

Speechless?

Three Ways to Handle
Public Speaking Anxiety

BY IAIN LAMPERT

Most public finance officials don't have a background in public speaking, and are unnerved by the very idea of it. But you don't have to be. You could be excited. Here are three methods for you to try to handle speech anxiety.



#1 Treat the stage like your playground.

Plenty of speakers are paralyzed when nothing stands between them and their judgmental audience, creating a negative loop where they're too nervous to move forward. So they stay put, which invites more negative judgment, which fosters more nervousness. The answer here is to break out of the cycle before it starts.

Try to lean on things. The podium, the conference table—mark your territory before the judges walk in. No area's "off limits" if you have the gumption to spread your wings and take up space.

Don't be afraid to "break the rules" of space—like walking into the audience instead of staying still on the dais. This is sometimes called being a cat. A cat would sit and sleep wherever it damn well pleases, and you can do the same.

#2 Warm up.



Tongue twisters are a great way to start. Here are some to try:

- Red leather, yellow leather, green leather, purple leather.
- You know you need unique New York.
- The six sheiks' sixth sleep's sick.

Wailing like a siren (starting low and going high) will help you clear up your throat. It might seem silly, but the benefits are well-documented. You wouldn't run a marathon before stretching your legs, so why give a high-stakes speech before stretching your vocal cords?

Here's another one. Playing the watermelon game (where you repeat a nonsense word in place of your speech's script, but use gestures and inflection as if you were communicating truly valuable content) can even be fun.

If you're concerned about being understood because of your accent, here are three options:

- Prepare fallback jokes for any mispronounced words.
- Change words you have trouble pronouncing.
- Do the "pencil drill" to warm up, which involves putting a pencil in your teeth and working to get through every word as you say your speech.
- Read your script to someone who isn't familiar with it. If they can't understand key words, that shows you where to slow down and focus.

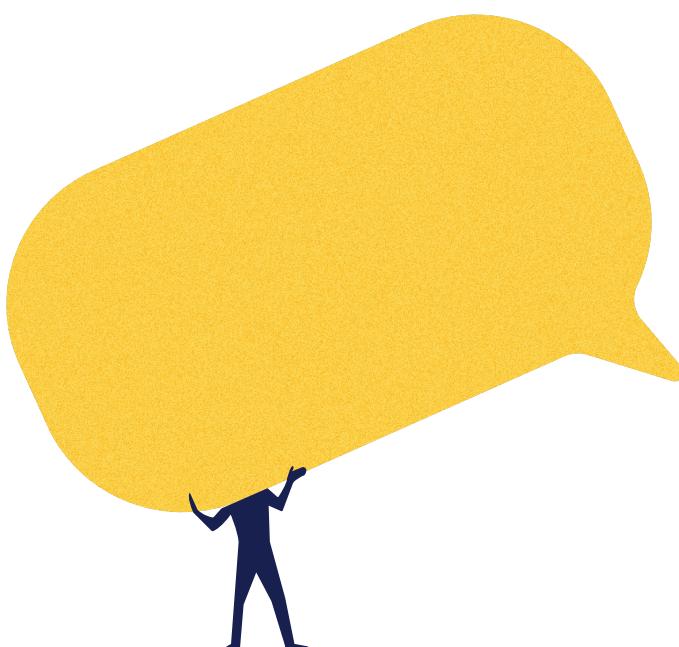
#3 Practice like you'll perform.

After you've memorized your speech, perform it in front of someone (running it by yourself is next to meaningless). It doesn't matter if they're barely paying attention—the mere idea that you're practicing by engaging another human being beats reading your words alone. Doing it with a group is even better!

People are mainly scared of public speaking because they rarely do it. If you've never said your presentation's words to a crowd, the first time will be terrifying. By the time you've gotten through the speech a dozen times in comparable conditions? It's a breeze. Even rehearsing with a small audience is much more effective than doing it alone.

You Can Do It!

Giving a few speeches probably won't eliminate your anxiety—but you can work to outgrow it. Claim your space before you start, resting a hand on the corner of the table and walking the edges like it's your home turf. Warm up your voice backstage, whispering tongue twisters and shaking out your shoulders. Then deliver that speech, which you've practiced in full, with real people watching.



Make Your Next Speech **EPIC**

Transform your speeches with storytelling



W is for **W**hat

hen you think about storytelling in speeches, you might envision one of those online short-but-high-impact talks—but those are about introducing novel ideas worth sharing.

You could also imagine high school or college speech and debate, which is about persuasion through research or dramatics—but storytelling in speeches is much simpler.

You don't need to be a technology, entertainment, or design speaker or debate champion to take a scattered set of work experiences and turn them into a simple story. Most narratives fall into one of four major themes: evolution, persistence, illumination, and connection. This is called the EPIC system, and you can use it to focus your speeches and make them more effective.

E is for **E**volve

Evolution speakers: Marie Curie, the Wright Brothers, Iron Man

Stories about evolution celebrate innovators, inventors, change makers, and dreamers. They're the people who look at Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw's quote, "Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?" and nod enthusiastically.

Stories of evolution are fundamentally about the transformation of individuals, of societies, of what's possible. They follow characters who don't settle for the status quo. These narratives resonate because they inspire growth. Whether it's a scientist defying gender norms, siblings chasing flight, or a billionaire building a better suit (and better conscience), the arc is always forward.



P is for **P**ersist

Persistence speakers: Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, and Hunger Games character Katniss Everdeen

These are stories about people who couldn't be broken. They stood up for their principles and refused to bend the knee, take a seat, or crack under pressure. These folks agree with the saying, "If you're going through hell, keep going."

Persistence narratives are anchored in resilience. They show what it looks like to be tested and still stand firm. What makes these stories powerful is the characters' refusal to let that hardship define them. Audiences connect with persistence stories when they're wondering if their efforts matter. These tales reassure us that grit has value.

I is for **I**lluminate

Illumination speakers: Sir David Attenborough, Bill Nye, and animated Magic Bus character Ms. Frizzle

These are stories that introduce audiences to things they never knew. They're informative, expository, and guide us to see things in a new light. "Knowledge is love and light and vision," as Helen Keller said, and these stories illuminate us with knowledge.

Illumination stories focus our attention on truths we've never thought

to explore. They're especially powerful when they take complex or overlooked topics and make them feel real and urgent. Through metaphor, humor, data, or dramatic storytelling, the speaker becomes a guide. These narratives work best when your goal is to lay the foundation for a call to action.

C is for **C**onnect

Connection speakers: Fred Rogers, Dolly Parton, and television's favorite coach, Ted Lasso

These are stories about love and togetherness, and they make powerful statements of shared humanity. Philosopher Albert Camus once warned, "Man is an idea, and a precious small idea—once he turns his back on love." Connection narratives broaden and deepen our bonds.

These stories are the emotional glue of any presentation. They bypass logic and go straight for the heart. When your aim is to build trust or unify a team, connection stories are essential. They allow audiences to feel seen. In an increasingly fragmented world, stories that connect us remind us why we're all in this together. ☀

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