

Speech Anxiety

Why am I so nervous about this speech?

You know the feeling...butterflies in the stomach, clammy palms, knocking knees. What you are experiencing is normal; roughly 70% of people experience some sort of speech anxiety (or speech fright). Here's what causes this feeling, according to Karen Dwyer in *Conquer Your Speechfright*.

Worrisome Thoughts—fearful thoughts of negative evaluation and failure and the feeling that you won't be *able* to meet expectations

Performance Orientation—assuming that the audience expects your speech/presentation to be perfectly written and delivered

Perceived Lack of Skills—feeling that you don't have adequate speaking skills or that you 'lack' adequate knowledge on your topic

Excessive activation or body chemistry—physical "out of control" reactions like trembling hands, nausea, rapid heartbeat, wavering voice, and shortness of breath

Situational aspects of the circumstance or the audience—novelty (because it's the unknown), conspicuousness (fear of being the center of attention), and audience characteristics like size, status, similarity, & formality

More importantly, how can I control my anxiety?

The biggest piece of advice is to prepare well in advance, practice over a period of days, and take care of yourself. Here are some specific tips:

In the Short Run:

- **Take deep abdominal breaths**
 - Take 3-4 deep breaths and help your mind and body relax
- **Use physical exercise**
 - Take brisk walk around the campus or some place outside
 - Press your palms together and release, press against a table and release, or tense of all of your muscles while sitting or standing and then release
- **Mental rehearsal**
 - Mentally prepare yourself by imagining yourself giving a successful speech from start to end
- **Take good care of yourself**
 - Make sure you have slept well the night before, had a balanced meal, adequate water, etc.

In the Long Run:

- **Preparation**
 - Work on your presentation well in advance
 - Do ample research so that you feel comfortable with the material

- **Get interpersonal support**
 - Have a social buffer of friends, family, and hall mates that you can talk to about your anxiety. Gather positive affirmations from them and believe in yourself.
- **Think positive thoughts**
 - Instead of fearing that your speech will be an absolute disaster, replace the image with images of successful *communication* (not a performance!). It will leave you feeling satisfied.
- **Physical exercise**
 - Follow an exercise routine. It helps your body deal with stressful situations and gives you more mental strength and serenity.
- **Skills Training**
 - Take a Public Speaking class
 - Work with a Speaking Center tutor to learn how to give effective speeches/presentations
 - Read materials such as books, articles, handouts, etc. that help you hone speaking skills

And, how do I conceal my fright?

This isn't as tricky as it may seem. The audience can't see most of the symptoms of your nervousness. Here are a few tips for problems that you might encounter, however.

If you are **speaking from a written text**, and you are holding a full sized piece of paper in one or both hands, it is likely that the shake of your hands will be translated and magnified by the paper, and your anxiety will become highly visible. If you have a podium available, you can **rest the paper on the podium**, and then choose to grip the podium (lightly) or hold your hands below the podium so they cannot be seen, except when you choose to emphasize your words with appropriate gestures.

If you have portions of your **speech written on cards**, you can **hold the cards with both hands** while you read brief sections from them. Because the cards are small and you are holding them up with both hands, slight tremors will not be visible to the audience.

If your **voice quavers or cracks** while you are speaking, you can control this by simply **using more air and speaking at a slightly louder volume** than you might be inclined to do. When you are nervous, you are more likely to take shallow breaths and speak quietly. This combination puts you at risk of having your voice suddenly begin to tremble or squeak. You can consciously choose to take deeper than normal breaths and speak more loudly than you might otherwise, combining to give your voice a quality which is less likely to quaver or crack, while simultaneously giving your utterances a greater physical presence. The combination of volume and force will serve to mask the anxiety, which might otherwise interfere with your message.

**The University of Southern Mississippi
Speaking Center
www.usm.edu/speakingcenter**