
Dealing with Speech Anxiety

People get anxious about public speaking for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes we are nervous because of who is in the audience, sometimes because of the topic, or sometimes we are just generally anxious about speaking up. Anxiety takes the form of sweaty palms, shaking hands, pacing, wobbly voices, or any number of other clues.

Two pieces of good news: 1. The anxiety is rarely as noticeable to others as it is to you, and 2. There are clear steps you can take to help yourself.

Strategies for Handling Anxiety

Be prepared. It seems obvious, but if you are more familiar with your material, you will have less to be nervous about.

Practice. Practice early and often. The closer you can come to recreating the speaking experience, the more effective the practice will be. Stand up when rehearsing and actually speak aloud. You can practice with an audience after you've done a few run-throughs on your own.

Get comfortable in the space. Check out the room where you will be speaking ahead of time. Even if you will speak in the same room in which you've had class all semester, take a moment to stand at the front of the room and look out at where your audience will be. Making yourself familiar with the view from the front of the room, eliminates one more aspect that can trip you up.

Plant a friendly face. Have a friend in the class? Someone you would like to have as a friend? Use that person as a touchstone. If you are comfortable, you can let that person know that you tend to get nervous and ask them to give you some extra encouragement. Seeing that smiling face (and maybe the occasional thumbs up) can give you a boost in the moment.

Express Thyself!

Visualize your success. A common strategy for athletics and other performers works for speaking too. Visualize yourself in the speaking event. Visualize yourself giving the speech confidently and successfully. Pay attention to how it feels to do well and hold on to those feelings for when you get nervous.

Shake it off. Take a minute to literally get the jitters out before speaking. Stretch out your arms, run in place, roll your shoulders, move your neck and jaw around—anything that gets you moving. This helps you relax by loosening up those muscles that you have been tensing. You just may not want to do this at the front of the room 😊

Breathe. Take a few calming breaths before you go to the front of the room, and take another one before you begin. Inhale through your nose for a count of ten, hold that breath for a count of ten, and then exhale slowly out of your mouth for a count of ten. Doing this a few times before you get up to speak will slow your racing heart and give your brain important oxygen.

Use your resources. The OCC tutors are trained in helping you prepare your presentation and rehearse it. By recording your rehearsal and providing constructive feedback, a tutor can help you improve and know that you are going into your presentation as well prepared as possible. If you find that you have anxiety in other areas of your life as well, don't forget that the Counseling Center and Peer Counselors are both available for you.