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SLAY THESE 8 PUBLIC SPEAKING DEMONS

TO CONQUER YOUR FEAR

by Dann Albright

Slay These 8 Public Speaking Demons to Conquer Your Fear

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Public speaking is one of the more common social fears. It's often said that people fear public speaking more than death. But it's something that many people — from students to executives — have to do regularly. No matter how much you dislike it, you may have to engage in public speaking sometime in the future.

Let's take a look at some of the common public speaking fears and how to allay them.

Why Does Public Speaking Make Us So Nervous?

On a shallow level, there are some easy answers to this question.

Some reasons have to do with our self-image. We think we're going to make fools of ourselves, or we project our own expertise onto others, leaving ourselves with a debilitating inferiority complex.

Some reasons have to do with our audience. We assume that they can see our greatest weaknesses, whatever they are, or that they're judging us. There's no shortage of these kinds of semi-intuitive theories.

But a few people have given this some deeper — and more scientific — thought. One fascinating theory actually comes out of evolutionary psychology and says that, as social animals, we value being part of a group. And when we're singled out as being outside of that group, it makes us feel uncomfortable. The thought goes that our chances of survival were significantly lower when we were on our own than when we were in a group, so feeling singled out makes us panic.



This is related to an interesting theory published in *Psychophysiology* (as [reported by The Atlantic](#))...

The social anxiety we experience at being the center of attention can actually change how we pay attention to faces. Angry or unhappy faces are processed especially rapidly by the brain in these situations. So not only are we made uncomfortable by being singled out, but our brains actually start working against us by making the crowd seem less happy than it is!

And, of course, another contributing factor is that people are generally afraid of what they're not familiar with.

That is why those who get up to speak in front of groups on a regular basis lose their fear. They learned over time that there's no reason to be afraid — most of the things that they were so afraid of haven't come to pass. They internalize the fact that everything will be okay.

No matter what psychological or neurological processes underlie our fear of public speaking, we have a tendency to focus on specific things that we've done, or haven't done for fear to strike. Which is why we'll be discussing those specific fears here.

Symptoms of Glossophobia

If you get nervous before you get up on stage to speak in front of an audience, you'll probably be well acquainted with the symptoms of glossophobia (the fear of public speaking). But do you know why you experience these particular things?

When you're in a socially stressful situation — especially one as stressful as public speaking — your body goes into a protective mode; you've probably heard of the "fight-or-flight" response. This is exactly what's happening when you experience public speaking anxiety. Your body is going into emergency survival mode.



Adrenaline, the hormone that triggers the fight-or-flight response, is released. In essence, adrenaline prepares your body to fight for survival or run as fast as you can. It does this by increasing blood flow to certain parts of the body, which can induce sweating, shaking, dry mouth, the need to use the bathroom, and becoming pale or flushed. You may even find yourself losing sleep ahead of your impending speech.

These are all classic symptoms of glossophobia. Understanding why you begin to feel like this can be helpful in overcoming your fear of public speaking. Keeping in mind that your body is just protecting itself against a threat that isn't actually there helps a lot of people feel calmer when faced with a public speaking situation — it's a natural reaction, but it's been a very long time since we needed it.

Understanding Your Fear

The first step, in getting over your fear of public speaking is understanding exactly what it is that you're afraid of. Most people have a generalized fear of getting up in front of people, but don't have a good idea the situation that causes them such discomfort.

To really get over your fear, **you need to understand where your fear is coming from.**

One of the best ways to get some insight into your glossophobia is to journal about it. Take half an hour, find a quiet place without distraction, turn your phone off, and write with a pen and paper. Reflect on how you feel about public speaking. Think about what you enjoy about it —

Do you enjoy teaching people things they don't know?

Do you like the connections that you make during and after your presentation?

Do you get a feeling of accomplishment when you're done?

Then move onto the harder parts: what's the worst that could happen in your speech? Are you afraid of looking foolish? That your audience will think that you don't deserve to be speaking in front of them? That someone will ask you difficult questions? That you'll make a mistake in your presentation? If one of these were to be true, what would actually happen? If you need some guidance, you can adapt this as a journaling prompt on the fear of failure.



Another way that you can gain some insight into your fear is to talk to someone who is good at and enjoys public speaking (if you can get over your annoyance with there being such a person). Talk to them about why you're afraid and ask why they don't feel the same way. This is probably best done with someone who you know well, as they're more likely to be understanding of your slightly irrational fears.

Once you've started to get to the bottom of your fears, it's time to start training yourself and using some tools to get over those specific fears. We'll be addressing specific fears and strategies for dealing with them — if you're still not sure exactly what's making you terrified of public speaking, pick a few strategies and see if they help. If not, try some more!

Feeling Unworthy

This is a common one — you feel like an expert in a topic until you get up in front of a crowd. At just about this point you feel like you're a complete impostor and start "feeling" that everyone in the audience knows more about it than you do. You fear that they'll be judging you, thinking that you don't have the authority to be up in front of them telling them about something they already know, and maybe even scoffing at your rookie mistakes.

Unfortunately, there isn't a good technological solution to this one. There's no app that will make you feel like an expert in your topic, and no website that will help you figure out if you're actually more knowledgeable than most people in your field (though looking at [Quora](#) and seeing [the questions people are asking](#) might help).



The best thing to do in this case is to remember that you've been asked to present on your topic for a reason—someone thinks that you're an authority, and they trust your opinion. You wouldn't be up in front of an audience if that wasn't the case. **Remind yourself of this every time you start to feel inferior.**

If this is something that really bothers you and sticks in your head while you're preparing for your speech, you can spend some time writing about it. Write down your accomplishments in your field, reflect on the times that you've answered questions that have been really helpful to people, and think about how much time you've spent becoming familiar with your topic. If you're giving a toast or another speech at a social gathering, think about how well you know the person you're toasting or the people you'll be addressing.

If you've been asked to speak, you *are* an expert in your area. You just need to remember it!

Forgetting Your Lines

How you deal with forgetting what you were going to say next can make you a great public speaker, or it can leave you so fearful that you script the entire presentation, which leads to boring and un-engaging speeches. Before we get into strategies for remembering the things you planned on saying, let's talk quickly about what to do when you do forget what you were going to say next—because it will happen.

The first thing that most people do when they forget what they were going to say is panic — which throws them off even further. There's no reason to get flustered!

Everyone forgets what they were going to say next, whether they're standing up in front of an entire company or talking to their friends at the pub. What do you do when you lose your train of thought at home? You say, "Oh, I lost what I was going to say there . . . where was I? Oh, right . . ." and then you continue on. You can do the same thing when public speaking. Stay composed, laugh it off, take a drink of water if you need to, and continue on.



One other recommendation: when you lose what you were going to say and have to pause for a moment, it's going to feel like you're standing up there in silence for a long time, when it's actually only

a matter of seconds. Your audience probably won't even notice! Don't feel the need to fill the silence — just collect yourself and continue.

Okay — so now you're ready to deal with forgetting your lines, just in case. But what can you do to *prevent* that situation in the first place?

Use visual aids as storytelling prompts. One recommended strategy is to use unique images, quotes, or figures on your slides that will remind you of what you were going to say next. If you're going to use a metaphor, include an image of one part of the metaphor. If you're going to tell a personal story, put up a quote from that story. If you're about to make your pitch to a company, use figures that show the great results you've had in the past.

Type up some notes and speaking prompts on a tablet. As Ryan suggested in his tech tips for appearing on TV or the radio. Instead of using paper or notecards, which can make noise and draw attention to themselves, keep a tablet nearby (on a podium works well, but you can even hold it during the presentation if you need to). Just jot down one line for each slide or each major point of your presentation that will remind of what you need to say. That way a quick glance will get you back on track.

Bad Pacing

This is one that I deal with myself — whenever I got up to speak in front of a group, I would fly through my slides as quickly as possible, usually forgetting to mention important things in the process, and finish up long before the expected time. When that happens, presentations are difficult to follow, not very engaging or interesting, and result in a lot of questions at the end, which can be nerve-wracking in its own right.

There are plenty of ways to deal with this problem, and most of them are simple.

The screenshot shows a PowerPoint presenter view. At the top left, the time is 14:11. The main area is split into two slides. The left slide is titled "Number of Correct Choices per Block by Condition" and features a line graph with four data series: English-normal (blue), Swedish-normal (green), English-normal with incongruity (yellow), and Swedish-normal with incongruity (purple). The y-axis is "Estimated Marginal Means" (8-18) and the x-axis is "Block" (1-5). The right slide contains a quote: "Language fine tunes rather than shapes perceptual processes that are likely to be universal and unchanging" (Athanasopoulos, 2012) and the word "Implications" with an asterisk. At the bottom right, a timer shows "Elapsed 0:09:16". At the bottom left, a notes pane shows the text: "10:20-15:30 Difference between English + Swedish is marginally significant. Can be difficult to interpret with low number of subjects." To the right of the notes pane is a button that says "Click to add meeting notes".

PowerPoint's presenter view, along with the equivalent functions in other presentation software, display a timer that starts when you begin your presentation. This is a useful tool and shouldn't be

overlooked! If you plan on spending the same amount of time on every slide in your presentation (not common, but certainly possible), you'll have an idea of when you should be advancing to the next slide.

If you need to vary the amount of time that you spend on your slides, you can add a time range in the notes, as pictured below.

This will help keep you on track with a glance. You can also use teleprompting tools like [uPrompt](#) or [PromptSmart](#) to help keep you on pace.

If you tend to speed up, like me, you may want to insert reminders to stop and take a breath or a drink of water into your notes or prompts. These pauses not only contribute to a natural-sounding speech, but also serve to keep you from going too fast. While using notes and prompts will help with this, it mostly comes down to practice!

Making Mistakes

The fear of making mistakes during your presentation — or getting called out on an error or inaccuracy — is one that terrifies a lot of people, and is the reason behind a lot of totally memorized speeches. There are a few things that you can do to minimize the chances of making a mistake. But even more importantly, it's important to realize that if you do make one, it's not a big deal. People make mistakes all the time, and your audience will almost certainly be very understanding. Correct yourself and move on.



Beyond knowing your topic well, the best thing you can do to reduce the chances of making a mistake is to practice and record yourself. No one likes listening to recordings of themselves, but being able to hear your speech from the audience's perspective will help you listen for a lot of things, including mistakes. You may discover that you need a bit more pitch modulation in your voice, that you use a lot of "ums" or "uhs," or that you made a mistake without knowing it.

Another thing to keep in mind is when you're most likely to make a mistake — do you tend to ramble when you forget what you were going to say next? Or start talking really fast when you feel nervous? Do you get flustered when someone asks you a question? Knowing the situations that make it most difficult for you to concentrate means you can practice with those things in mind. You can even record a video of yourself using your webcam to gain further insight into the places you're likely to slip up.

Being the Center of Attention

A lot of people — introverts and extroverts alike — are uncomfortable with being the center of attention. This may go back to the social and evolutionary factors we discussed previously; being the center of attention means being singled out, and often means being separated from a group. When you're standing on a stage or in front of a conference room, it can feel like there's no way to take the spotlight off of yourself.

But that's not totally true.

Yes, you are going to be the focus of attention. That's just the nature of presentations. But you can shift the focus of your audience from you as a speaker to what you're saying or talking about with a few important strategies.

The solution starts at the beginning of your presentation.



Adam Grant, a professor and author, recommends starting with a puzzle, an engaging question, or a story. This gets the audience thinking about the message that you're trying to convey. The more they engage with the content of your speech, the less they're thinking about you.

You can also dim the lights a bit — this makes many speakers feel more comfortable, and it may also make your audience more likely to laugh at your jokes, which goes a long way toward putting you at ease.

Of course, having interesting slides will draw your audience's eye toward the projection screen or whiteboard, but if they're too eye-catching, you audience will get distracted from your message. Using the principles of good slide design (like you can see in [these 28 creative presentations](#)) get your audience thinking about your message and not get distracted by the slides themselves.

And, of course, practice. After you've given a number of presentations to large groups, you'll start feeling more comfortable. Learning to be excited by public speaking — instead of terrified by it — takes effort as well as practice. Just keep at it!

Handling Questions



You're feeling good about getting through your presentation smoothly. But the thought of answering questions from the audience leaves you feeling weak in the knees. Going through a rehearsed presentation is one thing, but interacting with other people and dealing with unexpected questions is an entirely different one.

The most useful piece of advice that I've ever received about handling questions at presentations is simple:

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."

Admitting that you don't know the answer to a question is far better than trying to make something up or fumble your way through something you're not totally familiar with. People will respect you for saying that you don't know and that you'll follow up with the questioner later.

That said, the best way to prepare yourself for handling questions at your talk is to give a practice talk to some friends or co-workers (family members may not be as open about problems in your presentation, so they don't make a great test audience). Have them point out areas where you weren't clear or where you left something unexplained. Tell them to ask questions about anything that they didn't understand or disagree with. Practice answering calmly and confidently.

If you don't have a test audience available, or if you think this strategy won't work well for you, you can also use mindmapping tools to create a web of topics and angles that might help you predict some of the questions that you're likely to get.

Put your topic in the middle, and add nodes for your audience, related topics, and anything else you can think of. Then take a while to brainstorm some ideas about what sorts of issues might come to mind for your audience. Once you've gained some insight into the kinds of questions you might be facing, you can prepare to answer them!

Technical Failure

If you've had this happen before, you may tend to worry about it before your presentation, when you should be trying to stay focused and feed on the energy of the event that you'll be speaking at. Don't leave your technical preparations until the last minute! Make sure you're prepared.



First of all, make sure that you have your slides saved on your laptop, on a flash drive, and in the cloud. Having printed copies for everyone, just in case, is also a good idea (though that may not be feasible if you're speaking to dozens or hundreds of people). It might not be a bad idea to have it saved as both .ppt and .pptx, just in case you have to use an older version of PowerPoint to open it

(and if you're having more PowerPoint problems, [try these strategies](#)). Bring extra cables if you think you might need them, just in case.

Knowing that you have copies of your slides in at least three different places should go a long way toward helping to keep your nerves under control. Print out handouts ahead of time so you don't have to run to the copier. Get to the venue early so you can set up your computer and the presentation to make sure that everything works. If you're going to be using sound or video, do a test run to make sure that they play correctly, and have a backup plan if they don't (even if it's just reading a transcript or describing the video).

If you've taken these preparations, you're about as prepared as you can be for technical failures. There are certain things that just can't be predicted — [hard drive failures](#), [electrical problems](#), and the like — that you'll just have to roll with if they come up. Fortunately, most audiences are understanding.

Looking Like a Fool

This is related to the fear mentioned above, feeling inferior, but this is a bit different — many people get nervous about their appearance no matter the nature of the audience. They could be younger students, peers, colleagues. It has a lot more to do with personal insecurity than how you feel about your audience.

Usually, when this is an issue in public speaking, it comes down a lack of self-confidence. There could be any number of issues underlying that, but this article isn't about self-help; it's about getting over your fear of presenting! So here are a few things you can do to help [boost your confidence](#).

Look the part. People who dress well feel more confident, make more money, and present a better overall image to their audience. You don't have to look ultra-fashionable, but knowing some of the [latest trends in fashion](#) certainly wouldn't hurt.



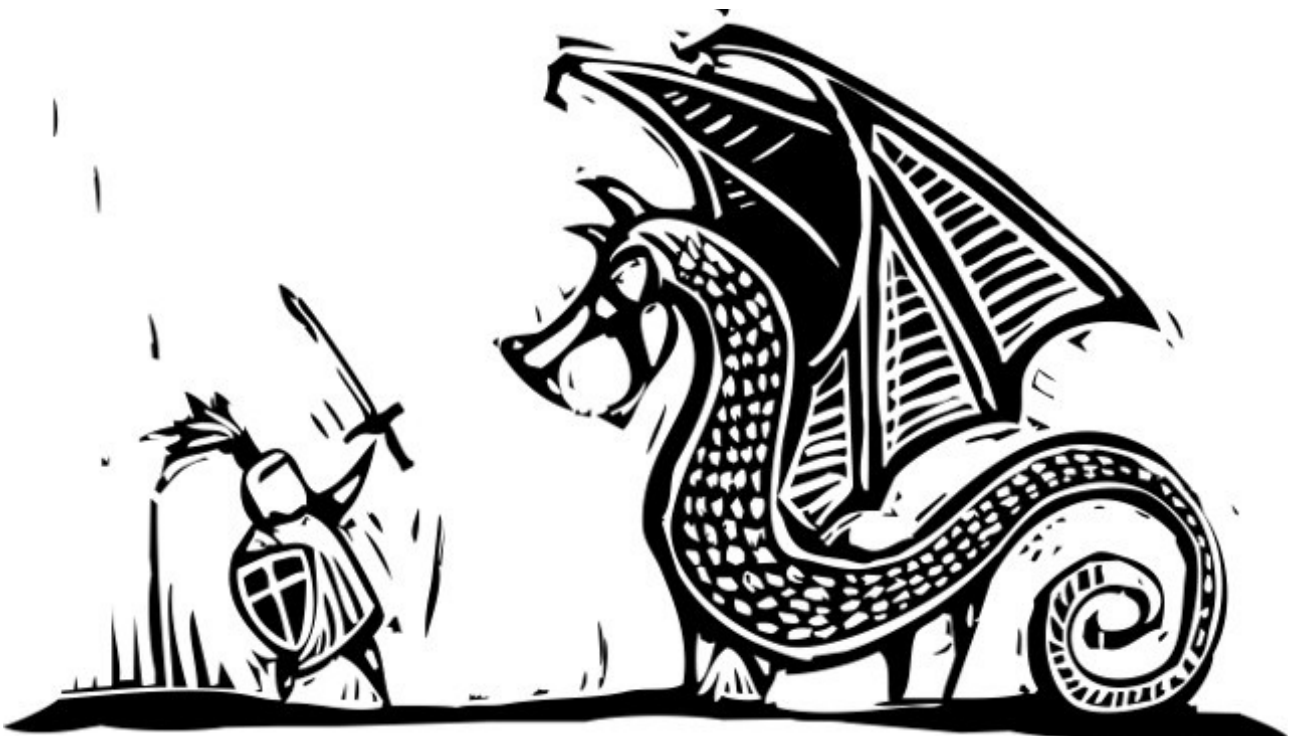
For men, a well-fitting suit is tough to beat. Many women having differing opinions on what sort of outfit presents a professional image, but suits, skirts, blazers, sweaters, and dresses can all be used to great effect. If you're looking for ideas, check out these [10 fashion blogs for professional women](#).

Get psyched up for your speech. It helps a lot. Seeking out the right inspiration before you get on stage or stand up in front of everyone can go a long way into turning your nervousness into excitement. Public speaking is a fantastic opportunity, and recognizing that it's a chance to improve yourself, work on a new skill, and get some personal development will help you get in the right mindset. You can also watch some [inspirational videos](#) to help you get motivated and pumped up.

Have great-looking slides. This also contributes to a professional image, and can help give you confidence in your presentation. Use the [basic principles of design](#) to create a [professional-looking presentation](#) that will add to your speech, and not detract from it. The greatest public speakers are often supported by the greatest slides.

Face Your Fears Head-On

If the idea of public speaking terrifies you, it's time to come face-to-face with that fear and conquer it. Very few people are born being great public speakers — but many people have achieved greatness with focused practice and a good handle on the tips above. You may not have time to engage in a lot of practice before your next presentation, but [making it a habit](#) not to back down from public speaking opportunities will help a lot in the future.



And although this sounds terrifying, actually seeking out public speaking opportunities is great for personal growth.

We mentioned [Toastmasters](#) in a previous article on http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/5-tips-to-improve-your-public-speaking-skills/?utm_source=pdf&utm_medium=pdf&utm_campaign=pdf. Toastmasters is a non-profit organization that seeks to help people get over their fear of public speaking and become much better presenters. They present a low-pressure, team-oriented environment to help you become the best public speaker you can be. If you're deathly afraid of getting up in front of people, I highly recommend getting in touch with them!

Even if you aren't ready to head out and seek out speaking opportunities yet, keeping the principles above in mind will go a long way toward helping you get over your fear. It's a lot to remember, but by focusing on the specific fears that you have, you'll be better prepared for your next speaking engagement, whether it's a huge business presentation or a quick toast at a small wedding. I leave you with this inspiring

I leave you with this inspiring [TED Talk by Megan Washington](#), who is one of Australia's premier singer/songwriters. She shares her mortal fear of public speaking, but by the end of the video she succeeds in killing a few demons within us. Stick to it, and good luck!

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