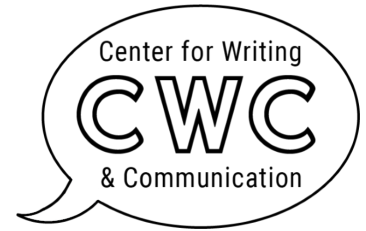


Overcoming Speech Anxiety



Part A. Eight Ways to Conquer Your Fear of Public Speaking

1. Figure out what scares you. Investigate your fears by making a list of the specific things that make you feel anxious or afraid. Then make a corresponding list of ways you can cope with or address these fears. Often, what you imagine is the worst-case scenario ends up not being that bad.
2. Breathe deeply. Practice breathing deeply and slowly. Think yoga style—breathe deeply while you’re practicing, before you go on stage, and during your speech. You can also try the “calming sigh” exercise: Inhale deeply, then let out a vocalized sigh as you exhale. When you’re presenting, you might have the urge to speak too fast or run out of breath; remembering to breathe calms your nervous system and lets you reset your mind and mouth. A tip is to take one breath before you begin talking.
3. Loosen up your body before speaking. Movement reduces tension and helps you concentrate. Doing some light stretching before your speech will calm you and help you get rid of excess nervous energy. You can also try taking note of where you usually store tension in your body and intentionally try to relax those specific muscles.
4. **Practice.** Formal practice before a speaking event will help you feel more confident about what you’re going to say and how you’ll say it. Rehearse your speech or presentation with a friend, family member, or classmate, or make an appointment at the Center for Writing and Communication and have a tutor give feedback. Informal practice in social situations (talking in

class, speaking to people you don't know at a party, etc.) will also help you conquer some of your speaking anxiety and fears.

5. Visualize success. Picture yourself succeeding and surviving. Close your eyes and do a mental rehearsal of your speech once or twice before you deliver it. Understand that even if you mess up, you went into the situation prepared and did the best you could.

6. Get enough sleep and have a good breakfast. It's important to take good care of yourself and **follow your morning rituals** before a speaking event. Don't drink coffee if you're not a coffee drinker (or if you're a regular coffee-drinker, make sure to get that daily cup the day of your big speech). Being rested will also help you feel less anxious.

7. Visit the space ahead of time. Get as many details as you can about the room, the audience, the equipment, your time constraints, etc. Do you need a watch, or is there a big clock at the back of the room? Will you have a podium? Where will the audience be around you? Is someone going to introduce you or will you need to introduce yourself? If you're speaking on a panel, find out about the set-up, etc.

8. Visit a CWC Tutor! Our tutors take appointments seven days a week and will tutor all undergraduate and graduate students. Tutors can videotape you, offer feedback and advice, and can even meet with you consecutively as you work to brainstorm, organize, and practice a speech. And it's free!

Remember: Your style of speaking won't be exactly the same as anyone else's. There are general conventions for presenting that may differ from your natural personality. It's okay to take some personal liberty—as long as your message comes across clearly and effectively overall.

Part B. Eight common public speaking fears and ways to overcome them:

1. **Fear:** The audience hates me.

Solution: Most of the time, the audience wants you to succeed. Sometimes you may have one or two people in the audience who are frowning, but it's important not to take this too personally. And if someone asks you a hostile question during Q&A, first acknowledge and clarify the question, then respectfully state your answer or opinion. Remember that some people simply come across as more abrupt or unfriendly than they mean to.

2. **Fear:** My PowerPoint will crash.

Solution: Yes, there's a good chance it will crash. PowerPoint is not reliable, but all hope is not lost. Have a backup plan—handouts, overheads, etc. Practice with them. The audience will appreciate your ability to recover with grace and keep the presentation moving despite technical difficulties.

3. **Fear:** I have nothing interesting to say, and the audience will be bored by my presentation.

Solution: First, remember that you deserve to be heard. Using your voice to share something with the world is one of the most powerful tools you have. Next, choose a topic that excites you—if you're excited, your audience will likely stay engaged in your talk. Work on verbal and nonverbal strategies for engagement, such as eye contact, vocal variety, gestures, and movement. Share examples that are relevant and meaningful to your specific audience. The more you tailor your speech to the audience, the more they will listen and stay involved.

4. **Fear:** I'll forget everything that I wanted to say.

Solution: Practice. It's said that practice doesn't necessarily make things perfect, but it does make them permanent. With lots of it, you'll at least remember what you want to say! Also, use key word outlines to keep you on track. If you get stuck, don't panic. Instead, stop, breathe, look at your notes, and get back on track.

5. **Fear:** I'll run out of time or I'll finish way too early.

Solution: Practice with a stopwatch. Do this often enough that you get a sense of timing. Have a clock with you during your speech and note to yourself specific places in your speech where you will check the clock to see how you're doing. You can also rehearse how you would cut down your speech if you find yourself running low on time. Knowing this will reduce your anxiety. If you finish early, you can answer questions or share an extra anecdote or example.

6. **Fear:** People can't understand me because I talk too quickly or too softly when I'm nervous.

Solution: You're right—speaking too quickly or softly makes it hard for your audience to understand you. Deep breathing is crucial, both for minimizing anxiety and for supporting a clear, loud voice. Practice speaking to the back of the room and picture your voice as a powerful laser that you can aim at all corners of the room. Consciously insert pause and breaths into your speech by marking them in your notes. Remember that silence is a powerful rhetorical tool that serves you as well as your listeners, who need time to digest what you're saying.

7. **Fear:** I will say the wrong word, forget a section of my speech, or do something embarrassing.

Solution: Number your note cards so they'll be easy to put back in order if you drop them. Wear clothes and shoes in which you feel comfortable, and eliminate distractions like jingly jewelry, keys in pockets, pens you click, or hair you twirl. Anticipate possible disruptions and do what you can to prevent them.

8. **Fear:** Asking someone to listen to my speech or presentation will inconvenience them/make them angry with me/be embarrassing.

Solution: There's no shame in asking for help! If you still feel uncomfortable asking a friend, family member, or classmate for help, you can make an appointment at the Center for Writing and Communication. A tutor can listen to your presentation, give feedback, film your presentation, or even fill out a mock-rubric.