



WINNING WAYS

It's natural to feel anxious about speaking in public, says Sarah Lloyd-Hughes, but, channelled properly, your nerves can help you to succeed

Whether you're speaking at an industry conference, pitching for investment or just sharing your views at a team meeting, public speaking carries high stakes – and, often, high levels of nerves.

Often cited as top of the list of a professional's fears, I am regularly asked: "How can I get rid of my public speaking fear?" or "How can I make sure my audience doesn't see that I'm nervous?" or "How can I do a *perfect* piece of public speaking?" But so long as you're concentrating on pushing away your fears and nerves, you're *acting*, rather than *connecting* with your audience.

If this is your approach, you're focusing on the wrong thing.

All speakers – professional or rookie – experience public speaking nerves. The difference between a beginner and an expert is simply the *degree to which you take your public speaking nerves seriously*.

Public speaking nerves are not the problem – taking them too seriously is.

How public speaking nerves happen

When adrenaline is released into our bloodstream by our adrenal glands and we're nervous, it plays havoc with our ability to act normally. This is natural.

It's simply a physiological reaction to a stimulus. We're wired to see a multitude of eyes looking at us as a threat. Our body tells us: "You're going to get eaten by a predator if you stay here" and the 'fight or flight' mechanism is triggered.

Our body is telling us to run, hide or fight – and so our limbs fill with blood and adrenaline, while our brain functioning is deprioritised. That's why we sweat, get the wobbles and go blank. Of course, all of this is happening while you're standing on a stage, so you can't reasonably run away. You're left with all the sensations of extra energy in the body, without being able to use it.

Four key strategies for working with nerves

1. Let the nerves slide

The good news is that when you notice your nerves and let them pass, they soon disappear. If you're shaking, struggling for breath or blushing (which I do from time to time) and you take it as a sign you're doing something wrong, it will get worse. But if you say to yourself: "Oh, it's just me blushing, no problem", you'll soon cool down and get back to normal.

The aim, therefore, is not to have no nerves, because this is a place where public speaking seems very lacking in energy. The aim is to become *comfortable in discomfort*, so that you can allow your nerves to transform into something more powerful.

2. Perfection is *not* the most important thing

Often it's the desire to be 'perfect' at public speaking that causes us to feel more nervous than we might. We have the feeling that people are judging us; that the second we go wrong we will lose all credibility.

But who decided what 'perfect public speaking' is anyway?

Is it reading out your prepared material exactly as planned? Is it knowing the exact, precise answer to every single question? We tell ourselves "Yes, it's exactly that!" But the reality couldn't be further from the truth.

Truly powerful public speaking starts not with 100% perfect public speaking, but with learning to be yourself when you speak.

Think about all the speakers you have been moved by in the past – those who you remember, or who have touched you. From Winston Churchill to Mahatma Gandhi, the most powerful public speakers are all different to each other. Some might seem really confident, others deep and insightful, others funny, others relatively quiet, but touching.

What unites them is that all of the most powerful speakers have learned to accept themselves. They know where they shine – and they know how to step beyond their comfort zone in service of their audience.

There is no 'perfect' speaker, only a speaker who is powerfully themselves.

3. Get over your self-obsession – and you'll get over your nerves

One of the biggest causes of public speaking nerves that I see time and again is that we obsess about ourselves.

We think: "I'm the public speaker, so I must be the most important person in the room" or "They're all looking at me, waiting for me to screw up" or "What must they think of me?"

The truth is that the audience is thinking a lot less about you than you imagine. Consider when you were last an audience member. What were you thinking about as you entered the room – "I wonder how the speaker's feeling?" or "I wonder what I'm going to get from this talk?" Probably the latter. Or possibly "I wonder what's for dinner?" might be closer to the truth.

The point is that the members of your audience are more concerned about themselves than they are about their speaker. They want some kind of value, but they're not scrutinising you nearly as much as you're scrutinising yourself.

If, instead of focusing on yourself, you turn your attention to your audience and ask: "What can I offer them?" you will find that you become less nervous and more capable of serving their needs.

They can't see your nerves anyway.

A good thing to remember is that you feel every little nervous twinge in your body and your audience might see only 20% of what's going on for you. So even if you're trembling like a kitten, the chances are your audience won't notice.

You're up on stage, in a heightened state, whereas they're chilling in their seats, so there's no reason for your audience to focus on your nerves.

4. See yourself succeeding

Our mental imagery plays a huge part in the degree to which we are successful, especially in high-pressured situations such as professional sports or public speaking. Psychologists have shown that when a sportsperson is serving at match point or trying to sink the winning putt, their mental imagery significantly impacts upon their chance of success.

So, how do you relate to your public speaking? If you see yourself as bad at public speaking, the part of your brain known as the reticular activating system will pull out all of the times in your life when you have felt that you did a bad job at public speaking – even if it was only one time out of 100.

If, on the other hand, you decide within yourself that you're actually quite good at public speaking, your reticular activating system will start finding all of the reasons to *support* your confidence.

What we focus on becomes a reality.

To help reinforce a positive mental image of your speaking, you could:

- ◆ Run through your speech or presentation, watching yourself succeed. The brain doesn't distinguish between a made-up memory and a real one, so in imagining success you're telling your brain you've done this before.
- ◆ Use a breathing exercise to build your confidence. Oxygen has a pacifying effect on nerves, so take a moment before you speak to breathe in lungfuls of air – and allow that to alter your confidence.

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- ◆ Build yourself a stage persona. Decide who you would *like* to be when you step on stage. Get an outfit, piece of jewellery or mental image that reminds you of this.

The route to inspire

Once you've battled through your nerves, you'll realise that any personality type can become a powerful speaker – and even that you can enjoy it on the way. As you enjoy your speaking you will realise that you can also *inspire* an audience, simply by being yourself.

Your nerves are a signal that there is something important for you about public speaking – so don't shy away from it.

The very best thing you can do is to get out there and speak. ♥



Sarah Lloyd-Hughes is author of *How to be Brilliant at Public Speaking* (Pearson). She also specialises in helping people to become more inspiring public speakers, through her company Ginger Training & Coaching. For more, see www.gingerpublicspeaking.com