

MAKING ORAL PRESENTATIONS:

DEALING WITH NERVOUSNESS

Below are some general suggestions for dealing with the nervousness that many people experience when making public presentations. Some of these tips are designed to minimize your anxiety whereas others aim to help you conceal your nervousness.

Minimizing Your Anxiety

1. The importance of practice can not be overstated. First practice by yourself and then in front of others. If possible, practice in the room in which you will give your talk. This will enable you to learn how the equipment (lights, etc.) in the room operates, work out any problems with the room ahead of time (such as no light at the podium when the room is darkened for showing slides), and visualize yourself giving a talk in that room.
2. Use an outline for your talk, not a text. It is too difficult to find your place in a text once you start speaking. The exception to this rule is that you should bring the first paragraph and the last paragraph of your talk to the podium. Your nervousness will probably be at its maximum when you begin your presentation and this will help you to ease your way into the talk. And at the end, if you need to cut your talk short, your last paragraph will help ensure that you do not forget to include your key points in your summary.
3. Print your outline in 18 - 20 point font so that you will be able to immediately find your place when you quickly glance down at it. Indicate on your outline when you plan to show a slide.
4. As an inexperienced speaker, it may be useful for you to aim to imitate someone whose presentations you admire.
5. Have someone videotape a presentation when you feel you are nervous. When you later review the tape you probably will find that you did not project your nervousness nearly as much as you thought you had.
6. Just like athletes "psych" themselves up before the competition, you too can benefit from such preparation. While sitting, close your eyes and imagine the room in which you will speak. Envision yourself giving a great seminar. Think about how you will present your talk and what it will feel like when you are done. It is best if you can do this exercise for several days before your talk.
7. Deep breathing (often called "belly breathing") right before your seminar may help you physically relax. Arrange to be alone for a few minutes before you present. (Make this requirement clear to your host ahead of time and then insist on it.) Focus on your breathing, taking *deep* breaths by exercising your diaphragm. If you are doing this exercise correctly, your "belly" will move in and out as you breathe, however if you place a hand over your breastbone, this area will not be moving.

8. Soon after your presentation ask trustworthy people for feedback on your delivery of the material (what you did well and what could be improved). Use this information to better your future presentations.

Concealing Your Nervousness

1. Arrange for a podium - these are great for concealing shaking legs and are much easier to read from than a horizontal surface.
2. If you cannot control a tendency to pace while you speak, wear shoes that do not make noise as you walk.
3. Empty your pockets of all items (change, etc.) before you begin OR wear a jacket that has roomy pockets so that you can place *one* object (coin, paperclip, etc.) in it and focus your fidgeting on that item.
4. Have water at the podium. In addition to correcting a dry throat, the brief pause in speaking that drinking provides you may be long enough to help you to organize your thoughts. Avoid drinks with ice. (You don't want to start choking!)

Points to Remember

1. Some nervousness is natural; it is a sign that you are taking the task seriously and wish to do your best. Even the most experienced speakers get nervous before an important talk. It is when nervousness becomes incapacitating that it is a problem.
2. The audience does not want to sit through a bad talk - they are sitting there silently encouraging you to do well.
3. The audience knows that you, as a junior person, are inexperienced and no one expects you to give a dynamite seminar. Thus, now is the time to get as much practice as possible and develop your skills so that in later years, when people expect better seminars, you will do well.
4. Skills develop only with practice - accept all of the speaking invitations you are given and actively look for more.
5. Recognize that great speakers are often very experienced speakers. It would not be unusual for a senior scientist to have given well over 1,000 seminars and lectures. Do not frustrate yourself by expecting your presentations to be as good as those of someone who has many years more experience than you. Your skills will develop over time.
6. And finally, as H. Jackson Brown, Jr., said "Be brave. Even if you're not, pretend to be. No one can tell the difference."