

Why You Need to Be a Decent Public Speaker

To succeed in the workplace you need to become a decent public speaker.

By **Karen Burns, Contributor** June 9, 2010



Karen Burns

YOU'RE AT A FUNERAL. Where in the room would you rather be: lying in the casket or standing up front giving the eulogy? Most people pick the casket (at least according to Jerry Seinfeld).

OK, it's a joke, but it's true that many people claim they fear public speaking more than death itself.

[See [15 essentials to getting hired.](#)]

If this sounds like you, you may not appreciate the following advice: To succeed in the workplace you need to become a decent public speaker.

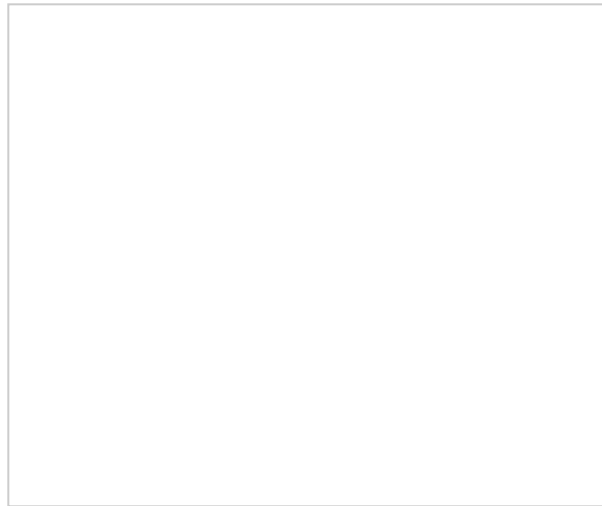
Why? Because being able to speak in front of people is a tremendously helpful career skill. Whether you're employed or still hunting, whether you're on the first rung of the career ladder or in the corner office, knowing how to articulate your thoughts to your fellow humans is an essential component of success, no matter what field you're in.

What better way to shine at job interviews, or in staff meetings, or at business luncheons than to express yourself clearly, confidently, coherently, and concisely? Speaking makes you visible. Speaking makes you memorable. Speaking can even make you look smarter than you really are. According to a study cited last year in [Time](#), those who speak up in groups are perceived as more intelligent than those who do not, even when they are less knowledgeable.

[See [why you don't need to love your job.](#)]

Still terrified by the thought of getting up in front of a group and—gulp—saying something? The only way you're going to get through this is to practice. So consider joining Toastmasters or any other group where you can develop some speaking skills. And consider these 10 Consoling Truths of Public Speaking:

1. You will likely never not be nervous about speaking in public. Nervousness is normal. Just accept it.



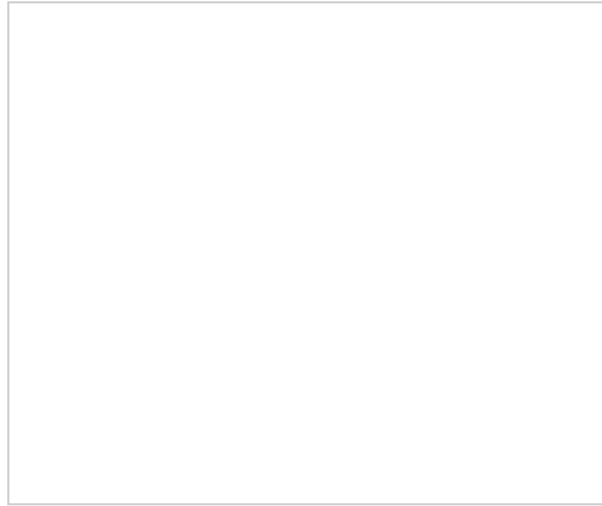
2. Your audience is on your side. Since they're probably terrified of public speaking, too, they respect anyone who does it. They want you to succeed.

3. You don't have to have confidence in yourself to do a good job of speaking in public. But you do have to have confidence in your message. This means you need to truly and deeply know what you're talking about.

4. Showing your enthusiasm, your belief in what you're saying, your passion for your subject, is the best way to engage your listeners. Passion perks people up.

[See [how to take risks in your career.](#)]

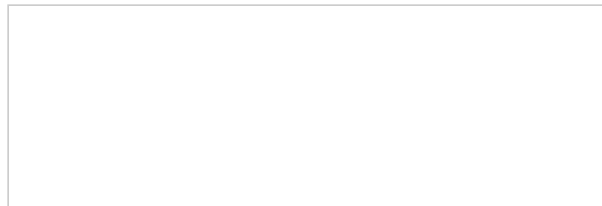
5. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the most effective way to calm your fears is to look directly at your listeners and talk to them, individually. Their bright shining faces will give you the courage to go on.
6. Making a mistake (dropping your notes, stumbling over your words, forgetting a point) can actually endear you to an audience. So don't make a big deal of it. Smile, apologize, correct yourself, and carry on.
7. Don't memorize your speech. It will feed your fear that you'll forget something. Plus it'll put pressure on you to be "perfect," which is both impossible and a recipe for anxiety. Be your genuine, courteous, engaged, humble-but-knowledgeable self.
8. Know your audience. What do they want to hear about? What are their priorities? Focusing on their concerns instead of yours is another good way to lift yourself out of your pit of anxiety.
9. The most effective messages are the simple ones. Don't bury your audience under a mountain of data. Two or three key points are about all most groups can easily digest in any one sitting. They will thank you for this.
10. Know your purpose. Why are you speaking? Normally it's to inform, educate, or entertain. However, you may have a hidden (even to yourself) agenda: to impress people. This is natural but if you are speaking only to impress, it's going to show and your listeners will be turned off. Impressing an audience is the result of doing a good job of informing, educating, or entertaining (see Nos. 1 through 9). That's the key to effectively speaking to anyone.



Karen Burns is the author of the illustrated career advice book [The Amazing Adventures of Working Girl: Real-Life Career Advice You Can Actually Use](#), recently released by Running Press. She blogs at www.karenburnsworkinggirl.com.

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Edited by [Rebecca Koenig](#).

