



Center for Writing and Speaking

P NO. 1 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Speech Anxiety

Why am I so nervous about this speech?

Roughly 70% of people experience some sort of speech anxiety; what you are experiencing is totally normal. Here's what causes this feeling:

- **Worrisome Thoughts**—fear of negative evaluation and failure or 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 lack adequate speaking ability or knowledge of your topic
- **Physical Nervousness**—physical reactions such as trembling hands, nausea, rapid heartbeat, wavering voice, and shortness of breath are familiar as products of anxiety, but can also contribute to making you more nervous because you feel out of control
- **Situational aspects of the circumstance or the audience**—novelty (because it's unknown), conspicuousness (fear of being the center of attention), and audience characteristics such as size, status, similarity, or formality

How can I manage my anxiety?

The best 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 to help your mind and body relax.
- **Use physical exercise**—Take a brisk walk around the quad or some place outside. Press your palms together and release or tense of all of your muscles while sitting or standing and then release.
- **Mental rehearsal**—Mentally prepare yourself by envisioning 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, are hydrated, etc.

(continued on reverse)

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Speech Anxiety, Continued

In the Long Run:

- **Preparation**—Work on your presentation well in advance and conduct 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 performance--speaking is about contributing to the larger dialogue on your topic, not just memorizing rote material.
- **Physical exercise**—Follow an exercise routine to help your body deal with stressful situations and give you more mental strength and serenity.
- **Skills Training**—Take a Public Speaking class, work with a CWS tutor to learn more about and practice public speaking, or read materials such as books, articles, handouts, etc. that help you hone speaking skills.

How do I conceal my speech anxiety?

You will feel like members of the audience will notice more of your nervousness than they actually can, but here are some tips to minimize symptoms while you give your speech:

- If you are holding a **full-sized sheet of paper** in one or both hands, it will be hard to hide if your hands are shaking because you'll inadvertently shake the paper. If you have a podium available, try **resting the paper on the podium** and then gripping the podium (lightly) or keeping your hands out of view, except when you decide to emphasize your words with appropriate gestures.
- If you have portions of your **speech written on cards**, try **holding the cards with both hands**. Since notecards are smaller and you're holding them with both hands, tremors will be less visible to the audience.
- If your **voice quavers or cracks** while you are speaking, try **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, which can cause your voice to tremble or squeak. The combination of volume and force can stabilize your voice and give you a better speaking presence.

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