

Public Speaking: America's Leading Phobia -- Part I

Few things are more frightening than having to stand up and deliver a speech. I have been teaching and writing on the subject for more than 25 years, and I still cannot figure out why standing up in front of an audience and speaking is such an intimidating experience. Although texts on the subject advance a variety of psychological theories and a battery of methods to combat stage fright, the problem continues to remain an enigma. At the risk of oversimplification, here are a few of the more common causes of stage fright: 1) fear of the unknown, 2) fear of being judged, 3) reluctance to face consequences, 4) insufficient knowledge, 5) inexperience, and 6) overall low self-esteem.

Simply identifying the cause of stage fright will not automatically cure it. The phenomenon rarely yields to rational analysis. Like many other phobias, insight alone does not guarantee a cure. There are countless individuals who know exactly why they feel or behave in a particular way, but are helpless to change things.

Here are some of my thoughts on speechmaking. Although I still get a little nervous in front of an unfamiliar audience, experience has enabled me to channel my nervous energy with considerable effectiveness.

Public speaking, like any other art form, demands practice. This, in turn, demands a clear-cut picture of what one should practice. Of all the elements required for successful speechmaking, organization heads the list. The best speech in the world will inevitably fail if it lacks organization. There are times, in politics, where the most obvious gobbledygook is able to masquerade as substance simply because it is well-organized.

There are five ways to organize a speech: 1) chronologically, 2) spatially, 3) topically, 4) cause/effect, and 5) problem/solution. If you use the chronological pattern, organize your speech according to when things occur in time, e.g., how long it takes for food to reach the stomach, small intestine, large intestine, etc. If you use the spatial pattern, organize it according to where it occurs in space, e.g., the brain is located in the cranial vault, the heart and lungs in the thoracic cavity, etc. If you employ the topical pattern, arrange things according to various topics, e.g., nervous system, cardiovascular system, etc. The cause and effect pattern calls for arranging things like this: smoking (cause) = lung cancer (effect). Lastly, the problem/solution pattern reverses the cause/effect pattern by identifying lung cancer as the problem and a ban on smoking as the solution.

The fundamental components of a well-organized speech must include an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In an introduction, you must introduce yourself by name ("Good morning, my name is Dr. John Smith"); disclose the topic of your speech ("Today, I shall be talking about chiropractic"); why you have chosen to talk about chiropractic ("I have chosen to speak to you about chiropractic because most people do not realize that it is the second largest branch of the healing arts"); and lastly, which aspects of your subject you will be addressing ("I shall be talking about chiropractic from three perspectives: a) its legal status, b) the scientific principles upon which it is based, and

c) the types of illness it can treat successfully. These are the things a good introduction should contain.

After making your introduction, you are ready to get into the body of your speech. In the body, you must expand on those things you outlined in your introduction. The legal aspect of chiropractic is first. You must also break it down into three sub-parts. For example: local, state, and federal regulations governing the practice of chiropractic. Do the same with the subject of scientific principles, e.g., biomechanical, neurological, and biochemical. And finally, with regard to the conditions it successfully treats, e.g., musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal. These examples of course, should not be taken to be all-inclusive representations of the conditions chiropractic can successfully treat.

An introduction organized in this manner will tell your audience exactly what you're talking about, why you're talking about it, and which aspects of the subject you're addressing. Having done this, your introduction is now behind you.

The body of your speech will consume the greatest amount of time. It will consist of main points and sub-points (sometimes referred to as primary and secondary points.)

After you have expanded on your subject in the body of your speech, it is time for your conclusion. Here, you must emphatically alert your audience to the fact that you are winding down -- that the end of your speech is near. Do this by beginning with the words, "In conclusion, in summation, or in closing. ..." Your summation should then recapitulate what you told them you were going to talk about in your introduction. Because most people have a very short attention span, it is essential that you restate the high points of your speech. You may also, when wrapping up your speech, add some additional remarks you feel the audience should know and remember.

Despite the fact that you may already be an accomplished speaker, or that your audience is unusually receptive to your message, be convinced that organization is the sine qua non of any good speech.

The next important thing to keep in mind is a serious audience analysis. There are two kinds of speakers: Those who are speech-centered and those who are audience-centered. Speech-centered individuals are those who are pre-occupied with their speech, rather than the audience for whom their speech is intended. Conversely, audience-centered individuals are preoccupied with whether their message is getting through and being understood. While either extreme can be legitimately defended as appropriate, I am inclined toward the audience-centered approach. The best speech in the world will fall flat on its face if the intended audience fails to understand and accept its message. It is not unlike the cliché, "The operation was successful, but the patient died." I therefore strongly recommend that every speechmaker perform an intensive audience analysis before uttering a sound.

One should now ask, "What are the ingredients of a good audience analysis?" It should take into consideration such variables as: age, group size, gender, education, knowledge of the subject, culture, language, economic status, intelligence, religion, occupation, demography, emotional disposition, political composition, and any special group affiliation. While these considerations may seem excessive, I assure you that the more you know about your audience, the better your chances of becoming a successful speechmaker.

Let me illustrate how a few of the aforementioned variables can make a difference. Take the question of age. If you were expected to address a group of teenagers, would your topic choice be the same as with an audience of senior citizens? Of course not. You must choose a topic with which

your audience is familiar and in which it is interested. I would never talk about menopause with an audience of young brides, nor would I talk about career changes to a group of retired stockbrokers.

Then, there is the matter of education. Surely you wouldn't address people who haven't gone past the sixth grade in the same way that you would an audience of college graduates. Your choice of words would be different and your references, in the form of metaphor and simile, would be keyed to your audience's experience. Add to this an awareness of your audience's economic status. How do you think an audience composed of middle-class people would respond to a remark like, "Imagine that you got up one morning, had some eggs benedict and a cappuccino, jumped into your Mercedes, and drove off to a broad meeting." Such allusions are clearly inappropriate for an audience of modest means.

Preconceptions and misconceptions are also worthwhile mentioning, especially when they pertain to chiropractic. Since every speaker should strive to be clearly understood, having an audience possess erroneous information from the start will present an additional problem that must be overcome. As if it were not difficult enough to communicate new information, having to clarify or dispel misinformation will make a speaker's task that much more difficult.

To attract new patients, many public relation strategies involve addressing lay groups. Basically, such audiences break down into those who have had chiropractic before, those who have heard about chiropractic but have never had it, and those who are totally ignorant of its very existence. Each group will require a slightly different approach.

Hopefully, I have impressed you with the importance of making a comprehensive audience analysis. If so, I shall now move on to a few other principles that facilitate effective public speaking.

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