

Tips for Effective Communication in Public Settings

Public speaking is a fundamental challenge, potentially stressful or frightening for many people, both adults and students. To find your voice, speak intelligently from evidence, and be self-confident when challenged about the questions of the day, is to find your own power and your own chance to change the world. Speaking in 2014, 17 year old Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai said: “We should not wait for someone else to come and raise our voice. We should do it by ourselves.”

Since sharing your work in public through presentations, field experiences, or media is central to this project, to civic participation, and to changing the world, this document describes some techniques of public speaking that with practice will grant anyone the ability to move from academics to action.

- 1. Prepare well.** Georgia State Professor Michael Mescon puts it this way: “The best way to conquer stage fright is to know what you are talking about.” This is a close cousin to the US Navy’s principle of 7Ps. Here is the cleaned up, non-sailor version: Prior Planning, Preparation, and Practice Prevents Poor Performance. Reinforcing this from ancient Greece is Epictetus, who spoke to the importance of listening and learning before speaking with this anatomically apt reminder: “We have two ears and one mouth so we may listen twice as much as we speak.” Listening is preparing. Once you are in command of the facts, the evidence, and the reasoning, it becomes natural to assert your claim.
- 2. Practice, practice, practice, and practice again.** Audiences are forgiving of mistakes, nervousness, and stage fright; however, it is disrespectful to waste their time though lack of preparation.
- 3. Speak only about what you know to be true and don’t fake it.** In his letters home from the Middle East, Malcolm X wrote, “I’m for truth, no matter who tells it. I’m for justice, no matter who it’s for or against.” Speak only about what you know and be happy to offer a professional “I don’t know but I will find out and get back to you.” Once again, audiences expect you to be knowledgeable about your message, prepared to deliver in an effective manner, and honest, but no one expects you to know everything.
- 4. Speak slowly and clearly.** Many people speed up their speech when they are nervous, but that makes you harder to understand and the audience might miss parts of what you are saying. Slow down your speech and take your time.
- 5. Make eye contact with the audience.** This is a tip that will help engage your audience in what you are saying—making it feel more like a conversation than a speech. Don’t just scan the audience—look at individual audience members one at a time. Try to give them an entire sentence or thought before moving on to another person.
- 6. Say thank you.** Your audience’s presence and applause are a gift. At the end of your presentation, always acknowledge your audience by thanking them.