

Do's & Don'ts for Public Speaking

Here are some tips of the trade when planning a public presentation, talk, or video. Trust your gut, be yourself, and don't be afraid to ask a friend, family member, or mentor for feedback as you craft your style.



DO

Warm up your instrument

Your voice is your instrument, and you want to make sure it's in tune and ready to go before you speak.

Spend 10 – 15 minutes on vocal warmups to ensure people can hear you loudly and clearly and avoid vocal cracking, vocal fry, and squeaking.

Get in position

The position of your body impacts how well you project and your confidence.

If you're standing, stand straight with your shoulders back and feet about shoulder-width apart. Using this "superhero pose" helps build your confidence while you practice. Practice also helps you get comfortable with how you place your hands, feet, elbows, knees, and head.

If you're sitting, make sure your feet are both on the ground and you're at an angle that feels comfortable. Sit closer to the seat edge rather than fully reclined – this will ensure you look engaged to your audience.



DON'T

Coat your throat before you speak

About 90 minutes before you speak, avoid foods and beverages that may coat your throat like milk, ice cream, orange juice, and other thick substances.

Water is usually your best friend to keep your mouth well hydrated and your voice clear. If you need something stronger, hot tea with honey or hot water can help soothe your vocal cords and keep everything in working order.

Slouch, slump, or grump

For storytelling that has a visual component, like public speaking or recording videos, you'll want to present your best self and avoid body positions that make you feel uncomfortable or tired.

If you're not sure how you look, ask a friend or family member to take a picture or use your phone to record your body language while you practice your talk.

Finally, "the clothes make the man." Wear clothes that feel comfortable and won't require adjustments while you're talking. Be yourself, tailored to your audience. For video and taped presentations, consider avoiding stripes and busy patterns that may be warped on a recording device.

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DO

Trust and respect your audience

These folks have come to hear your unique perspectives. Whether you can see them, such as in a small room or auditorium, or you can't see them, like on a webinar or a stage with bright lights, please remember to demonstrate respect and trust.

Some key strategies:

- **Say "Thank You," Twice.** Thank the audience for listening, for their time, or for being there. A short "Thank you for having me," before you start is a great way to build trust before your presentation. "Thank you" is also a great way to wrap up your speech.
- **Keep humor simple and sweet.** Jokes and humorous stories are often culturally dependent. They don't always translate across different backgrounds. If you decide to use humor, keep it short and sweet – avoiding anything that might offend or tune out your audience. If you use humor, use it wisely to make a point.
- **Stick to your time limit.** Going over time stresses out organizers and can undercut the effectiveness of your talk. It can also unintentionally take time away from other speakers.
 - Many organizers will provide a timekeeper or give you a "warning" when you're approaching time. Ask for help if you need it!



DON'T

Insult your audience

Folks who feel angry, insulted, or sad often stop listening. Some may even start building their "rebuttal case" in their heads during your talk. You can avoid this by not insulting your audience.

Some key strategies:

- **Show up on time.** Be on time for your presentation and mindful of any remarks, especially if you're part of a larger program with specific timed remarks.
- **Don't insult people's identities, locations, or professions.** While professional comedians and others may at times get away with insult-based humor, most public speeches and talks aren't the right forum.
 - **Avoid making fun** of people's identities – immutable characteristics like race, ethnicity, gender and sex, body size, age, and disability.
 - **Respect the environment.** Avoiding insults about the location of the event, the profession of your audience, and other people keeps you from accidentally stepping on landmines.
 - **Never use slurs or profanity.** If you're not sure if something will be offensive, ask the organizers, close friend, or mentor.

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DO

Be brave – you can do this!

Even experienced public speakers can get nervous when speaking. The key is to get the “butterflies in your stomach to fly in formation.” Use your nerves to jumpstart your energy when speaking.

Most audiences are forgiving – they have come to hear your story, and they aren't looking for a perfect, robotic tale. Small hiccups and missteps are a normal part of every talk and remark. Keep going and don't lose sight of the big picture.

Hit a road bump? It's always okay to stop and take a breath. Pauses can help you collect your thoughts and keep going.

Control what you can

Public speaking is an adventure, and much of how it goes won't be in your control. Great storytellers are able to roll with the punches and focus on what they *can* control, rather than outside circumstances.

You can control the basics:

- Your story.
- Being well-rested.
- Being fed and well-hydrated.
- Practicing your remarks in advance.
- Asking questions about your audience, time limits, and other key details before you speak.
- Wearing comfortable and appropriate clothes that demonstrate your personality.



DON'T

Apologize

Sometimes at the beginning or middle of a talk, the speaker will start apologizing. This can be anything from, “I'm so sorry, I'm not sure why my AV isn't working” to “I'm sorry, this is my first time speaking” or “I'm sorry, can I start over?”

While it's not technically incorrect to apologize, it often doesn't add anything to the listener's experience. It fills time in your remarks but doesn't add to your story.

If you must apologize, don't let it impact your momentum. Pivoting with light humor or moving to a Q&A format can help when something stops working.

Worry about the small stuff

Public speakers often talk about the three types of speeches: “The speech you plan to give, the speech you give, and the speech you wish you gave.”

After the adrenaline subsides from speaking, you may feel regret for something you wish went differently or was said differently. Give yourself some time to breathe, and then make gentle, nonjudgmental notes about what you would do better next time.

You can also focus on what resonated with your audience – for example, positive feedback, nonverbal cues like applause, and speaker evaluations. Remember, most people only remember about 30% of what they hear in a presentation.

Your goal is to make that 30% count.