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On Speaking Terms: How to Get Through Talking in Front of a Crowd

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LISjobs.com's career development newsletter, ISSN 1532-0839

May 01 2006

On Speaking Terms: How to Get Through Talking in Front of a Crowd

Published by [rachel](#) at 12:25 pm under [speaking](#)

by [Samantha Schmehl Hines](#)

We've all heard the axiom that the thing people fear most in life is speaking in public. Perhaps that is even true for some librarians. Even if public speaking isn't on your personal top ten list of fears, it can still be difficult to muster up the courage to address a crowd. Yet, librarians' job descriptions increasingly involve speaking to groups of people, through teaching, addressing a meeting, interviewing for a job, or presenting at conferences.

Practice Makes Presentations

How can we become more confident in this area? This will horrify some, but the best way to become comfortable and competent at public speaking is through practice. Practice speeches before you deliver them to your audience. Gather your cats together and tell them all about ProQuest, or rehearse your presentation on the budget for your mom or best friend. Joining a group such as Rotary or Toastmasters will also help you become more relaxed with public speaking - and could provide you and your library with valuable community connections.

In particular, practicing your presentations before you give them will help immensely with your delivery and flow. You will notice whether you're taking too little or too much time, or if there are any awkward sentences or strange turns of phrase that looked fine on paper. Don't just wing it when you're actually presenting! Make sure you have put in some rehearsal time, and figure out what you are going to say. Some people like to write out exactly what they want to say; others prefer the flexibility of an outline. Remember a few key facts:

- Spoken sentences should be shorter than written ones. Your audience can only follow what you're saying for so long before they've forgotten where you began.
- Structure and organization matters in both writing and speaking. In speaking, though, you must be even more clear and organized, as your audience can't flip back to your thesis statement or the previous page. State what you are going to say, say it, then recap what you have just said.
- Keep your audience in mind when writing your speech or presentation. People are busy and easily

distracted, but if you can make what you're saying relevant to them, you will keep their interest.

In library circles, PowerPoint slides or other visual aids are almost a prerequisite for speeches. Keep in mind that such tools serve merely to illustrate your speech, not as notes to yourself or references for after the talk. Avoid reading your speech off of slides. It can help to write your presentation first, then go back and create slides. Make sure your slides and any text are visible from the back of whatever room you will be speaking in.

This is another great opportunity to practice your speech beforehand in a similar environment, to make sure everything is legible and that you have mastered the use of the technology beforehand. Nothing stops a speech short like mixing up the PowerPoint slides, or the computer crashing. In fact, it's best to prepare yourself for giving the speech without slides, in case there are technical difficulties. Bring backup files and perhaps even a handout with your visual aids, just in case the worst happens.

While practicing your speech, be aware of your body language. Are you pacing while you speak, or rocking back and forth in place? Do you have a death grip on your notes or the podium? These are not life-or-death issues, but, as you work to improve your public speaking skills, you can try standing still while speaking, using gestures and body movement only for emphasis, and coming out from behind the podium for Q&A times - or just in general. This will make you look supremely confident.

Face Your Fears

For many people, just putting in a bit more preparation and rehearsal time can calm the jitters of addressing a crowd. If not, it may help to keep these things in mind:

- Your listeners want you to succeed. Your audience will be genuinely forgiving of PowerPoint fumbles or stumbling over words, and will work with you to hear the message you're trying to present.
- A little nervousness can help you! Try to harness that energy into a more dynamic performance. It's better to have a bit of a quiver in your voice when you start out than to present in a monotone.
- It may set you at ease to begin with a joke to break the ice. Getting people laughing might make you feel more confident.
- Remember to breathe! A few minutes before your speech (perhaps while you're being introduced), take a few deep, slow breaths. If you are the type to speed up while going through the speech, write "BREATHE!" or "PAUSE!" into your notes at appropriate times to remind yourself to slow down.
- Once you've started speaking, the hard part is over. Your nervousness will fade as you start presenting.

As you can imagine, you can find scads of materials on public speaking to help overcome fears and improve techniques. The best that I've encountered is the *Public Speaking Handbook for Librarians and Information Professionals*, by Sarah R. Statz (McFarland & Co., 2003). It addresses library speaking situations in a thorough and helpful manner.

A few other librarian-oriented articles on public speaking include:

Dzurinko, M. (1999, April). Giving Presentations with Pizazz. *Information Outlook*. Retrieved March 10, 2006 from:

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FWE/is_4_3/ai_55015334

Ewing, R. (2004, Nov.) Presenting with Confidence: 10 Tips for Librarians. Retrieved March 10, 2006 from LISCareer.com:

http://www.liscareer.com/ewing_presentations.htm

Osborn, J. (2004, Aug.) The Librarian's Guide to Developing Presentation Skills. Retrived March 10, 2006 from LISCareer.com:

http://www.liscareer.com/osborn_presentation.htm

Skyzinski, S. (2005, March). Taking Public Speaking to the Next Level. Lexis- Nexis InfoPro. Retrieved March 10, 2006 from:

<http://www.lexisnexis.com/infopro/profdev/column/2005/200503.asp>

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