Seven Strategies for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety blocks creativity. Most of us have experienced “writer’s block,” and public speaking anxiety can keep us—literally—from getting our voice out in the world. Speaking anxiety can occur because we’re afraid of being judged, we feel vulnerable speaking about a certain topic or maybe we’re anxious about simply hearing our voice in public. Speaking anxiety symptoms include: rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, shaking hands, pacing, wobbly voices or any number of other clues.

Good news! Here are seven skills you can practice to reduce Public Speaking anxiety:

1: Breathe.

Learn and practice diaphragmatic breathing or “belly breathing.” Taking a few calming breaths from the belly before your presentation will not only help you feel calm by slowing down your racing heart and supplying your brain with oxygen, but your voice—supported by your diaphragm—will sound strong, resonant and confident. Remember: anxiety is just excitement in need of breath! Breathe! [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ua9bOsZTYg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ua9bOsZTYg)

2: Root your feet.

Stand with your feet flat on the ground, directly under your hips. Allow your arms to hang relaxed by your side. Now, imagine that you have roots—like roots of a tree—shooting down through your shoes, through the floor, into the basement and then through the basement and into the earth below. Whenever you’re feeling anxious, or if you forget what you had planned to say, root your feet. It reminds you to “be in your body” instead of allowing your brain to chatter distracting thoughts. You can also imagine that your roots are shooting down and then out towards the audience, joining with their “roots.” What the audience sees is your confident, warm look at them before you speak. This is your way of physically communicating that you appreciate the audience. Indeed, you need them and they need you. Because of the “root system” in the room, you won’t fall over!
3: Shake out:
You can literally shake out “the shakes.” Begin by vigorously shaking your hands, then add your triceps, biceps, shoulders, chest, belly, rear, and feet! Move your neck and jaw around—anything that gets you moving. This helps you relax by loosening up muscles you may have been tensing. After shaking out, you will notice that you can hold a piece of paper without shaking! When your body is still, you look relaxed and confident.

4: Focus on the audience:
Remember: Your presentation is not about you. It’s about teaching the audience, motivating, persuading or inspiring them! Have a clear intention. Remind yourself: “What do I want my audience to think or feel or do after my speech?

5: Practice.
Can you imagine attending a Broadway show where none of the actors had ever rehearsed their script? Or a military recruiter shipping a new recruit off to battle without first sending them to bootcamp, where they could experience what war might look like, sound like and feel like? Rehearse in the space where you will be speaking. Even if you will speak in the same room in which you’ve had class all semester, take the time to stand at the front of the room and look out towards the audience. Speak out to hear your voice in that room.

6: Visualize success.
Remember a time when you presented well. Recall the audience’s positive response; what did it look like, sound like, feel like? Hold that confidence as you step up to speak. Root your feet, look warmly at the audience, take a deep belly breath and begin!

7: Use your resources.
The Writing Center at Amherst College offers Public Speaking assistance to help you prepare and rehearse your presentation. If you find that you have anxiety in other areas of your life as well, don’t forget that the Counseling Center is also available for you.

Susan Daniels, Associate in Public Speaking sgdaniels@amherst.edu