

PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Path to Success

Second Edition

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*To my mother—
for helping me stay on the path to success*

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Preface

Public speaking is not really about speaking in public. Although public speaking involves sharing ideas with a group of people, it is mainly a mechanism for exercising leadership.

Public Speaking: The Path to Success introduces a unique set of powerful public speaking techniques that you can use to develop and communicate your ideas. It is packed with tips and tricks to help you take your public speaking skills to the next level. While this book won't make you a professional speaker overnight, it will give you the tools—and hopefully the confidence—to stand in front of an audience and speak with impact.

In the pages that follow, you will learn how to:

Lead from the Podium

Your primary goal as a speaker is to lead your audience toward a particular objective. But before you can lead, you must think like a leader and know where you want to take your audience. The first part of this book will help you develop a leadership mindset, examine your default public speaking settings, champion your cause, and embrace the art of practice. After understanding these concepts, you will be able to exercise leadership every time you speak.

Connect with Your Audience

The key to connecting with your listeners is to make your speech all about them. If you want them to listen to your ideas, you first must show them that you have their best interests at heart. The second part of this book will help you conduct an audience analysis, manage first impressions, make your ideas resonate, and own the room. If you employ these ideas effectively, your audience members will reward you with their appreciation and their applause.

Use Your Voice

Like a guitar or trumpet, your voice is an instrument. You can use the music of your voice to enhance your verbal message and express your ideas in a memorable way. The third part of this book will help you tune your voice, use the five key elements of music, and layer musical techniques. Once you master these concepts, you will be able to use your voice to produce a symphony of words.

Construct Memorable Messages

You must carefully select the words you use to communicate your ideas. Using vivid and rhythmic language is essential to making your key ideas more quotable and easier to remember. The fourth part of this book will help you craft powerful language, tell compelling anecdotes, and leverage repetition. After digesting these ideas, you will be able to construct messages that leave a lasting impact on your audience.

Deliver Specialized Speeches

You can stand out from the crowd by learning how to deliver different types of speeches. Although some speech types may seem challenging, you can advance your ideas by organizing them in a clear and impactful manner. The fifth part of this book will introduce specific frameworks to help you deliver impromptu, informative, persuasive,

and inspirational speeches. By using these methods, you will be able to deliver dynamic speeches for many different occasions.

These five parts are full of practical techniques that you can use to design and deliver powerful speeches. Even if you apply just a few of these techniques to your next speech, you dramatically will improve your ability to speak powerfully from the podium and captivate your listeners.

I hope this book inspires you to pursue your passion and stand up for what you believe in. Now is the time to use your voice to change minds and change hearts. Now is the time to *lead*.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge the many individuals who helped make this book possible.

First, I remain grateful to my teaching assistants, Daniel DeFraia and Christopher Drury, for their wonderful contributions to the first edition. They pushed me to refine my ideas and develop examples that would resonate with a professional audience.

I also want to thank Dr. Thomas Wei for introducing me to the relationship between music and speech. His love for music inspired me to listen to the music beneath the words, not just the words themselves.

For the second edition, Sydney Callahan picked up where they left off. She was not only a fantastic teaching assistant, but also a skilled editor and thought partner.

Finally, I want to thank the students in my Harvard course, The Art and Practice of Public Speaking, for inspiring me to write this book. They helped me become a better professor and a better person.

PART 1

LEADING FROM
THE PODIUM

The Leadership Mindset

Every time you deliver a speech, you are exercising leadership. Whether you are a student, a manager, a politician, or a professor, you must lead your audience toward a particular objective. Your job isn't simply to communicate ideas to your listeners; your job is to show them that you are a *leader*.

While your audience members may not remember everything you say, they will remember how you made them feel. This is why it's critical to develop the mindset of a leader. With the proper mindset, you will be able to convince your audience members that you care about them and want to help them achieve their goals.

To win over your audience members, you first have to establish trust. They are looking for a leader who tells the truth and follows through on promises. You can't expect listeners to give you the benefit of the doubt. You must earn their trust by conveying the appropriate character or *ethos*.

In *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, William Keith and Christian Lundberg emphasize the importance of establishing credibility:

Ethos is not automatic. Think about cases where you weren't persuaded by a speaker; if you felt the speaker wasn't honest or didn't have your best interests in mind, you might have decided not to listen to all the (potentially good) arguments presented to you.¹

According to Keith and Lundberg, speakers can create a positive ethos by highlighting “the history of their actions, as politicians often do when invoking their voting records,” referring to “deeds that exemplify their character ... [such as] a war record or participation in a social movement,” and citing “their education or the research they have done with experts.”² In short, you must tell your audience members why they should consider your point of view.

Your audience members won't trust you just because you rattle off a list of impressive facts or accomplishments. They only will trust you if you think and act like a leader. By developing a leadership mindset, you will be able to create a powerful ethos that makes your audience members want to listen to you. Once you have their attention, you will be able to take them on a memorable journey—a journey that excites their minds and teaches them something about the world or about themselves.

Getting on the Balcony

We already have established that your primary goal as a speaker is to show your audience that you are a leader. As part of this process, you must think about how your audience perceives you when you are standing in front of the room. You must examine what you do well and how you can improve. You can achieve this perspective by stepping back and getting on the balcony.³

In *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky talk about the importance of “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony.”⁴ 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?”⁵

Let’s say you are dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above. A band plays and people swirl all around you to the music, filling up your view. Most of your attention focuses on your dance partner, and you reserve whatever is left to make sure that you don’t collide with dancers close by. You let yourself get carried away by the music, your partner, and the moment. When someone later asks you about the dance, you exclaim, “The band played great, and the place surged with dancers.”

But if you had gone up to the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, you might have seen a very different picture.

You would have noticed all sorts of patterns. For example, you might have observed that when slow music played, only some people danced; when the tempo increased, others stepped onto the floor; and some people never seemed to dance at all. Indeed, the dancers all clustered at one end of the floor, as far away from the band as possible. On returning home, you might have reported that participation was sporadic, the band played too loud, and you only danced to fast music.

Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray. Otherwise, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.⁶

The “balcony” is not just a place where you can observe others; it is a place where you can observe yourself.⁷ Getting on the balcony will help you see yourself clearly and observe how the audience is reacting.

One of the most effective ways to become a powerful public speaker is to evaluate your performance objectively. You will be able to achieve this objectivity from the balcony by noticing “that part of yourself that others would see if *they* were looking down from the balcony.”⁸ In fact, perhaps for the first time in your life, you will be able to understand *how* you can improve.

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 listeners’ reactions. Or, you might ask a couple colleagues to watch you deliver a speech and then ask them, “What one thing could I have done better?” You can even record yourself with a smartphone or webcam and review the speech at a later time. Whatever strategy you choose, you’ll gain insight into how to improve.

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 understand what your audience is experiencing, 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. As Heifetz and Linsky explain, “Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as much a prescription for ineffectuality as never achieving that perspective in the first place.”⁹ Indeed, powerful public speaking, much like leadership, requires speakers to assess and improve their 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 announced the number of filler words I had used, I asked myself, “Did I really say ‘um’ that many times?”¹⁰ 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: reduce my use of filler words.

Assessing your performance is an important first step, but it's not a one-time process. You have to *continue* assessing your performance if you want to improve.

Going back to our metaphor, you have to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor, over and over again ... You take action, step back and assess the results of the action, reassess the plan, then go to the dance floor and make the next move. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on a changing reality.¹¹

To use the balcony technique to your advantage, you must know what behaviors to look for. I call these behaviors default public speaking settings.

Default Public 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 driving from one place to another. We follow the same routine or route without even thinking about it.

Let’s try an experiment. Put down this book for a moment and clasp your hands together by interlocking your fingers. How does your grip feel? Comfortable, right? Normal, hopefully. Now, unclasp your hands, and clasp your hands together the *other* way, with the opposite thumb on top. How does your grip feel now? A little awkward?

We each have a default way of clasping our hands—a pre-programmed grip that feels “right.” Similarly, we each have default public speaking settings—ingrained ways of communicating and interacting with our audience. However, when it comes to public speaking, some of these default settings may impede our ability to build a strong connection with our listeners.

To become a powerful public speaker, you must identify your ingrained speaking patterns and determine the impact they are having on your capacity to lead. From the balcony, you can see “your own default [ways] of interpreting and responding to events around

you ... and gain greater latitude and freedom to respond in new and useful ways.”¹²

As you observe yourself from the balcony, make a list of the default public speaking settings that are getting in your way. Do you nervously adjust your glasses or run your hands through your hair? Do you say “um” or “uh” every few words? Do you clasp your hands in front of your body or behind your back? Once you identify these habits, you can challenge yourself to adjust them.

It is worth noting that adjusting default public speaking settings isn’t an easy process. It’s a lot like training yourself to clasp your hands the opposite way. The changes may feel uncomfortable for a while, but with enough practice, they naturally will become part of your speaking style.

Although you may have many problematic default settings, you don’t have to adjust them all at once. You can make significant progress by pushing yourself to overcome nervousness, eliminate filler words, and use natural gestures.

Overcoming Nervousness

Most speakers are not naturally at ease in front of an audience. In fact, many people are downright afraid of speaking in public. But when you ask these people why they feel nervous, you quickly learn that they are afraid of what *might* happen. The truth is, most of the preconceived notions that people have about public speaking stem from a fear of the unknown. *What might their colleagues or friends think of them after they finish speaking?*

The only way to deal with this fear is to step up. You must face any fear that you have, even the fear of being in the spotlight. Contrary to popular belief, public speaking is not about being in the spotlight. Public speaking is about saying something that matters.

The next time you start to feel nervous, try using a technique called the “T Repeater.” Take a deep breath in and then exhale short “T” sounds very slowly until you are out of air. Go ahead. Try it. Breathe in slowly and then exhale, “Tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh.” Focus

on relaxing your mind and your shoulders as you are exhaling. Try to make sure that your short “T” sounds are evenly spaced. Feel yourself releasing your nervousness as you let out one short “T” sound after another.

Alternatively, find a quiet space and try the 4-7-8 exercise.¹³ Breathe in through your nose for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and exhale through your mouth for a count of eight. Remember to inhale quietly through your nose and exhale completely through your mouth. Ready? Try it. Notice how quickly the tension dissipates when you focus on your breathing. Repeat this exercise at least three times before you begin speaking.

Another helpful technique is turning your palms face up. You tend to be more nervous when your palms are face down next to your body. If you turn your palms up, you are less likely to have sweaty palms—a clear sign of public speaking anxiety. So, before you speak, turn your palms up, breathe in slowly, and then breathe out slowly. Repeat this exercise a few times. Then walk to the front of the room and impress your listeners.

If you are especially nervous about speaking in front of an audience, you may want to try easing into eye contact. Many speakers believe that they have to look at their audience right away. In reality, speakers need only create the *impression* that they are looking at the audience when they begin their speech. To create this effect, look at the space between an audience member’s eyes or the lower part of his or her forehead. If there is some space between you and your audience, you also can look at the top of an audience member’s head or the rims of his or her glasses. Shift your eye contact every few seconds just as you would if you were looking directly at individual audience members. You can use this technique until you are comfortable enough to make genuine eye contact with your audience.

Of course, these exercises only help you overcome your last-minute jitters if you are prepared. Speakers often feel nervous because they’re not sure what they want to say or how their speech will turn out. This is why it’s so important that you know your material and know it well.

Eliminating Filler Words

Once you overcome nervousness, you will be able to focus on one of the most common default settings—the use of filler words.¹⁴

Filler words are tentative terms such as *um*, *uh*, *well*, *like*, and *you know* that “can muddy the clarity and blunt the impact of one’s message.”¹⁵ I describe them as verbal crutches that help people process their thoughts.

Some people argue that filler words are so common in everyday speech that they generally are accepted. But just because filler words may seem “natural” does not mean that they belong in formal speeches. Although filler words are near universal, using too many can make you appear nervous or unprepared. Moreover, most scholars agree that a speaker’s credibility decreases as the number of filler words increases.¹⁶ Powerful public speakers work hard to eliminate these words from their vocabulary so that the audience can focus solely on their message.

There are two places where filler words commonly appear: at the beginning of a statement and in between ideas. See what happens the next time you answer a question. You might use a filler word right away without even thinking. Then, when you are finished discussing your first idea, you may be tempted to use another filler word as you decide what to say next. You can think of these two “filler word hot spots” in the context of a two-paragraph essay. The first hot spot would be the tab before the first paragraph and the second hot spot would be the white space between the first and second paragraphs.¹⁷

When you use a filler word such as “um,” you are thinking verbally. In other words, you are verbalizing your thought process. This implies that the best way to avoid using filler words is to *pause*. If you’re not speaking, you can’t say “um”! Instead of speaking right away, take a couple seconds to think about what you want to say. This pause serves two important purposes: it will help you begin powerfully, and it will help you avoid using a filler word. Pause, think, answer.

The same technique applies when you are transitioning from one idea to another. While you may be tempted to fill the silence between ideas with a filler word, remember to pause and give yourself a moment

to think about what you want to say next. Don't begin speaking until you are ready. Remember: Pause, think, answer.

It may feel unnatural to pause, especially because you've been thinking aloud for your entire life. I assure you, however, that you will deliver more powerful speeches and reduce your chance of using filler words if you allow yourself time to think.

If you need help overcoming a filler word problem, ask a family member or friend to clap every time you use one. You also might ask a colleague to count the number of filler words you use in a presentation. Often, people don't realize they are using filler words until someone points it out.

Although we live in a fast-paced society that seemingly demands instant answers, we must use the pause to our advantage. We may feel pressure from others to speak right away, but ultimately, we only should speak when we are ready.

Using Natural Gestures

Now that we have discussed a verbal default setting, let's turn our attention to a common nonverbal setting—the use of distracting hand gestures.

Many speakers default to clasping their hands, crossing their arms, or putting their hands behind their back. Although these behaviors may seem harmless, they dramatically impact your ethos. If you don't know what to do with your hands, leave them by your sides. But if you want to use your hands to enhance your speech, then you must learn how to gesture naturally.

Gestures are nonverbal extensions of your speech used to emphasize the particular ideas that you are sharing verbally. They are important nonverbal tools that narrow the distance between you and your audience. When you reach out toward your listeners, you physically are getting closer to them. You also are conveying your emotions in a more direct and personal way.

According to Toastmasters International, every gesture “should be a total body movement that starts from the shoulder—never from the elbow. Move your entire arm outward from your body freely and easily. Keep your wrists and fingers supple, rather than stiff or tense.”¹⁸ Let your gestures underscore what you are thinking, feeling, and saying.¹⁹

Given the importance of gestures, you may feel tempted to insert them at particular points in your speech. However, you shouldn’t try to time your gestures. Instead, you must give yourself permission to gesture naturally and purposefully.

In *There’s No Such Thing as Public Speaking*, Jeanette and Roy Henderson explain that the best gestures aren’t planned:

When the image is strong enough and the point important enough, your gesture center will automatically provide the uncontrollable urge to gesture, as well as the appropriate gesture to express that image. The best rule of thumb for gestures is simply to just *wait for it*, then when you feel it, *go for it!* Eventually, with experience, you will never need to consciously think about your gestures again.²⁰

It is important to *feel* rather than plan your gestures so that they naturally align with your words. Planned gestures look insincere and often distract your audience from what you are saying. Allow yourself to gesture naturally and you will produce powerful, purposeful gestures every time.