of expression is blocked if we do not do so.
Many hope to jolly themselves out of their morass, to think away or throw off their fears: like the ostrich, they bury their heads in the sand until problems seem to just go away. Of course this is hardly a comfortable presentation posture, besides limiting projection.

**Keep your sense of humour**

There is real power in a smile or a laugh.

When paralysed with nerves, we need to keep a sense of humour. Buddha said: “Nothing is left to you at this moment but to have a good laugh.”

Ancient Chinese medical texts vouch for the healing effects of laughter. A physician in Classical Rome noted that women who were “melancholy” were more likely to have “tumours in the breast”.

“A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones,” says the Book of Proverbs.

Being gloomy is hard work! We use 13 muscles to smile, but 72 to frown.

Laughter is a powerful medicine. When Norman Cousins, author of Anatomy of an Illness, was diagnosed with severe spinal arthritis, doctors gave him a one in 500 chance to live. He noticed that the pain lessened when he laughed. Along with other therapies, such as intravenous doses of vitamin C, he watched comedy videos, thought positively – and laughed his way to health.

Some websites:

http://www.potentialsmedia.com/NormanCousins.html
http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/cousins.html
http://www.indiadiets.com/Alternative%20Healing/Laughter.htm

Smiling is even a brain-tonic! For when we smile, our facial muscles contract, sending increased blood to our brain. With increased blood flow, the brain receives an oxygen bath similar to that from a short exercise workout. Further ideas are at:

http://www.epub.org.br/cm/n13/mente/laughter/page3.html

Enjoy your gift, your opportunity to present, and your audience will respond positively.
Chapter 3

Brain, breath, body

Most presenters have at some time encountered that nagging little voice that lurks in vulnerable and pressured minds. Like a doom and gloom revivalist preacher it predicts disasters out of minor hitches. It speaks with such conviction that who are we to dispute it? Dispute it we must. Such thoughts sabotage our success.

The American anthropologist Margaret Mead estimated that the average human utilises only four percent of his or her potential. Recent studies put this as low as one percent. How much of that wastage is because our brains are clogged up with negative thoughts and worries! Truly, as Buddha said: “We are what we think. With our thoughts we make our world.”

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said: “What you expect, that you shall find.” The Roman philosopher Marcus Aurelius said: “Our life is what our thoughts make it.” The Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote: “Men feel disturbed, not by things, but by the views they take of them.” In more modern times, the noted American motivational lecturer Norman Vincent Peale said: “You are not what you think you are, but what you think, you are.” Henry Ford summed it up as “Whether you believe you can or can not – you are right.”

Ironically, many battle against a crippling fear of failure only to discover that success is equally challenging for they must live up to an even higher yardstick. Truly:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.*
*Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.*
*It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.*

(Attributed to Nelson Mandela, but actually written by Marianne Williamson.)

Dustin Hoffman’s biographer noted that, once successful, he seemed to need his “shrink sessions” more than ever. He had first gone to his psychotherapist because he felt he was a failure and now he needed help to cope with success.

To try to understand the problems we face with public speaking, let us consider the three Bs – Brain, Breath, Body.

**The Brain – where it all begins**

Solutions for public speaking anxiety begin at the top – with our brain. When we feel threatened in an exposed situation, such as standing up to speak to a crowd, the primitive section of the brain takes over. This resembles that of reptiles, to whom survival, a speedy escape from danger, strength, and the quick strike are basic. As our body revs up to meet challenges this “reptilian” brain-stem response speeds our heartbeat and contracts all the muscles
of our body in preparation for the fight or flight, affecting our breathing, equilibrium and muscle tone.

At the same time, the more sophisticated part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, with which we reason, think and speak, seems to shut down, overwhelmed by the reptilian brain. As blood is directed away from the brain to the lungs, arms and legs, we say: “I just couldn’t think straight”.

We need to:

• Slow down internally, deliberately curbing the primitive responses.
• Systematically condition ourselves to deal with such pressures.
  • Breathe in and out slowly.
  • Place a hand on our forehead for a few moments. This eases butterflies in the stomach, un-blocks “brain-fog”, releases the memory box and curbs excess fight or flight impulses so a new response to the situation can be learned.

Probably instinctively you have used this technique, but you didn’t realise its potential. Remember when someone fired a question, you put your hand to your forehead, saying “I know this… it’s on the tip of my tongue…”

What happens is that blood flows to the frontal lobes behind the forehead, where rational thought occurs. These are the emotional stress-release neurovascular balance points for the “stomach meridian” of ancient Chinese medicine, named Positive Points in Brain Gym (see below), a form of Applied Kinesiology. Both Western and Eastern medical authorities recognise the need to keep the electromagnetic circuits of the body (described as meridians in the Chinese system of acupuncture) flowing freely.

http://www.icak.com/
http://www.kinesiology.net/

The power of the whole brain

It is normal that people favour one brain hemisphere at the expense of the other. Presentation stress increases this natural inclination. Those who are predominantly “left-brained” may become too obsessed with fine detail and analysis, losing the “big-picture”. Or “right-brained” speakers may be flighty, easily distracted, wrestling to contain an unfocused “butterfly brain.” They need a proportion of left-brain sequence and analysis.

Much of the preparation of a speech focuses on left-brain information and facts. It is important to balance this with the realisation that audiences’ brains tend to focus on right-brained aspects like our body language, rhythm of speech, vocal timbre and imagery. We are more effective speakers if we can balance our logic and analysis with colourful imagery and expression.
Educational Kinesiology and Brain Gym

The term Kinesiology derived from the Greek root kinesis, meaning motion. Also known as Edu.K., Educational Kinesiology is a personal development program of human body movement, pioneered by educator and author Paul E. Dennison and his wife, Gail Dennison. Their program, Brain-Gym, develops brain-body wholeness with simple movements like cross-crawl (i.e. crossing over the mid-line between brain hemispheres) which enable people to access parts of the brain previously inaccessible to them. [http://www.braingym.org/](http://www.braingym.org/)

Originally conceived to correct learning disabilities, this whole-brain learning is used by people from many fields (professionals, students, athletes, dancers, musicians, artists) to draw out their hidden potential and to make it readily available.

Some over-diligent people, by trying too hard, “switch off” the brain-integration mechanisms necessary for complete learning. Thus, information that is received by the back brain as an “impress” is inaccessible to the front brain as an “express”. This inability to express what is learned or to stay “centered” locks us into a failure syndrome, resulting in irrational fear, flight-or-fight reactions and frozen emotions.

Brain-Gym exercises can make radical improvements in the learning stages of preparation. Various exercises improve facility of a wide range of everyday experiences, relating to effective functioning of both sides of the brain. Even a simple action like the steering of fingertips balances and connects the two brain hemispheres. Many exercises are directly relevant to projection, resonance and focus in stage performance.

The “PACE” Sequence

Of these, the “PACE” (Positive-Active-Centered-Energy) four-step warm-up sequence helps poise and concentration both in practice phases and presentation.

1. The first step is simply to drink water. As a marathon runner, Dr Dennison learned the many benefits of water. A dehydrated performer’s responses become sluggish as the electrical and chemical actions of the brain and the central nervous system are conducted by fluid. This is especially relevant for the speaker whose voice and system need hydration of at least eight glasses of water per day – even more in periods of stress.

2. Massage the soft tissue under your collarbone, while holding the navel with the other hand. Among other benefits, this activates the brain to send messages from the its right hemisphere to the left side of the body and vice versa, facilitates the flow of electromagnetic energy and increases the blood supply to the brain.
It frees the public speaker’s ability to cross the visual midline and thus keep his or her place while reading and to blend consonants.

3. Cross-Crawl, or cross-lateral walking in place, involves alternately moving one arm and the opposite leg and then the other arm and leg, such as when we march. This accesses both brain hemispheres simultaneously and is an ideal warm-up to improve co-ordination, breathing and stamina, to enhance hearing and vision.

4. The final steps, called Hook-Ups, connect the electrical circuits in the body. First cross one ankle over the other, whichever feels most comfortable. The hands are then crossed, clasped and inverted. A simple and unobtrusive method to do this back-stage is to cross one arm over the other, opposite to the legs. If your left ankle crosses the right, then the right arm should cross the left. Rest your tongue behind your upper teeth while inhaling slowly. Continue breathing out and in for a few minutes.

This exercise decreases adrenaline production by bringing attention to the motor cortex of both frontal hemispheres, away from the brain stem’s survival mode. The mind and body become more flexible as energy circulates through areas blocked by tension. The figure of eight pattern of connected arms and legs follows the energy flow lines of the body.

The PACE exercises are invaluable for emotional centering, for balance and co-ordination, deeper respiration and for releasing emotional stress, especially before meeting a challenge such as a presentation.

Kinesiology has a holistic approach that deals with the physical, chemical, emotional and spiritual aspects of a person’s neurological health. It discovers areas of nerve interference and offers solutions and appropriate treatment. It can clear focus and become a form of preventive medicine, leading to better health by improving the immune system and increasing the ability to focus and to cope with stress.

Many presenters are blocked by suppressed memories from childhood. Perhaps a teacher or parent made some unthinkingly cruel comment like “Sit down and be quiet. You haven’t anything worthwhile to say!” American therapist Stanley Keleman says the adult speaker may unconsciously carry deep inhibitions as a result of such stored “insults” or physical and psychological trauma. The muscles remain “on guard,” protecting from issues which reverberate to this “memory in the muscles,” thus restricting free action of the voice and body.

http://www.centerpress.com/
http://www.formative-psychology-eu.com/books.htm

Indian-American doctor and pioneer of alternative medicine Depak Chopra has extended this concept to cellular memories.
Release blockages through Neuro-Emotional Technique

Perceived “insults” and memories may be released through Applied Kinesiology’s Neuro-Emotional Technique sessions. Health practitioners such as chiropractors and osteopaths use muscle testing to discover where areas of nerve interference occur and how it creates disorganisation within the nervous system. Simple treatment can bring immediate results. (This author can attest that such treatment broke a long-standing pattern of “switching off” caused by a combination of negative thought patterns, food intolerances and hurtful memories such as nicknames and childhood taunts.)

http://www.netmindbody.com/index_2.html

Brain Gym and Applied Kinesiology are holistic and “whole-istic”, a powerful means to free the psyche and allow the voice to speak out with confidence.

Breath, the basis of life

Just as our breath is the very basis of life, so it is the lifeblood of all performance. Significantly, the word “inspiration” relates to breathing, our very life force. For without breath, what are we? Breathing is central to all performance. It is essential that speakers are aware of and draw on this vital resource. Amplifiers may pick up sounds of shallow breaths in audible, irritating gasps. Deeper breathing is subtle, fuller and provides resonance for the voice.

Air is still free! Politicians have not managed to impose a tax on it. We can use as much as we need, even waste it, without concern or guilt. It is when we hoard our air or forget to release it, that we panic, fearing that we don’t have enough, and so we often do run short. A major problem when we are under pressure is that we forget to take time for a good deep breath between sections. Just as a car cannot run without petrol, so a speaker cannot produce rich vocal resonance without adequate air.

Yet it is possible to create further tension by trying too hard with breathing. Having overheard my decades of teaching clarinet students how to breathe correctly, my three sons asked me to check their own breathing. Because they tried too hard, each one in turn demonstrated exactly how not to breathe. When we are relaxed, breathing is a natural, easy process. However it is precisely because we are not relaxed on-stage that we need to explore correct technique.

How Tension Inhibits Breathing

When we feel threatened, the contraction of our muscles inhibits natural breath flow. As part of the fight or flight reaction, when pressured we all tend to hold our breath. This tenses our bodies ready for action. Performers who forget to release their air
and inhale find themselves trapped in ramrod, frozen postures. Prolonged breath holding causes insufficient oxygen flow to the brain and thus a lower energy level.

**As easy as breathing**

Breathing is an involuntary action that has functioned without conscious direction since our birth. Watch a pet or baby sleeping. See the movement as their ribs expand, their chest rises and falls as they breathe. We are astounded that a baby’s small lungs can produce such an incredible volume of sound. This is because infants breathe naturally and easily and use their whole chest, diaphragm and lung mechanism. Speakers should also use this capacity.

For the speaker, the major vocal issue is not lack of air, or the necessity to inhale enormous amounts. The amount of air required to project to the back of an auditorium is relatively similar to that of normal speech. What is needed to reach the back of the room is more sound energy, rather than just air volume. In fact, taking a huge intake may cause breathy tone, because the air will want to rush out. Or, when tense, we may inhale air but forget to use it!

The root of the problem for speakers is tension, specifically that of the vocal folds. Our “true” vocal folds and lungs are protected from food ingested the wrong way, or from an insect straying inside, by the involuntary closing of the “false” vocal folds. When the fight or flight reaction causes all our muscles to tense, inevitably our voice is choked because the false vocal folds clamp shut. Notice your natural reaction to close your false vocal folds if you clench your fist hard and grunt.

Open these false vocal folds with a Santa-type “ho ho ho” or by a big belly laugh or a sob. (It is not surprising that operatic singers produce round, resonant tones as they constantly express such extremes of emotions!)

On-stage, we can discreetly replicate this action silently to release false vocal folds locked by fear. This is all the more reason to include healthy humour and laughter in your speeches. This retraction of the folds produces a richer vocal timbre and allows projection over a wide range without strain.

The speaker’s voice is a meld of three main components – the lungs (the powerhouse), the voice box (the source of sound) and the throat-mouth-nose vocal cavities (the resonating chamber). An easy flow of air through this pipeline from deep in the lungs produces a smooth stream of well-modulated words without tensing the throat and jaw.

**Deep, diaphragm breathing**

Singers talk of drawing up the air from their feet to remind themselves to breathe deeply using the diaphragm, that network of largely involuntary muscles which divides your lungs from your
stomach. The following natural activities show how we already use our diaphragms in everyday living. Locate your diaphragm by placing your hand just above your navel. Pretend to smell a beautiful rose or lavender, fake a cough, yawn or sneeze, or call out “Boo!” and you will feel your diaphragm at work. Or light a candle, blow steadily so that the flame tilts, then blow it out.

Inhale, sounding “eeek” ... then compare another inhalation saying “ohhh” as in “hot.” Notice that the former felt shallow, tight, unsatisfying and the latter quick, deep, easy, lasted longer? By creating a dome shape openness inside your mouth this is also aiding retraction of the false vocal folds.

Notice your breathing patterns while lying relaxed, perhaps drowsing in bed before sleeping. Lie comfortably, with the knees bent, a hand above your navel. Empty your lungs with a gusty, audible sigh. Let it go freely – don’t force it. Release all that stale air which has sunk to the bottom of your lungs. Give an extra huff ... imagine the tide drawing out to sea. Wait a few seconds until you really need a breath and then inhalation will flow naturally, instinctively. It will be deep and satisfying ... and correct.

Having emptied the lungs first, you will breathe deeply, correctly, without any conscious thought. The lower chest area will lift, then the upper chest – this latter is not a “no-no”, after all, we do have lungs enclosed in there! As you breathe out, notice that your lower chest subsides first, then the upper chest.

Another way to identify correct action is to place your hands over your lower ribs at the side. Gently ease out the air. Feel the ribs and lower back muscles expand as you inhale. Or make a diamond shape by meeting both index fingers and long fingers placed just above your navel. As you breathe in your fingers should separate, then meet as you exhale.

**Build lung power**

Regular exercise, such as swimming, aerobics or walking, is a pleasant way to develop lung capacity. For those who prefer breathing “exercises” and especially to relax before a presentation:

Lie down and relax. Slowly exhale fully, wait, then inhale and hold. Breathe out ... give a huff at the end ... wait ... breathe in ...hold a few seconds ... inhale ... repeat. You will find that your capacity and consequent counting increases over a period of time.

Many are surprised at their increased capacity when they discover their “back-expansion breathing”. As our chests accommodate our heart and other organs, our lungs stretch wider at the back. To locate this extra resource, sit, bend forward, head towards your knees, fingertips at either side of your backbone. Feel the expansion as you inhale.

In delivery, some speakers experience a pent-up feeling of “not having enough air”. They desperately snatch frequent shallow
breaths, hyperventilate and become clogged up with too much air which they don’t take time to exhale. This can cause a light-headed sensation and fainting – as well as airy, breathy vocal tone.

Although we tend to breathe in through the mouth when needing quick, full intake, it is preferable to inhale through the nose where possible. This has the added advantage that less noise is picked up by amplification. Slow inhalations are more soothing, whereas constant quick gasps may add to our feeling of unease. The reality is that in a presentation we hesitate to take time to exhale, or for a deep, slow breath. Yet, listeners do appreciate “catch-up” time to absorb your content. You can gain time for this by asking a question and using the answers to breathe, or by walking across the platform.

**On the platform**

Experienced speakers pace themselves and ensure that they always inhale adequate breath. It does help to plan this by speaking through your material well before the event, choosing breathing places between sections. Mark these with a symbol such as // or pencil “OUT” for exhalations between sections. Notice your natural pacing, rhythms and patterns in everyday situations; how long you pause between sentences; observe how you instinctively phrase, pace and breathe. Yogis have discovered that deep breathing relaxes the body and mind. They use it as a path to meditation, relaxation and general health.

So, you are about to go on stage. You are energised. You feel a bracing in the torso with ribs working freely and breath coming easily. You are prepared to deliver your message with a resonant and confident voice.

Some web sites:
- [http://fmscommunity.org/breath.htm](http://fmscommunity.org/breath.htm)

**Breathing warm-ups**

Feel a satisfying movement of an expanded and flexible rib-cage with these exercises:
- **Blow a sheet of paper against the wall with a steady stream of air; or blow a candle (good for volume control).**
- **Laugh or sob; this encourages retraction of the false folds.**
- **Take a breath and exhale on “fff”.**
- **Hiss. Make mosquito-buzzing noises.**
- **Hum. Vocalise on “miaow” so all the vowels are activated.**
- **Yawn, sigh.**
Body posture

The speaker’s instrument is the body – all of it, from the toes up. Not just the mouth that moves. Breathing is closely linked with good posture – and to our fears. Let us go back to that basic fight or flight reaction to fear. When threatened by that sabre-toothed tiger we instinctively protect ourselves with hunched shoulders, thus constricting and shortening our spine and squashing the muscles required for efficient air intake.

Audiences are quick to read body language, absorbing far more from this than from actual verbal content. Research has shown 55 percent of your presentation’s impact is determined by your posture, gestures and eye contact, 38 percent by your voice, tone and inflection and a mere 7 percent by your content. These figures were contained in Albert Mehrabian’s book *Silent Messages.*

http://www.kaaj.com/psych/

However, for an updated viewpoint, see:
http://www.businessballs.com/mehrabiancommunications.htm
http://www.netmindbody.com/index_2.html

The audience tends to focus far more on the speaker’s body language, rhythm and imagery than on the actual words. For example, folded arms are a sure signal of an insecure or defensive speaker.

Poor posture robs the speaker of conviction as well as resonance. A slumped posture is not a compelling look, hardly persuasive to the listeners. It can cause restricted breathing and a dull, nasal voice because the rib cage constricts the lungs.

Such poor posture and repeated body misuse can damage the voice as Australian actor Frederick Matthias Alexander discovered early last century. His recurrent loss of voice during performances threatened his career. Alexander spent desperate hours in front of a mirror, observing the muscles used in speech. He noted breathing interference and some curious movements of his head and neck, not only when he spoke but even when he merely thought of performing. When he learned to use his body correctly his voice problems ceased. His Alexander Technique evolved into a system of therapy that focuses awareness on body usage, balance and posture. It is based on the premise that use affects functioning. It is a relaxed system of non-doing and awareness rather than busy exercises.

http://www.alexandertechnique.com

A major focus of the Alexander Technique is on restoring the natural habit of stretching and lengthening our spine, freeing and
opening out our bodies. We reconsider how we move through everyday actions so that the head leads the body.

Thus, we are uplifted and harmonised in an efficient blend of balance, effort and subsequent relaxation and breathing. Mental directions to the crucial muscles and body parts achieve a sense of "up-ness" to counteract gravity’s compression. When bad postural habits are eliminated, the back widens and the spine lengthens, the neck “lets go” of tension.

Correct, comfortable posture allows us to move easily, freely and to project positively.

**What is “correct” posture?**

At the very word people instinctively over-compensate into a rigid parody. In a forced attempt to achieve “correct” posture, overarching the back risks backache. This tightens our abdominal muscles and locks our knees, causing tension through the body. Many stressed people have almost perpetually locked knees, lower back and neck. The fight or flight reflex triggers the “tendon guard reflex” which shortens the calf muscles and locks the backs of the knees so the body, to align and maintain balance, moves forward onto the toes. Neurophysiologist Carla Hannaford believes this postural problem is a major cause of inability to speak freely. Prolonged use of a rigid stance can even make presenters feel dizzy or faint.

http://www.twblearn.com/Resources/carla_hannaford_resources.htm

The ideal position should be comfortable and natural. Expand your chest while lifting high the back of your head. This lengthens your spine so you stand tall like a puppet on a string.

To find this natural, comfortable balance, stand with your back to a wall with head and feet slightly away from it. Lightly press the torso, from shoulders to buttocks, against the wall as much as possible, given the inherent S-bend of the spine. Bend your knees slightly, thus unlocking their tension, and tuck your tummy into that “bikini-girl” posture, which in turn tilts your pelvis forward a little. Do you notice how your chest has expanded out into that Pavarotti type pose common to good singers?

Probably this seems forced and unnatural, but it looks poised and confident. Stand against the wall for a few moments periodically to accustom yourself to this posture. Make it a habit. Speak a few words and you will hear improved projection, depth and quality of your voice. Common postural habits like leaning to one side, overstrained upward chin or lowered chin can distort your voice production. They cramp and inhibit the lungs and larynx (although trained actors and singers manage to produce full resonance in a variety of unnatural postures!).
A positive natural posture is relaxed but upright with the chin up, the chest out and the back straight. Make your spine taller. Imagine that you are being pulled upright by your ears! Press your heels into the floor, balance equally on both feet.

Your back will straighten, your chest will expand and your voice will project with ease and resonance at its natural pitch.

Some web sites:
http://www.alexandertechnique.com/
http://www.ati-net.com/
http://www.posturepage.com/

We are what we eat – and drink

As athletes maintain a carefully balanced diet regimen, so should all performers. Especially, what can we eat before a presentation to access the required energy? When the fight or flight reaction activates, blood is directed away from the digestive system. Eating a big steak just before a presentation will only make us feel sluggish and sleepy, because the task of digesting animal fat draws oxygen from the body tissues.

Experts suggest eating five or six small protein meals a day as this is less likely to cause a hypoglycaemic attack when blood sugars drop after a large meal. A small, healthy snack about two hours before speaking maintains steady, optimum blood sugar levels and sustained release energy. Complex carbohydrates such as bread, potato, rice, whole grains and legumes, eggs, pasta or oatmeal biscuits, which contain fibre, are easily digested. Plan ahead to eat most protein at breakfast and opt for lighter forms like fish, chicken or eggs closer to the event.

If you cannot face eating, suck glucose lozenges or drink Glucodin to keep up your energy levels. Fresh fruit juices are easily digested but avoid acidic citrus. Grape juice gives quick energy, relieves nervous exhaustion and clears phlegm. Avoid dairy products, which increase mucus, and oily or fatty food.

Speakers Need Water!

Performance stress causes dehydration. During challenging times, increase water intake to improve concentration, mental and physical co-ordination; it alleviates mental fatigue, increases energy levels, relaxes for improved communication. Our bodies are made up of about 70 percent water, which is an excellent conductor of electrical energy, necessary to efficiently pass messages between the central nervous system, brain and sensory organs.
Another source of fluid is herbal tea such as peppermint (eases digestive upsets), sage (a tonic for brain and nerves), chamomile and valerian (reduce nerves and insomnia), St John’s Wort (an antidepressant for mild anxiety and excitability), maté (a general tonic for exhaustion and tiredness) and catmint, thyme and valerian, which calm the nervous system.

Some web sites:
http://www.psychologytoday.com/htdocs/prod/PTOArticle/PTO-20021002-000002.ASP
http://www.hypericum.com/
http://www.essentialoils.co.za/essential_oils/ginger.htm
http://dreampharm.com/zginger.asp
http://www.sbherbals.com/0798HotM.html
Chapter 4

Your voice is your instrument

““There is no index of character so sure as the voice,” said former British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. Even the most interesting, erudite material can bounce away from listeners’ ears if delivered in a nasal, strident, hoarse, thin, breathy, dull or sarcastic voice.

Indira Ghandi was tongue-tied, inarticulate and squeaky in the early stages of her prime-ministership, yet she became a fluent, fiery debater.

Margaret Thatcher’s original Lincolnshire accent and affected, often shrill voice spelt electoral disaster until she worked with a drama coach who slowed her speed and lowered the pitch of her voice by forty-six hertz which is half the difference in pitch between the average male and female voices.

Grace Kelly’s mother described her daughter as “nothing but a giggly somebody with a high nasal voice”. Her tone was honed into a lower, sexier pitch by a drama coach.

Michelle Pfeiffer’s natural speaking voice has been described as “nondescript”. But it proved an asset rather than a disadvantage because it could be more easily coached and modified into various accents or dialects.

...Make it music to listeners’ ears

We are all capable of modulating and changing voice qualities; many have done so unconsciously, picking up inflections from a partner, room-mate or by moving to a different area or country. We can radically improve poor vocal timbre and increase range with conscious thought and listening.

Varied modulation and pitch range enhance presentation but listeners tend to sleep through dull monotones. They would have difficulty sleeping through a newborn baby’s range of up to five octaves! Well-modulated speaking voices use a pitch range of around 8-10 notes. Female voices are about an octave higher than males.

Pitch is determined by the number of vibrations per second of your vocal folds as measured in hertz, with lower voices moving at fewer hertz (around 130 cycles a second) and high ones ranging up to 1397 for a soprano’s top “E”. Tension, the primary enemy of good voice production, also tightens and lifts timbre.

As we face an audience full of “sabre-toothed tigers”, instinctively we tighten all muscles defensively. As our vocal folds, throat, jaw and larynx tense, our voice becomes thin and lacking in authority, a tell-tale sign of nerves out of control – or may simply shut down.
A rich and positive voice is more pleasant to the ear and conveys credibility. Society tends to respect a lower voice as one having an air of authority. Unfortunately, some actors have actually damaged their voices in an effort to lower their voices – an effect that can be obtained with ease by retraction of the vocal folds.

Women who have high pitched and thin sounding “little girl” voices can be trained to lower their pitch by learning to consciously retract the false folds (remember the feeling in the larynx when you laughed or sobbed silently), thus producing a more authoritative sound. The pitch only needs to be reduced by a few hertz. Even a semi-tone will be useful. Experiment by reading stories to small children and dramatise them using different character voices. You can train your voice to a lower pitch with no damage to the true vocal folds as long as you remember to keep the false folds retracted.

**Pre-presentation pitch exercises**

Before walking on-stage, find your natural range by making a surprised “oh, oh” type sound (as in “hot”). To reassure yourself that your voice is working freely, make a sound like a siren over about one and a half octaves.

Intone:

he he he
ha ha ha,
ho ho ho

Plant a supportive partner or colleague in the audience to tip you off with a subtle gesture if you are speaking too fast, high, loud or soft.

A truly nasal voice is one where the opening from the throat to the nasal passages fails to close on all vowel sounds. Only three sounds should pass through your nose – m, n and ng. You can improve your voice quality by making sure you get a full closure of this opening to the nose by making a hard “G” sound saying:

hung-gee,
hung-gair,
hung-gah,
hung-oh,
hung-gu

As a warm-up, yawn with the teeth and mouth fairly closed and round your lips as if saying “oo”, “one” or “open”.

Speech projection, enunciation and facial expression require a flexible jaw and this also helps to prevent constriction of the false folds. As 50 per cent of brain signals pass into the body through a junction box at the jaw, called the temporo mandibular joint, all areas will function more efficiently if locked jaws are freed.

This can be done best by wiggling your jaw loosely from side to side and massaging the hinge of your jaw, just in front of the
ear. If you feel an urge to yawn, let it happen – this is one of nature’s best remedies for releasing tension and increasing oxygen intake.

| Enhance your voice with a yawn and stretch |
| These are great stimulants because they can: |
| • Release toxins and waste material in the blood. |
| • Causes a strong downward movement of the diaphragm. |
| • Stimulate a full intake of air. |
| • Release stiff trunk muscles caused by tiredness. |
| • Improve circulation to the head. |
| • Relax tension in the jaw, throat and face muscles. |
| • Improve voice quality. |

Voice resonance may also be improved with a Brain Gym exercise called “thinking caps”. This is done by unrolling the curved rim of your outer ears several times. This relaxes the jaw, tongue and facial muscles. It also:

• Activates the brain to help you hear with both ears.
• Screens out distracting sounds from relevant ones.
• Switches on reticula formation and helps listening comprehension.
• Helps public speaking, singing, playing a musical instrument.
• Helps short-term working memory and thinking skills.

Poor articulation results from tense jaw, lips, palate and tongue. Improve this with silent laughs and yawning and massage the TMJ (temporo mandibular joint). Blow raspberries. Roll your Rs. Relax the tongue by exploring your teeth and gums with it. Warm up facial muscles by acting out a wide variety of emotions. Pull funny faces. Gently nod from side to side. Walk around breathing and stretching. Open your mouth sufficiently to articulate without mumbling!

When former US president Bill Clinton suffered hoarseness, talk-back lines ran hot as many people related that they had also experienced similar problems in their speaking. Suddenly, the topic came out of the closet.

Speakers need to take care of their tools of trade – their voices. Just as an athlete would never compete without thorough physical and mental warm-ups, it is vital for speakers to prepare themselves.

Physical loosening and limbering unwinds tension and induces deep breathing. This can include stretching, yawns, yoga exercises and Tai Chi.
Vocal warm-ups

As you’ve been making sounds all your life you really need very little effort to warm up the vocal apparatus. The only warm-up you really need is to make a sound like a siren on an “ng” as in “sing”, throughout your range. This needs to be a small sound achieved by effort in the large muscles of the neck and torso with only a little air being used. (Prove how little air is needed by sirening silently! Make sure you use the same effort in the same muscles as when you made sound. This is also the time to pay attention to retraction of the false vocal fold as the aim is to wake up all the muscles involved in producing sound.) The silent siren is particularly beneficial to help maintain vocal flexibility during a performance in those times you may be actually off-stage or in the wings.

Other actions you may find useful are gentle humming in a comfortable mid-range (e.g. “ohhh” as if expressing mild surprise) of easy small range tunes like *Three Blind Mice* or *Frere Jacques*. When the voice is flowing, expand the pitch range progressively higher and lower. Always use a most comfortable vocal effort in making a sound. Softer sounds, paradoxically, need more effort.

Buzz your lips as you hum to limber up your lips. Make “brr” motor bike sounds.

Open up the throat by saying “aah” as you do when you go to the doctor.

Or say “ohh” while you bend your knees slightly, feet flat on the floor. Bending your knees prevents their locking that can cause tense stomach and glottis muscles and thus a throaty tone.

Say the alphabet interspersed with the word “awesome” while maintaining the same pitch: “awesome-a-awesome-b-awesome-c-awesome-d” and so on. Feel the openness at the back of the throat – the retraction.

Or say the *Hot Potato*: “One potato, two potato, three potato, four; five potato, six potato, seven potato, more.” Imagine eating a too-hot potato. This really opens – retracts – the throat.

http://www.jazzboulevard.com/bksample.htm
http://www.voiceacademy.org/vaweb/textonly.jsp

The voice under pressure

Our old bogey, tension, is a major cause of vocal problems. Constricted vocal folds rob voices of resonance and projection and can lead to vocal trauma.

The efforts required to counter back-ground noise, insufficient or no amplification, or unreceptive audiences (such as in classrooms and lecture theatres) can strain the voice. A solution is to use a technique called oral “twang” or “safe yelling”. To do this take a short, high breath, brace your torso, retract the false folds and make spontaneous loud sounds. Practise the happy yell of Italian
mamas when they call out for the children and papa to come for dinner – “mangiamo!” … let us eat. Another example of the spontaneous “yell” is the cry made by a baby moments after birth. Or a child’s “Muuuum”.

Can you recall a noisy party where there is usually one voice that can be heard over all the rest? You think what a loud voice! What’s more, that kind of voice quality never seems to tire. The difference is the amount of “twang” or “ringing” quality in the voice, a sound made by tightening the collar of the laryngeal tube, which creates another resonator within the vocal tract. The extra resonance in the 2 to 4 kilohertz band of the sound spectrum contributes to the perception of loudness or “ringing” tone.

To protect your voice in noisy environments you need to activate this twang quality to enable you to be heard more easily without vocal trauma.

Seminar leaders, school teachers and lecturers, who handle large and sometimes unruly groups, can avoid yelling by using techniques such as “room ecology” where the speaker defines his or her expectations of the audience. Actors and experienced speakers know to stand centre-stage forward for their strongest message and move to the side for a more relaxed or lighter effect. Similarly, teachers and lecturers can establish their expectation of attention by moving closer to the audience – or even amongst them. They will quieten and listen, allowing the speaker to use normal voice levels.

When speaking in the open air, use an acoustic hailer. Stand in front of a wall to enhance the sound. In outdoor work, be careful to keep warm. When shivering with cold, we tend to tense up our neck, shoulders and rib-cage and tighten our joints, leading to constriction of the false vocal folds and poor vocal performance. Remember to retract. A few drops of eucalyptus oil on a tissue inside a shirt pocket or bra will help this retraction.

When contending with environmental risk factors – such as dust, smoke, chemical pollutants and a dry atmosphere – you should increase water intake to hydrate the vocal folds. Aircraft travel combines the noise and dryness issues, so keep speech to a minimum when flying. Coughs and colds can be catastrophic for anyone whose employment requires constant voice use, whether as a speaker, actor, teacher, lecturer, singer, or media presenter. Problems are exacerbated if halls, studios and classrooms are poorly ventilated or centrally heated, with the resultant dry air affecting the vocal folds.

**Solutions for vocal problems**

If you strain your voice, check if it was caused by constricted false vocal folds, in which case silent laughs, sobs and making siren sounds may help.
Also:

- Increase your water intake. Borrow the singer’s maxim, “pee pale, speak clear”.
- Rehydrate the vocal folds with steam inhalations and a humidifier.
- Suck lozenges such as Fisherman’s Friend, or those containing zinc, slippery elm, ginseng or echinacea. Avoid analgesic lozenges.
- Essential oils such as eucalyptus, lavender and frankincense may be inhaled with steam.
- Honey soothes the throat.
  Paul Newman says: “I drink a couple of jiggers of honey for my energy and for my throat before a stage performance”.
- Drinks of warm honey and lemon soothe and heal.

Gargling lemon kills germs in the throat.

- Increase vitamin C supplements, but ease off if diarrhoea indicates overdose.
- Humidify your bedroom or work environment, especially during winter.
- Maintain good health through exercise and adequate, balanced diet.

Laryngitis (inflammation of the larynx) responds to hydration, riboflavin, niacin and zinc supplements. It is most essential to rest if you are unwell. Keep germs to yourself; go to bed and recover as quickly as possible. Medical treatments may include aspirin, cough suppressants and decongestants (but avoid antihistamines). Gargle with warm water and salt. Naturopathic gargles, including sage, horehound or slippery elm, can help.

Natural remedies include eating garlic (a natural antibiotic) and ginseng. Gargling tea-tree oil can prevent a sore throat developing into full-scale infection. (The author has successfully used it internally in small doses of three drops in half a glass of water up to three times a day for one or two days. Be warned, however, that it is classified as a poison.)

Before presenting beware of:

- Mucus-producing foods (dairy products, chocolate)
- Also nuts, which could catch in the throat.
- Smoking (including passive smoking),
- Alcohol, caffeine and drugs.
Alcohol depletes the body of B vitamins and magnesium which combat tension. The depressive effects of alcohol can be exacerbated by hot stage lights and overheated rooms so you feel more flushed and uncomfortable. Excess alcohol, especially of spirits, raises body temperature and increases blood flow to the vocal folds, causing possible damage and roughening voice timbre.

Caffeine lifts blood pressure, increases the heart rate, can constrict the blood vessels and causes increased urination and gastric secretions. It may trigger anxiety disorders. Chocolate, some analgesics, flu and sinus medications and pharmaceutical stimulants may contain caffeine.

A natural remedy for a stuffy nose is to irrigate warm salty water through the nostrils into the sinuses, inelegantly known as “sniff’n’spit”. This circumvents nasal drip and throat irritations.

As well as illicit drugs such as cocaine and marijuana, beware of using beta-blockers and stimulants. Beta-blockers are prescription drugs which block the adrenaline reaction; they do not stop nerves, but they lessen their anxiety symptoms. They lower the heart rate, reduce sweating and tremors and alleviate a dry mouth or jitters. Potential side effects can include triggering asthma, cardiac conditions, anxiety or mental illness, dizziness, lightheadedness, nightmares, hallucination, lethargy, insomnia, visual disturbances, diarrhoea, loss of appetite, cold hands and feet, loss of hair.

Also be cautious of medications that dry the throat such as antihistamines, corticosteroids, anti-inflammatory drugs and anaesthetic throat sprays.

Carry throat lozenges to secrete in your cheek if you develop a ticklish cough. If your voice wavers or cracks this may be due to constricted air supply. Take time for a deep breath and a sip of water before proceeding. Tense neck muscles can be eased with massage, subtle stretches and yawns.

Seek medical advice if throat problems continue as constriction may cause nodules. Chronic hoarseness or a “lump in the throat” sensation may be a result of common reflux laryngitis (gastro-oesophageal reflux). Vocal polyps, ulcers or nodules result from voice abuses, such as prolonged constriction of the vocal folds, yelling, or projecting out of range, without that open laugh, sob or siren sensation. Rest and implementing correct usage solve most problems and the vocal muscle is quite forgiving of minor strain. However, if chronic hoarseness continues it is wise to consult an ENT specialist as sometimes an injury requires surgery.

Looking after your voice ensures you are equipped to take the stage and deliver your message with projection, poise and confidence.
Websites:
http://www.voicecare.org.uk/warm_up.html
Center for Voice Disorders of Wake Forest University, USA):
http://www.bgsm.edu/voice
http://www.bgsm.edu/voice/warming_up.html
http://www.qbmc.org/voice/vocalwarmups.cfm
Speakers and singers can learn about voice qualities (speech, twang falsetto, sob/cry, opera and belting) at “Jo Estill’s Compulsory Figures for Voice” at http://www.evts.com
Chapter 5

As others see you

Stage presentation is often forgotten or underrated by novice speakers, but professional poise can be as memorable as the content of your performance. Unconsciously, people assess you just as much by your manner and body language as by the actual performance. Give-away signs of nerves can be curtailed by awareness. The hands are the greatest culprits, prone to flapping, fluttering, clenching or stabbing at the air. They should be kept low so they will not upstage your face. If really necessary, curb their restlessness behind your body or loosely by your side – but avoid your pockets!

Make gestures that are relaxed, natural, relevant, definite and varied. They should be timed exactly to the point, or slightly preceding it. Poor timing gives a “canned” artificial look. A large auditorium needs bigger movements because subtle facial or hand movements will be lost.

Your image

Dress is important, not just for the look of it but because it increases your own confidence and poise, and makes you feel and look special.

It is safest to err on the side of over-dressing rather than under-dressing. But don’t go to fussy or outrageous extremes. Aim for understated elegance. Be aware of current fashion but resist the bizarre. Simple, stylish clothing presents best.

Know the dress conventions of your particular field. For example, academics at conferences tend not to overdress, and even the top people in the field may favour smart casual. If presenting at a conference, bring a choice of outfits and observe colleagues before deciding.

What matters most is good grooming, from neat hair to polished shoes. Face and hands are focal points and so need special attention. Clothes should be clean and freshly pressed. Wrinkle-free fabrics stand up to the rigours of travel.

Women tend to dress “up” more than do men. Resist excessively high-heeled shoes, glamorous as they may look, which can cause foot cramps, as well as upsetting your posture. Check new shoes for slippery soles, and take the precaution of rubbing them over a rough surface like cement before the performance.

Choose colours and styles to enhance rather than detract. Shirts and blouses should be lighter than jackets. Colours should be middle tones, pastels (which may appear as off-white in spotlights or on TV). Bright red can show you up in a neon glow. Stark white can upstage your face and eyes by their appearing brighter.
For television, avoid garish patterns that will distract from your face. Choose subtle rather than bold patterns. Avoid plaid, herringbone, stripe or checked patterns that might appear to ripple or vibrate on the screen. Grey or brown eye shadow usually enhances eyes, but avoid electric blues or greens that may give a ghostly look. Avoid jangly or shiny jewellery that will pick up distracting reflections. Even for radio interviews, you will gain confidence by knowing that you look your best.

**Distracting mannerisms**

Embarrassed gestures, nervous twitches, tics and stutters signal nerves. We may be painfully aware of some mannerisms; others we disbelieve until we see a video replay. How often do we see speakers slipping glasses on and off their noses, cleaning them, fiddling with them? Simply print out notes in a type large enough to dispense with the glasses altogether.

Empty your pockets of coins and keys beforehand to reduce irritating jingling. Foil rocking body movements by keeping your weight firmly on the balls of your feet. Avoid unnecessary movements – for aren’t we irritated by speakers who wave and stab at the air? Gestures of the arms and face are preferable to big body movements, giving a more vital impression.

Before the big day, dress in the outfit you intend to wear and practise your speech and stage deportment. Work with a mirror or video camera and seek the advice of a mentor or colleague. Treat it as a real performance, gearing yourself through the day, quietening yourself and focusing.

All these suggestions will help your image, but the most important thing to do is be as natural as possible, believe in yourself and be yourself.
Chapter 6

Preparing your speech

“Did you call, sir?” called the valet to Sir Winston Churchill, who was soaking in his bath.

“No, I was just giving a speech to the House of Commons” came the reply. Churchill, an inspiring orator, was said to spend an hour’s preparation for each minute of a speech. One of his secretaries wrote that, “Quick as was his wit and unfailing his gift for repartee, he was not a man to depart from the theme or indeed the very words that he had laboriously conceived in set-speech form. To the last he retained a sense of apprehension in addressing the House of Commons, or, for that matter, any large assembly.” (from Sayings of the Century, by Nigel Rees, Allen and Unwin, 1984)

Research and write out your speech exactly as you would deliver it, whether you choose to read it, to learn it by heart, to speak impromptu with outlines on palm-cards, or use a prepared text with main points highlighted by fluorescent pens or red-ink points marked in the margin. Your choice will depend on your preferred manner of projecting your own personality.

Writing your speech

An Irish politician described his system of giving speeches: “First you tell them what you’re going to say. Then tell them. And then tell them what you have told them.” A good speech needs a beginning, a middle section or body and a conclusion.

Know your audience. Check beforehand with the organisers as to venue, guest list, demography and expectations.

Know your topic! Research. Choose active verbs in short sentences, clear grammar. Keep it simple. Remember, your speech is intended for listeners’ ears, not for their eyes. Speak it out aloud while writing.

Audiences appreciate an overview, to keep them on track: “I will tackle this question from three angles, namely ... to prove that ...” Mark off these points clearly, to shepherd wandering thoughts back onto the trail. Use pointers such as “Let me emphasise ... ” or “The important point is ...”

Divide your speech into point form, clearly marked by numbers and use memorable sub titles. Plan how you will capture your listeners’ attention by changing the timbre or speed of your voice, directing a question, showing visuals or moving across the stage.

To read or not to read

Audiences respond better to a pair of eyes, however nervous, than the speaker’s bent head. Fortunately, reading of speeches
seems to be confined to the territory of formal academics, and even there it has become less common.

There are some situations where reading is advisable for part or all of a speech. These include:

- **When you must avoid misquoting or misinterpreting,** e.g. with a press release about a sensitive issue.
- **For accurate technical equations and complex calculations.**
- **When you must synchronise with another person who operates transparencies or a teleprompter. Rehearse together first.**

**If you do read:**

- **Maintain eye-contact as much as possible** (scan sections of your notes and look up to deliver – a lowered chin constricts the voice).
- **Keep sentences short.**
- **Use wide margins for notes and reminders to “pause” or “smile”**.
- **Use clear point form and highlight headings.**

**To memorise or not to memorise**

Certainly, memorise, if you have a photographic memory! However, most of us who don’t would rightly feel very nervous of mental blocks. Sir Winston Churchill’s memory failed once in Parliament and he subsided, head in hands. He apparently learned from this lesson; there are various accounts of the time he spent preparing speeches and a friend commented: “Winston spent the best years of his life writing impromptu speeches.” He also perfected a trick to inject the impression of the impromptu into read speeches. He wrote into the text signals to pause, as if searching, before producing that telling word.

A compromise to memorising the whole speech is to:

- **Jot down the points you intend to make.**
- **Speak freely into a tape recorder.**
- **Type up the words into a full speech. Polish it.**
- **Attack the speech with different coloured highlighters according to your category codes.**
- **Transfer onto medium sized cards the key words of each section, in point form, and quotes or figures which must be exact. Cards are more discreet, do not crackle as paper does.**
Packing your briefcase

Now you’ve prepared your speech and you’re ready for the big event. As well as the text of your speech (how many people have turned up without their notes?) your briefcase could contain:

- **A bottle of filtered water; most of your water intake will be en route to the presentation rather than when on-stage (where that jug may contain iced water, courtesy of ill-advised organisers!)**
- Eucalyptus drops or cough lozenges especially those which contain honey and echinacea.
- Homeopathic or flower remedy drops – Dr Bach Rescue Remedy or Performance Plus.
- A multi-vitamin supplement or vitamin B such as Berocca.
- Lemon and ginger or other herbal tea bags.
- Liquid saliva spray.
- A spare pair of stockings/tights/hose for ladies. For men, a spare tie, cufflinks.
Chapter 7

Countdown to performance

A first response from performers asked “How do you prevent stage fright?” was “Prepare! Practise! Thoroughly and with plenty of lead time.”

We do reap what we sow. If we know, submerged deep down under the procrastinations, avoidances, excuses and distracting trivia, that we have neglected solid preparation, some nerves are as inevitable as applause follows a class act. However, performance fears are surely lessened when we have prepared securely and wisely in the weeks and days before the event.

We can program our brains like a computer, feeding in correct information as to the sequence of words, sections. Then, if a blur of panic overwhelms us in the initial moments of a presentation, we can safely go into “auto-drive” for a few moments, knowing that our brain is securely programmed and will send messages to lips without our consciously driving them. Herein lies confidence. Yet, if in the initial preparation stages we have not logically thought through the basic arguments of our speech, such weaknesses will surface when we deliver under stress.

Fail to prepare. Prepare to fail

Program your dreams. See yourself succeeding. An important part of the build-up to a performance is the mental preparation. Sit or lie comfortably relaxed and undisturbed while you visualise yourself sailing successfully through the speech.

See yourself, calm and poised, walking onto the platform, opening your mouth to speak. Hear the vibrant tone that flows out. Out of the corner of your eye, see those fear-gremlins skulk away into the shadows at the back of the stage, while you are encompassed in the warm, flattering and protective stage light.

See how the faces in the audience respond to you, smile up at you? Hear them clapping, shouting “Bravo!” See yourself backstage with diary open, wondering where you can find time for a repeat presentation.

Create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you can see yourself in this positive light, you are well on the way to fulfilling all your hopes and dreams.

Repeat positive affirmations to yourself. Some possibilities are:

“It is all right that I allow myself to feel nervous, vulnerable, or fearful. I ask for the help and support that I need.”

“I allow myself to enjoy this presentation, mistakes and all.”
“I accept that my best is good enough.”
“I strive for excellence rather than perfection.”
“I allow myself to make mistakes, and I keep going.”
“I am glad to have this opportunity to learn through any mishaps.”
“What a great opportunity to present tonight.”

This mental preparation will help overcome the common tendency to self-sabotage. When you hear those little negative voices run riot in your head, here’s what you can do:

- **Acknowledge and confront them.**
- **Mentally turn down their volume.**
- **Block them with proactive positive thoughts like: “I think I can”**
- **Use positive affirmations such as “I know I can”**
- **Blot out the thoughts with a meaningless chant like “blah blah blah”**
- **Try a Shakespearian touch with “Out, vile thought!”**
- **Or just mentally repeat “STOP!”**
- **Recall in your mind the words of people who have encouraged you.**
- **Use an icon: put a can of bug-spray nearby and use it as a reminder to conquer the “thought-bugs”.**
- **Test yourself against the “thinking distortions that hamper”: tunnel vision, too-rigid control, thinking the worst, blaming others.**

Ban such over-generalisations and negatives from your mind:

- **Terrible (“It’s all terrible!”)**
- **Awful, poor.**
- **Everybody, none, nobody. (“Everybody says ...”)**
- **Always, never.**
- **Ought to (“orta”), should have (“shoulda”).**

Replace them with flexible thinking:

“Sometimes I stutter, but mostly I speak clearly.”
“Usually I prepare well.”
“In some cases I stumble, but only slightly.”

Negatives become less of an issue if we focus outwards. Be passionate about your subject. Love your audience.

**The effects of “nerves”**

Many big-name performers have acknowledged fears – and kept going. The singer-actor Barbra Streisand, talking of her
anxiety, said: “I was kind of nervous. It wasn’t stage fright, it was a thing called death. I would stand in the wings and my whole life would pass before my eyes … I was so frightened … I felt the pressure … enormous pressure.”

American film star Dustin Hoffman found live acting far more stressful than filming. When performing Shylock in The Merchant of Venice in London, he spent so much of his off-stage time in the bathroom that a plaque was attached to the door. It proclaimed “Dustin Hoffman is here” and was signed by all the cast.

Most performers notice that nerves increase the frequency of urination. To reduce the need to urinate immediately before a performance drink your water earlier in the day and just sip a little before and while speaking.

Pre-performance qualms can also trigger diarrhoea. Try Gastrolite or an equivalent over-the-counter remedy from a pharmacy. If you use a prescription drug such as Immodium, it must be taken about two and a half hours before performing because it may cause dry mouth, drowsiness or fatigue. A few sips of brandy is an effective old remedy.

### Natural and Homoeopathic Remedies

Help for “nerves” may be found with flower remedies such as Doctor Bach’s Rescue Remedy, gelsemium or homeopathic ipecac (note that the medical form of ipecac induces vomiting). Dr Bach’s Rescue Remedy helps presenters to centre and to alleviate panic, exhaustion, tiredness and fear. [http://www.acorn.uk100.com/bach_rescue.html](http://www.acorn.uk100.com/bach_rescue.html)

Australian actor Sigrid Thornton, popular star of the ABC’s Sea Change, returned to the stage after spending the past 20 years in front of the camera. She admitted to some opening night nerves: “I’ll be using a little bit of Rescue Remedy on the tongue.” (The Australian, February 27, 2001).


Ginger is excellent for calming upset stomachs and is often included in travel motion remedies. Drink lemon and ginger tea or infuse grated fresh ginger in hot water.

Some people prevent nausea and travel sickness by wearing acupressure magnets on elastic wristbands. This is applicable to stomach nerves in performance. Relief can be felt by massaging or pressing on the pressure point (called Neigun, or PC6) that is located about two finger breadths above the wrist crease, between the two main tendons on the inner forearm. Press firmly or stroke towards the wrist. This pressure point is also useful for treating shortness of breath, insomnia and anxiety.
Massaging the sensitive area 5cm around the navel (the adrenal points) can relieve emotional stress. Holding the forehead can release tension of the stomach.

Dry mouth, that bane of performers, is exacerbated by throat tension. To relieve it:

- Relax your throat by dropping your jaw and rubbing the underside of your tongue against the inside of your teeth. This activates the lubricating saliva glands.
- Press the tip of your tongue on the hard palate near the teeth ridge.
- Subtle sucking movements promote saliva.
- Imagine the taste of lemon juice or vinegar.
- Simulate yawns.
- Bite on your tongue.

Rather than drinking water immediately before your performance, rinse your mouth or gargle with warm water (warmth relaxes the throat and vocal cords). Drink sweetened tea with milk or suck a boiled sweet, cough lozenge or slice of lemon to increase saliva. Chew sugarless gum or smell some vinegar – its aroma prompts saliva. Simulated yawning also stimulates salivary glands. Check if your medications may worsen the problem. A pharmacist can supply an over-the-counter spray solution that creates artificial saliva. The yoga “lion” pose, with tongue outstretched, also promotes saliva, while relieving tension. It is known to ease and prevent sore throats and to help people who stammer.

http://www.duke.edu/~das19/yoga/lion.html
http://www.yahooyoga.com/yyh1b62.htm

The days before

Plan the lead-up days, rescheduling where possible other tiring commitments like meetings to lighten your workload.
Organise equipment, clothes.
Maintain a balanced, healthy diet. Curb caffeine, alcohol, nicotine and drugs. Double your water intake. Spend time in mental preparation; see yourself succeeding.
If possible, rehearse in the venue to become accustomed to the acoustics and feel of the hall. Make allowance that an empty hall is more resonant than one filled with people. Ask a colleague to listen to this rehearsal to give an objective appraisal of volume and pitch, to check whether your voice projects to the back of the hall.

The hours before

Don’t feel guilty about being as lazy as possible on the day of a big challenge as long as a sensible routine is maintained. We can all learn from actors and singers who know to “save themselves” as
as well as their voices on the day of a performance. They talk less, eat less, pamper themselves a little, and don’t rush around. They retreat into themselves, focus on their part or persona, and especially avoid arguments or upsets.

Tension is energy that is blocked. Release it in whichever way works best for you. Go for a run, or other exercise. Many find they perform well if just slightly physically tired. It is often helpful to offload jitters caused by the excess adrenaline charge.

A long soak in the bath is wonderfully relaxing, even more so with various herbal oils or mineral salts. Water is a well-known therapy proved from Roman times. Even a five-minute bath or a quick hot shower unravels muscle tension. Massage shoulders, arms, back of neck. Stretch. Yawn.

Eat a light snack (e.g. rice, pasta, bread), maintain water intake, rest, meditate or pray and mentally prepare. Visualise yourself succeeding.

Plan to arrive at the venue in good time without rushing. Get used to the space. This will allow you to check for problems or obstacles to a smooth performance, such as an electrical cord that might set your entrance off to a flying start. How close is the drop down to the stalls? Check that tapes or video illustrations are rewound ready at the correct point. Test overhead projection, power point slides, video and sound systems. Fiddling with equipment as you speak does not build confidence or credibility.

Are the audience’s seats so distant you must roar? If so, ask to move the podium or the chairs closer. Is the lectern so high that you would peer over it? Or so low that you can barely see your notes? For a more professional entrance, leave your papers on the lectern beforehand, especially if you are the first speaker.

Give a typed introductory biography to the presenter to read as your introduction. Ask for whatever you need. A jug of water? (Remember that stress dehydrates.) Better lighting?

Ask a colleague or recording technician to check microphones and sound levels. How close should you stand to the microphone so all “p” sounds don’t explode like popcorn cooking? Will your voice fade if you move to the side of the lectern? If you walk around the stage with a radio microphone, will some areas attract reverberations or feedback?

Author and ABC radio presenter Sandy McCutcheon described how he arrived at a speaking engagement to find no podium and no lighting: “I intended to read notes so I wanted light. And I wanted a podium, because otherwise it looks tacky and I don’t feel comfortable without a podium. If I don’t have anywhere to put my hands they may shake like crazy. Because, of course, there is nervousness, although I enjoy the nerves.”

McCutcheon said he liked to get used to the space. “I like to look round the room, feel comfortable with it, know if there are
possible distractions – like, if there is a window behind you, ask them to put a curtain over it so the focus will stay with you.”

As you approach the last half-hour before going on stage, sit quietly and read through your notes.

The half-hour before

Now is the time to avoid on-stage distraction or embarrassment by discarding jangly jewellery, keys, coins and turning off your mobile phone!

Protect your space. With tensions running high backstage, it is easy to become tangled in other people’s traumas. During a preparation we all need space for centering energies, calming thoughts and for mental preparation. Everyone develops personal rituals of preparation, and just as we hope others will respect our space before launching out into the footlights, so we must be considerate of their need for privacy, even in crowded dressing rooms. Relaxation techniques are ideal here for calming and for general wellbeing. But do not expect to be relaxed on stage – there, tension is inevitable and can be harnessed into vital energy. You shouldn’t try to be hyper-relaxed – you need to inject a manageable amount of tension to power your delivery.

Make time to get yourself mentally focused for the task ahead. Open your brain with the PACE sequence, especially the kinesthetic “cross-crawl” exercises for easy access between the right and left sides of the brain.

Don’t curb the instinctive tendency to pace the floor. Walking is a natural, easy form of cross-crawl. Movement keeps blood flowing, delivering more oxygen to the heart and brain. It also prevents the blood from pooling in your feet and is a positive way to unlock your brainpower.

At this time, the dreaded fidgets can arrive. Curb them by steepling the hands with fingers pressed together – a technique which also balances the brain hemispheres.

Another easy hand technique is to connect thumb to each fingertip in turn, which helps to centre thoughts and emotions. (Using worry beads or hand massage balls can also fight the fidgets.)

Deep breathing is essential to steady nerves. Inhale through your nose while pressing the tongue firmly but without strain on the roof of the mouth. You should feel the expansion of the diaphragm as you do so. Release the tongue and exhale through the mouth.

The following techniques reduce the likelihood of “over-breathing” and warm up your voice:

1. Inhale. Exhale … then force-exhale the residual air from your lungs.

2. Bend forward. Breathe in with arms upraised above your head. Expel the air in a long hissing action until your lungs feel
quite empty. Your next breath will be easy and natural. This action is useful for getting in touch with the correct mechanism of breathing, noting the action of the muscles of the diaphragm and the lower back, rather than for your actual speaking.

3. Buzz your lips while humming a simple melody or scale.
4. Make rolled “rrr” sounds to loosen your tongue and improve diction.
5. Do the Alexander Technique “whispered ahh” several times. Stand balanced and upright. Smile broadly showing the teeth, which are lightly touching but unclenched. Let your jaw swing open easily while exhaling on a whispered “ahh.” This is the purest, uninterrupted sound you can make. It relaxes the jaw, improving projection and tone, frees the crucial neck hinge, opens the important bronchial throat passage, encourages deep, natural breathing. Benefits include easing tension and nausea and reducing the risk of stuttering and stammering. More oxygen enters the blood stream and senses are heightened.

The minutes before

The territory between your anonymous seat backstage and the brightly lit stage has been called the “launching pad”. The moments before launching into a performance can make a crucial difference between maintaining calm control or succumbing to blind panic. You need to learn to slow down while still on the launching pad, to resist the impulse to rush on and tumble headlong into an incoherent presentation.

From the following suggestions assemble your own launch-pad check list:

1. Sit comfortably, visualise transferring all your nervous energy away from the tense part of your body (e.g. the jaw) down into your toes. Think “toes, toes, toes” and your jaw relaxes.
2. Give your hands about twenty vigorous shakes.
3. Sip some water or rinse your mouth.
4. Think: “I feel fine, my fingers and shoulders are relaxed, I am in good form. The audience will like me.”
5. Keep thinking positively as the time to take to the stage approaches. Turn down the volume of negative voices in your head. Instead, focus on the outcome you desire – to inspire, to entertain, to “sell”, to be invited back.
6. Think through the content you will present. See yourself focused, voice projecting effortlessly and clearly.
7. Let off tension with a silent laugh or sob. Yawn. Stretch. Check your posture by standing against a wall.
8. Bend your knees to unlock tension.
9. Imagine “I am the greatest”. Assume a confident, smiling celebrity mood.
10. Slow down. Breathe in and out slowly.
11. Smile.
Chapter 8

You’re on!

Some speakers revel in the sheer buzz and electrical intensity of the adrenaline rush, the stage-lights, the applause. Others grow to like rather than dread the whole scenario, the more experience they gain.

For those of you who still find it an ordeal, it requires enormous courage to walk on stage and open your mouth. Your stomach is an aviary of butterflies and moths. A compost heap of worms, caterpillars and other greeblies are gnawing at your gut. But somehow you must attach a positive smile to your face or, if your personality prefers, a sober, dignified mien. However, be aware that people do respond to a bright face and especially to a smile. Act, if necessary.

Be prepared for the flow of adrenaline, and welcome it, for it will give energy and strength to your performance, but don’t become obsessed about it. Remember, it is a natural, normal and helpful reaction, as long as you don’t fight it.

Stand upright, but not ramrod stiff, with shoulders down and chin slightly raised as if looking over the crowd. Walk confidently, but not too quickly, onto the stage. Ah, you hear the applause? Remember, it is just reasonable good manners to acknowledge this with a smile and nod. Although speakers rarely give a formal bow, it is useful to know how to do it for that particularly illustrious occasion. To bow, look down at your shoes, slowly bending at the hips, count to three, then return to the upright position.

Take a few moments to poise yourself before starting. These seconds may seem an age to you but they are not to your audience. They capture attention and the atmosphere’s spell, quieten the rowdy and establish a calm beginning for yourself. Silence is a potent attention-gatherer.

Your audience

If people are huddled at the back of a large auditorium you won’t want to bellow to be heard. Overcome any reluctance to move forward by saying: “Would you please all stand. Look at your feet. Now, while you’re doing that, move forward to the front rows.” They usually will laugh and comply. If presenting an after dinner speech or otherwise competing with cutlery and food, prime the MC to prompt the audience to turn their chairs to face you.

The ensuing shuffle gives you a last chance to open your vocal folds with your silent laugh, with the beginning-yawn or by mouthing the word “one”. Focus on projecting the first sentence clearly to ensure free, positive resonance. First impressions linger.
If your take-off is smooth the rest of the flight usually flows with fewer bumps. Navigate your course with a clear focus on the horizon – your audience – rather than dwell inward on your own queasy stomach and sensitive ego. Most fears are self-centered. Keep looking out!

Most listeners will empathise with your agonies but would prefer not to suffer along with you. They are there to enjoy themselves, to be enlightened, provoked or touched by your content. Rather than wish you ill, they want you to succeed. Adopt a friendly face from the audience and pretend she is your grandmother in whose eyes you can do no wrong. Speak to her.

A less successful ploy is to pretend that the audience is not there, like an ostrich with its head in the sand, or the monkeys who see no evil. This may be a reasonable coping mechanism, but a cough or squirm will soon remind you of their existence. It might result in a bland, acceptable effort, at best.

It is far better to cultivate an attitude of giving to the audience, rather than trying to pretend that they have been magically spirited away. Audiences notice and appreciate this and respond in turn.

Empathy from caring, understanding supporters makes a huge difference to our ability to project and communicate, and, consequently, to relax and perform at our best. Encourage supportive friends and family to attend your presentations by telling them just how much you appreciate their presence.

If you see frowning faces in the audience, have the courage to assume that it is caused by poor indigestion, toothache, a fracas with their partner, or today’s letter from the bank manager. Anything other than your own presentation.

Often we imagine criticism where none was intended. It is easy to misread listeners’ body language, facial expressions and reactions. On occasion I have been aware and wary of a sober face and assumed they were bored or unimpressed. Inevitably it was those same people who most thanked me, saying how my content had challenged, moved them or given much to absorb. Why do we rush to think the worst?

Tell yourself: “These people have come to hear me, this is a wonderful opportunity to inspire them.” As success breeds success, so a positive attitude earns respect.

Actor Ingrid Bergman was depressed by the panel’s reactions at her first audition: “I take a quick glance down over the footlights at the jury. And I can’t believe it! They are paying not the slightest attention to me. In fact the jury members are chatting to the others in the second row. I dry up in absolute horror. I simply can’t remember the next line. I go blank with despair. They didn’t even listen to me. They didn’t think I was worth listening to. So life isn’t
worth living… And I know there’s only one thing to do. Throw myself in the water and commit suicide.”

Fortunately Bergman decided against the dark, dirty water. Years later she asked one of the jury, “Why at that first audition did you all treat me so nastily, and disliked me so much?” He responded: “Disliked you so much! Dear girl, you’re crazy! The minute you leapt out of the wings onto the stage, we turned around and said to each other, ‘Well, we don’t have to listen to her, she’s in!’ ”

Notice Bergman’s repetition of “I”, typical of how we become inward and self-centred when panic strikes. Instead of huddling inside our fragile psyches, we need to lift our eyes, to look outside ourselves. As the 17th century Puritan John Bunyan wrote: “Then fancies fly away, I’ll fear not what men say.”

The crucial positive opening

Those first words are vital for your own confidence and the audience’s appraisal of you. If your initial sound is squeezed out with strangled tension or a miscalculation of projection, your stomach will plummet. You may think, “Oh, no, this is going to be a fiasco!” (Resist that thought. If this does happen, forge on valiantly; you can still settle down and redeem the performance.)

On the other hand, if that first word sings out beautifully modulated with seemingly effortless ease, your confidence will soar with it. The public speaker must capture the audience in that first tantalising sentence. Most listeners give undivided attention only at the beginning and end of a speech. Choose your first words with care.

The Opening Gambit

Never, never, never start with an apology about your lack of experience or poor public speaking track record. Your listeners might well wonder, if you aren't qualified, why are you there?

Choose instead your most arresting statement or an intriguing question, a quotation or startling fact, or a story. People of all ages love stories, but they must be relevant.

Jokers don’t win every trick

Please don’t feel compelled to begin with a joke. If it bombs, both speaker and listeners are tempted to go home early. A joke that is well chosen and to the point can be brilliantly effective – but there are many hazards, especially if joke-telling is contrary to your personal style. Be yourself.

It you do wish to begin with humour, it’s safest to not label it as a joke; instead, the words “Can I tell you a story?” immediately gain attention. A self-deprecating anecdote usually is better digested than a canned, ancient, recycled joke. Audiences
appreciate original humour directed towards oneself, are repelled when it denigrates a defenceless victim.

Where relevant, humour can be a big audience winner. Jokes are safest if turned on oneself, perhaps relating a mishap or embarrassing situation. People respond to your openness. Don’t embarrass other people. Beware especially of racism, profanity, or stamping on religious and political corns. Test those hilarious jokes on the family over breakfast to discover just how effective they are. If you do upset anyone, have the courage and grace to apologise.

How do we give birth to a healthy joke? First don’t announce it’s on the way! Dress it subtly, let it grow unawares. Curb that expectant grin. Pause for emphasis before the delivery, then wait a moment for listeners to register and laugh. It will be stillborn if you rush on before they have time to react. If a joke does miscarry, carry on regardless.

There is some truth in that old joke: “Do I have to inject humour into a speech?” – “Only if you want to be paid.” Choose humour that’s appropriate for your audience and your particular style, and keep a light touch.

The eyes have it

People respond positively to eye contact. Force yourself to haul your eyes from the floor – a give-away sign of insecurity. Many nervous performers fix their gaze on inanimate objects like the ceiling or a light fitting. As well as alienating the listeners, and giving the performer a glassy, unnatural bearing, this ploy is not usually effective. Experienced speakers who worry about losing their drift if they actually look at the audience, focus just a little above their faces, or at their hairlines.

Stammering and stumbling

Fear of stammering is a major bogey. The average person thinks at the speed of about 700 words per minute, but speaks at 150 to 180 words per minute. No wonder that with the adrenaline pumping and our heartbeat hammering faster, the thinking apparatus and tongue appear to tangle. An ideal rate is an average of 120-150 words per minute. Pause … Breathe out then in, slowly.

Many speakers and actors conquered – or outgrew – stammering. King George VI stammered badly and his first radio speech was a fiasco. After his wife (the “Queen Mother”) encouraged him to work with a Harley Street speech expert, he became fluent and confident. Another stuttering king, Charles I, avoided the problem altogether. On ascending the British throne in 1623, he merely told Parliament: “I am unfit for speaking” and sat down.

Many leading actors have overcome their earlier tendencies to stammer. Actor Bruce Willis’ stutters disappeared after he joined a
high school drama group. Gerard Depardieu was a childhood “dunce” who stammered so badly he could not finish a sentence. Psychological problems locked Depardieu in a nightmare emotional tangle, disrupting his memory and concentration until Dr Alfred Tomatis prescribed daily hours of listening to filtered Mozart and Gregorian chant. Depardieu’s mind, speech and concentration were unlocked to reveal extraordinary creative intelligence, near-photographic memory and perfect musical pitch! His many film roles have included acting in a foreign language, English. (See http://www.tomatis.com)

The most acclaimed of the ancient Greek orators, Demosthenes, overcame his initial weak voice, poorly constructed sentences and bad stammer. After being ridiculed at an early debate, he locked himself away in his study and practiced for weeks. It is said that he cured himself of stammering by practicing his speeches with pebbles in his mouth, while walking on the beach at Piraeus. He overcame his shortness of breath by reciting poetry while running uphill. With much practice, his oratory was so renowned that his reputation is prominent thousands of years later.

Acclaimed Australian actor, John Bell, was heartened by Demosthenes’ example. He wrote in his biography The Time of my Life (Allen and Unwin, 2002, p. 19):

Another thing that drove me to act was a determination to conquer a frightful stutter. I had begun stammering round about the age of 12; by the time I was fifteen I couldn’t get a word out without turning crimson, choking and stuttering.

Inspired by Demosthenes’ example, he turned to acting as a means of curing his weakness:

So I knew it could be beaten; I would have to beat it by acting in public. It was tough going at first and I often had to change words or adlib to get through. It took me twenty years to finally master the problem, and even today, when I am tired or overwrought, I get an attack of stammers, but, thankfully, not on stage.

John Bell’s long, respected career on the boards started because of an impediment – one which his audiences would be surprised to hear that such a master of language ever experienced.

Like shakes, the more you try to control stammers, the more they escalate. If your tongue tangles, stop, have a drink of water and a slow breath. Try reverse psychology. Think: “OK, tongue, just go ahead and trip.”

Humming is an excellent way to control breath and speech. A situation can be rescued with a quiet phrase hummed while writing information on a flipchart, passing out hand-outs or just walking
across the platform. Incorporate a song into your speech and the audience will love you! Keep smiling.
http://www.psychologytoday.com/htdocs/prod/PTOArticle/PTO-19981101-000028.ASP

Handling mistakes
A few mistakes do not a fiasco make. Professionals throw them off casually but file them away to reinvent as an endearing anecdote in later presentations. Make them part of the performance! Put them behind you and keep going whatever happens. That moment is already passed, you cannot go back in time and fix it. Flusters over small mishaps of technology or statistics are not important enough to sabotage a whole presentation. Don’t look back, or, like Lot’s wife, you will be turned into a pillar of salt … or something equally inanimate and bitter tasting.

If you momentarily lose your train of thought, simply pause. Place a hand on your forehead while you exhale. (In your panic, you probably held your breath, right?) Then slowly inhale. Brain fog can happen to anyone. If you don’t make a “thing” about it, the audience will either not notice, or will forgive. Mishaps or pauses that seem to be enormous and lengthy to the presenter are usually minuscule in reality.

Watch the clock
But do so unobtrusively, so audiences don’t pick up a sense of pressure and fluster. Bring a watch or small clock so you can pace your time. Don’t rely on finding one at each venue. Start on time and finish on time. Respect your listeners’ busy schedules and the next speaker’s time limits. Or purchase the Presenter Pro, a pocket-sized time-keeper which can be programmed to vibrate at selected intervals before the conclusion time. See http://www.keithabraham.com.au

Perhaps you have miscalculated your time, and the master of ceremonies is pointing to his watch. Rather than scramble whole chunks into the last minutes, take a breath while you consider which less important points should be omitted. You might ask the audience which of several items would be most valuable and hint that so much material warrants a return visit! Resist overloading your audience with more information than they can absorb. The old performers’ adage “Leave ‘em wanting more” is true for speakers.

Be brief. Listeners welcome a punchy, tightly worded, clear speech rather than droning and convoluted mumbling. One does not have to speak long to be remembered; the Sermon on the Mount takes about five minutes to read aloud. Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address consists of just 10 sentences.
The conclusion

Fool-proof phrases to rouse flagging interest begin: “Finally ...”, “To sum up ...” or “Let me stress ...” This directs back any wandering attentions to focus on your last minutes.

Put as much thought into your last sentence as you did your first. You want the audience to take away the essence of your speech. Leave them with the sense that the time they have spent listening to you has been worthwhile. Perhaps they feel uplifted, challenged or fired for action. Or more relaxed after enjoying your company, your wit and humour.

There are many ways to cross the finishing line. You may encapsulate your content with a quotation or joke which will leave them on a high note. Briefly summarise your main points, or answer a question raised at the outset. Offer a solution to a problem or some satisfying conclusion so the audience feels they have gained from hearing you. Signal finality by slowing the pace towards the end and look directly at your listeners to give strength and intensity to your last words.

People love to receive something extra, free of charge. Handouts or a well-chosen small gift which reminds them of your central message can be given at the end of your presentation rather than earlier when this would distract from your spoken words.

Question time

“What will they ask me?” The fear of the unknown causes many novice speakers to flinch at the thought of answering questions. You will not have this worry if your speech preparation included noting potential queries and practice of appropriate answers.

The words “Are there any questions?” often are met with bald silence. This does not imply failure. If your presentation was so concise and clear that no clarification is needed, or the audience needs a break after a long presentation, don’t extract unwilling questions. Many people may be shy of speaking out and prodding is counterproductive.

Perhaps you might plant a colleague in the audience, primed with a preferred question which you can answer with ease. This breaks that uneasy ice and triggers other questions. Or you could clear the fog with: “Often I’m asked ...”

Because listeners use a different part of the brain when absorbing content, they may be not yet ready to verbalise. A less threatening prompt is to ask them to “Turn to the person next to you and discuss if you have any questions that need clarification.” Or you might casually say, “While I drink a glass of water, think if you have any questions to ask me.” That water will also help you to think fast if any curly questions are lobbed from left field!
case, pause. Reflect. (Perhaps during that moment, ask if a member of the audience may answer the question for you.)

Repeat each question, not only for the people at the back of the hall – who will appreciate your consideration – but also for the tape if you have agreed to a recording. Rephrase and simplify any convoluted or stumbling questions.

Remember, you are the expert. You were invited to speak because of acknowledged qualification or experience. You are prepared, up to date on the research. Most of the audience could not match your command of the topic. Although some questions may be tricky, delivered from grandstands or pushed in wheelbarrows, it is rare that they are actually as hostile as they might first seem. An “on-edge” presenter may mis-read an enthusiastic question as an effort to trip him or her.

Compliment useful or stimulating queries to reinforce important points from your presentation: “That’s an excellent question, I’m glad you raised it.” (But don’t enthuse over all questions or you may appear fawning.) Phrases like “As you no doubt know . . .” “Perhaps you might briefly share your expertise with us . . .” defer to their knowledge while giving yourself time to marshal your own thoughts. Remember, you are the expert, the floor is yours. You own the space.

If you cannot answer a question, it is better to admit it openly than to tangle yourself up in convoluted attempts. People appreciate the honesty of “I don’t think I could do justice to that complicated question without further time or research, but I would be happy to follow it up with you later.” Or “I am not prepared to answer that at present; would someone else like to enlarge on it?”

Perhaps you might feel challenged of neglecting certain sources or accused of omitting important points. Check that you understand each other before hackles rise. They may be working on similar research. Look for areas on which you can agree.

In the unlikely event that you do encounter open hostility, drop your shoulders, take a deep breath and a drink of water. Listen carefully to their points, looking to agree on some common ground. Empathy helps to defuse possible aggression and maintains rapport with the rest of the audience.

Remain objective and realise the person may be envious of your position on the podium. Understanding their position enables you to respond with compassion. Maintain a neutral, even voice and avoid emotive language. Look on this as an excellent opportunity to re-state your position: “Let me clarify my point.” Find a source of agreement: “I understand that you do agree with me on . . .” Or cut it short with “I value your question but I don’t think it’s applicable to today’s topic. I’m happy to discuss it further if you come and see me later.”
If you do feel threatened, deal with their point briefly and then call for the next question. Dodge inelegant public power-struggles that will alienate the rest of the audience, who are otherwise on your side. Most grandstanders will desist once they have their quota of attention. If they try to turn it into a debate, suggest following up the discussion at the end of the session rather than take time from others’ questions.

Keep an eye on the time so your audience does not become restive. Give a brief wrap-up, restate your conclusion and thank them for their interest.

**After the applause**

This book has shown how you can turn those negatives that formerly blocked you into positives which allow your imagination to blossom, your sentences to flow, your words to soar. Now, instead of being knocked sideways by the wave of adrenaline, you can understand and anticipate, utilise, and even welcome it. Properly channelled, this adrenaline will lift that performance from the merely mundane to an exciting and enriching event.

A majority of people struggle through life without ever confronting their worst fears. You are amongst the minority of courageous survivors for you have looked your demons squarely in the face. Congratulations.

You have suppressed unnecessary excesses of ego to the validity of your message and your listeners’ needs. You have met the “enemies” and discovered that they are your friends.

Communication is a two-way equation and your audience relates to how you see them. Now, by throwing off your defences you can build an affinity with your listeners as living, breathing people, instead of a sea of eyes. They will respond as you send out positives with love and humour and you will enjoy your time on the platform.

What you give out comes back to you. If the presenter is positive, at ease, happy, so is the audience. Importantly, so is the person who pays your fee, who might invite you to return!

Now, as you square your shoulders, breathe, smile and walk on stage to confront those glinting sabre-toothed tigers’ eyes, you will discover instead beautiful, soft, friendly pussycats. Hear them purr, as they applaud your words.

You can now take centre-stage with confidence and enjoy your time in the warm glow of the spotlights. Be yourself. Give out. Enjoy!

“Bravo!”
Further reading and bibliography

The following books have been referred to and in some cases briefly quoted from:

Don Campbell, *The Mozart Effect* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1997)
Carla Hannaford, *Smart Moves: Why learning is not all in your head* (Great Ocean, Arlington, Virginia 1995)
Dick Rigby, *Holistic Singing and Toning: Developing voice power for healing and enjoyment* (Kenmore Specialist Centre, Brisbane;1998)

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KEYNOTE/SEMINAR PRESENTER

Ruth Bonetti creates CONFIDENT COMMUNICATION with her proven techniques to conquer presentation anxiety - that Number One Fear in Society. Her simple, practical solutions empower speakers to project with poise, free from vocal tension – so their success escalates.

Author of 10 books including Don't Freak Out - Speak Out; Public Speaking with confidence and Taking Centre Stage, Ruth shows how to lift presentations from the merely mundane to exhilarating, enriching communication.

Ruth polished platform poise in her long international career, having presented across Europe (she speaks German, Swedish and French) and Australia. In America her seminars were repeated by popular demand and she was invited to return the next year.

Clients include Queensland and Northern Territory Governments, Australia – Japan Foundation (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Queensland Institute for Medical Research, Westpac (Women in Business), and Minale Bryce Design. She is an Accredited Professional Speaker of National Speakers Association, Australia.

Ruth is also available for individual coaching, and participants report significant success through training with her.

During her humorous and interactive presentations, audience members learn to be fantastic on their feet – to speak out with confidence. Ruth's practical, simple and empowering techniques ensure participants develop poised, confident communication.

"Thank you so much, Ruth, for enriching the lives of our staff with such a professional and enlightening presentation. The feedback has been fantastic!"

Sheena Harris, Manager, Westpac Business Direct
"So many commented that the course helped them professionally and has been instrumental with their job advancement. They love your positive, empathetic and lively style."

Lynette Palmen, Women's Network Australia