SPEAKING FOR SUCCESS

Readings and Resources

Second Edition

Edited by

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To Grandpa Ben —
My role model for success
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Speaking for Success: Readings and Resources is designed to help students master the art and practice of public speaking. Like my courses at Harvard, this collection challenges students to identify their own public speaking behaviors and change the way they prepare for presentations. It builds upon and extends the ideas in Public Speaking: The Path to Success—an action-oriented guide that teaches students how to speak with confidence and leave a lasting impression. Together, these two books provide students with the knowledge they need to change hearts and change minds every time they speak.

This collection explores the tools and techniques that powerful speakers use to captivate their listeners. Unlike traditional academic readers, this collection of readings and resources maintains a strong focus on praxis. To that end, I have shied away from articles that merely discuss public speaking theory. Instead, I have selected articles that help students understand what to do and how to do it. I also have included articles that focus on first impressions, leadership styles, and public narratives. In many ways, these articles are just as important—if not more so—than the articles on specific techniques. After all, powerful public speaking is not simply about delivering an effective message; it is also about demonstrating one’s capacity and readiness to lead.
Speaking for Success: Readings and Resources is divided into three main parts. The first part, “Developing a Leadership Mindset,” explores the relationship between leadership and public speaking. Given that a speaker’s job is to lead the audience toward a particular objective, it is important that students think about themselves as speakers and as leaders. Once students develop the appropriate mindset, they will be able to focus on the message itself. The second part, “Crafting Memorable Messages,” introduces students to the attributes of well-designed presentations. Students will learn how to transform their ideas into a compelling presentation that engages the audience and strikes the right tone. After developing the presentation, students will need help refining their delivery. The third part, “Delivering Powerful Presentations,” examines the interplay between speakers and listeners. It equips students to stand in front of a room and make an impact—on their audience and on the world around them.

Over the years, I have worked with many students who were afraid of speaking in class or in the workplace. These students wondered whether they ever would be able to stand up and speak up about something that mattered to them. With practice and persistence, however, these students were able to show others (and frankly, show themselves) that they had what it took to succeed. My hope is that other students will use the frameworks and strategies in this book to conquer their own public speaking challenges—for if they do, they soon will find themselves on the path to success.

— Steven D. Cohen
Part I

Developing a Leadership Mindset
Step back and see how your audience is observing you.

Every time you deliver a speech, you are, in fact, leading. Whether you are a student, an executive, a politician or a professor, you must lead your audience toward a particular objective. Your job isn’t simply to communicate ideas to your audience members—it is to show them you are a leader.

As part of this process, you must think about how your audience members perceive you when you are standing in front of the room. You must examine what you do well and how you can improve. But how do you achieve this perspective?

In Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading, Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky talk about the importance of “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony.” It’s a metaphor that emphasizes the need for leaders to step back in the middle of a situation and ask themselves, What’s really going on here? The “balcony” is a place where you can see yourself clearly and observe how your audience members respond to you.
Assessing Your Performance

You can reach the balcony in many different ways. For example, you might pause for a moment after sharing an important idea and mentally observe your audience members’ reactions. Or, you might ask a couple of colleagues to watch you deliver a speech and share their observations with you. You can even videotape yourself and review your speech at a later time. Whatever strategy you choose, you’ll gain insight into how to improve your performance.

Stepping onto the balcony allows you to focus on what is actually happening rather than on what you are saying. From the balcony, you can feel the emotion and capture the energy in the room. Once you more firmly understand what your audience members experience while you are speaking, you will know exactly what actions to take.

That’s the key—taking action. Thinking and analyzing are the easy parts; the hard part is changing your behavior the next time you speak. Indeed, powerful public speaking, much like leadership, requires that you constantly assess and improve your performance.

When I was in college, I remember hearing all sorts of filler words pop out of my mouth. It wasn’t until I attended my first Toastmasters meeting that I realized I had a problem. When the Ah-Counter listed the total number of filler words I had used, I asked myself: Did I really say “um” that many times? The Ah-Counter, in a sense, helped me get on the balcony and understand what my audience was hearing. Armed with this knowledge, I knew exactly what to do: Pause more frequently to reduce my use of filler words.

Identifying Your Default Speaking Settings

Each of us has default settings—automatic, pre-programmed behaviors that are comfortable and familiar. For example, when someone sneezes, we typically say “Bless you.” We don’t stop to think about why we say it—we just say it. We also have default ways of getting dressed
in the morning, preparing certain meals and walking from one place to another.

Similarly, we each have default public speaking settings—ingrained ways of communicating and interacting with our audience members. However, some of these default settings may actually impede our ability to make a powerful impact on our listeners.

To become a powerful public speaker, you must identify your ingrained speaking patterns and determine the impact that they are having on your capacity to lead. Do you nervously adjust your glasses or run your hands through your hair? Do you say “um” or “uh” every few words? Once you identify these habits, you can challenge yourself to adjust them.

**Making Positive Changes**

It is important to remember that making significant adjustments isn't an easy process. It may take time and the changes may feel uncomfortable for awhile, but the results are typically well worth the effort.

I often push my University of Maryland and Harvard Extension School students to adjust their default settings in real time. At the beginning of every semester, I ask the students to stand in the center of the speaking area and introduce themselves to the class. Some students really struggle with this exercise and default to sharing impersonal, bland introductions. Here is an example:

*My name is Susan. I’ve been in school for a couple years now, but I’m nearing the end of the road. I come from a large family in central New York and found my way here after living in a bunch of places. So, yeah. That’s about it.*

It’s not that students like Susan don’t have anything interesting to say; they just don’t know what to say. I help them get on the balcony by suggesting that they ask their peers for feedback. When they do that, the students discover they had sounded rather uninspired. I encourage
them to share their passions with their listeners. When the students begin again, they instantly become more animated.

Like Susan, you must push yourself to adjust. The perfect place to do that is in Toastmasters. But you can’t expect to become a powerful public speaker after attending a few club meetings. You need time to change the habits that are holding you back.

In his 2008 book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses the fundamental importance of practice. What “distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works,” writes Gladwell. “That’s it. And what’s more, the people at the very top don’t just work harder … than everyone else. They work much, much harder.”

The only way to “reprogram” your speaking patterns is to embrace the art of practice. Make public speaking a hobby by seeking opportunities to speak. Ask to introduce a keynote speaker. Volunteer to speak at a company function. Fill a Toastmasters club meeting role. It doesn’t matter where you speak. What matters is that you push yourself to get on the balcony over and over again.

If you commit to examining and adjusting your default public speaking settings, you will dramatically enhance your ability to lead.