

Scared Speechless <http://www.back2college.com/publicspeaking.htm>

Draw on life experiences when building a classroom presentation

By Cyndi Allison

Your palms are sweating. Your eyelids are twitching. Your breakfast is on spin cycle.

It's your turn to stand in front of fellow students and deliver a speech.

Speaking in public is cited as being the number one fear for American adults. It ranks ahead of being bitten by a dog, being hit by a truck and death.

Although many students dread and even put off taking a public speaking class, most students understand the need to develop and polish speaking skills. "I should have taken this class [Fundamentals of Speech] my first year," said Stephanie, a returning student at Catawba College.

Studies show that employers rank oral communication skills right at the top of desirable qualities considered when making hiring decisions. Grade point average doesn't even make the top ten.

Older students actually have a leg-up when taking a public speaking class. Younger students have far fewer years and life experiences to draw on when hammering together a five to seven minute presentation. Returning students have worn a variety of hats—employee/boss, husband/wife, parent/grandparent. Extra mileage translates into excellent fodder for public speaking assignments.

Go with What You Know.

When given an option, always go with a topic you know well and care about. It's far easier to speak from experience than from detailed notes about an unfamiliar subject area. Plus, it's more fun to work with material you enjoy.

Once a student started his speech with: "I play almost every sport you can imagine. Today, I'm going to talk to you about lacrosse, since I don't know anything about the game."

Although the student had done extensive research about the history of lacrosse and the rules of the sport, he would have been far better off discussing a familiar sport he had played prior.

Some of the best presentations I've seen have been drawn from life experiences. For example, this semester a local factory worker told the class about fire protection systems. She brought samples of sprinkler heads from work and explained how the sprinklers in the classroom worked. A cosmetologist gave a demonstration on how to attach hair weaves. A farmer detailed the lost art of milking a cow by hand. A mother with teenage children demonstrated how to make taco soup in a slow cooker.

Organize.

Once you decide on a topic, it's very important to organize materials. Remember that you don't need to share everything you know about a subject. Determine your bottom line and make sure all materials support your goals.

Set up an outline, so you'll know what you're working with. Typically you work out the points for the body of the presentation first. Order materials systematically. If you want to show the class how to sew on a button, then practice and note each step in the process. If you want to build an argument against capital punishment, then list your reasons and order them logically. Often, it works well to save your strongest argument for last.

Once you have the presentation body set up, then spend some time working on the introduction. It's important to set the stage for your presentation. Be sure to draw the audience in.

One of my students did a presentation on supporting the Lions Club eyeglass collection program. At the beginning of the speech, she flipped the lights off. "Can you imagine sitting in the dark during this class?" she asked. When she flipped the lights back on seconds later, the speaker had the full attention of every class member.

Don't overlook the conclusion. This is your last chance to make a lasting impression. Be sure to drive home your main points. Give a quick summary and end with a strong statement or thought-provoking question.

Leave an echo in the room.

Fill-in-the-Blanks.

Once you have your outline set up, then go back and fill-in-the-blanks. Consider various ways to make your point or points. Remember that visuals, anecdotes, and quotations transform chunks of data into memorable information your audience can digest and use.

If you think back to "Show and Tell" in grade school, then you'll remember that it's far easier to explain when you have something to display. Some presentations require visuals. For example, it's virtually impossible to demonstrate how to press flowers unless you have the tools to do so. On the other hand, some speeches can be delivered without visuals. Still, visuals do add variety and make the information easier to follow and digest. Consider posters, overhead slides, or PowerPoint.

Anecdotes are simply little stories to back up the information presented. Everyone enjoys a good story. Draw from your own experiences and add short narratives to highlight your key points. For example, one student gave a speech on eating smart. The speech would have been very standard had the student not told the class how she used the "smart eating approach" to drop 100 pounds over two years time.

A solid quotation can be used to start or end a presentation and to back up your own ideas. Simply check a cataloged quotation reference book or look online at [Quoteland](#) or at [Quotation Dictionary](#). For example, I put “quotation” in the search bar at Quotation Dictionary and found nine quotes on quotations including the following:

“A quotation in a speech, article or book is like a rifle in the hands of an infantryman. It speaks with authority.”—Brendan Francis

Practice.

Once you have the outline and supporting materials gathered, you need to practice out loud. Although some studies indicate that mentally throwing free shots between basketball games increases basket rates, going over a speech in your head is not the same as giving it out loud.

Try to practice with an audience. Give your presentation for your family or for some friends. Ask for specific feedback.

- What did you find most helpful in my speech?
- What parts were hard to follow?
- Which examples or visuals helped most?
- Do I need to add more visuals?
- Did I interact well?
- Did I do or say anything distracting?

If you can't find an audience, then practice in front of a mirror or tape your presentation (audio or video are both helpful). Although you may feel silly talking to your mirror or cringe when you hear or see the tape, you really will learn a lot about your speaking style and skills if you sit back and evaluate.

Slip into the Speaking Zone.

Always get plenty of sleep the night before you speak. Eat lightly beforehand. Wear comfortable clothes. This is not the day to sport brand new heels.

Breathe deeply before you step up to the lectern. It may help to close your eyes and mentally picture a favorite place like a spot in the woods or a sunny stretch of sand at the beach.

Say something nice to yourself before you step up to speak. You would never dream of looking at the person next to you in class and sneering, “I’ll bet your speech is going to be terrible. No one will be interested. You’ll probably get a bad grade.” But, many students will say those kinds of things prior to speaking. Little wonder it’s hard to get up and give a speech after hearing words like those in your head. Replace those thoughts

with: "You know your material. You worked hard on the presentation. Everyone is looking forward to hearing what you have to say."

You Can Do It!

If you're working toward a degree, then you'll probably have to take a speaking class or give some presentations in specific classes. Draw on your years of experience to come up with ideas. Draft an outline with introduction, body, and conclusion. Add color to the presentation with visuals, anecdotes, and quotations. Practice out loud. Finally, relax. You'll do just fine, and you'll get better every time you step to the front of the room.

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