

10 pieces of sage advice for public speaking success

How to balance enthusiasm and detachment, passion and logic, factuality and eloquence, in your public speaking? One veteran offers some practical wisdom on these delicate subjects.

By Nick Morgan | Posted: September 9, 2016



From time to time it's important to take a step back to put public speaking into perspective. I take it seriously, and I am passionate about it, but it's important to recognize that public speaking is one human activity out of many.

We don't burn people at the stake any longer for disagreeing with us, and life is about love and work, as Freud said, so at the very most public speaking should only occupy your thinking 50 percent of the time.

Here are my 10 rules for thinking rationally about public speaking, whether it's something you dread or love, whether it's a career or a religion, and whether you ever will try to master the art and science of it—or not.

1. A presentation is a brief phenomenon. It's measured in minutes, and the trend is to shorter and shorter speeches. Unlike chess games that can go on for days, or agriculture, measured in seasons, speeches are planned and timed to the minute. Many implications follow from this observation; here are three: (1) You should always give a few minutes back to the audience; in other words, end early, not late. (2) If your speech goes badly, and inevitably some will, realize that you will live through it. (3) Seconds are important to this art form too. Good public speaking is about timing. Use your seconds wisely. Don't just fill them up with words. Use pauses, gestures, and silence as well.

2. Your most important job as a speaker is to find your voice. Clients ask me if their messages are new enough. But there's very little that's truly new in the advice we humans give to one another. Aristotle figured out most things a couple thousand years ago. Rather than obsess about novelty, realize that what is new is your voice. If you draw on your own experience, insight, and stories, your message will be a new version of what may be an old truth, but no one will be able to say it just the way you can. Human voices, when achieved, are unique. That's your real job—find your unique voice. Don't quote someone. Say it the way only you can.

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3. Slow down and pare down. The mistake most rookie speakers make is to try to tell their audiences too much, to cram everything in, to tell them everything the speaker knows. I've learned as a coach that different clients need different messages. Brilliant advice to one person falls on deaf ears for someone else. They're at different places, or differing levels of skill, or have different issues. One size doesn't fit all, and that goes for the presentations and their audiences too. Rather than dump what you know on everyone, spend time figuring out what to leave out, what you're going to not say, and how you'll use silence to best effect.

4. You'll learn more from audiences that don't love you than audiences that do. Early on, most speakers just want to be loved. They want an endless, ongoing standing ovation from their audiences from the very start. And so presenters placate their audiences, tell them what they think the audience wants to hear, and avoid challenging audiences to think hard. The result is an endless stream of mediocre presentations. Only when you get the courage to make your audience hate you will you find out what you really need to say to them.

5. You can't give speeches in your head. Speakers run through speeches in their head and believe that this is rehearsal. It's not. Use your body to give a speech, and to rehearse one, because we embody our emotions first to find out what they are. In your head, you can say it quickly, smoothly—and blandly. In your body, you find the clumsy moments and the issues with connections from one part to another. Never rely entirely on the mental. Public speaking is performance art.

6. Let it go. A speech is the product of the speaker, the message, and the audience. When it's done, it's gone. Let it go. Don't let the accumulating weight of all your successes and failures define you. If you do, you'll stop being capable of being truly present and creating performance art. You'll just start phoning it in. Never, ever phone it in. You, your message, and your audience deserve better.

7. Not all audiences should hear you. I can always tell rookie authors because when I ask them "who's your audience?" they say, as if it were obvious, "Well, everyone!" Those are writers who haven't thought clearly about what they are writing about and who should read it. Not every audience will respond to your message. It's everyone's job—you, the meeting planner, the speakers bureau, the organizers, whoever's involved—to get this right beforehand. It's always obvious after the fact.

8. Take care of yourself, but not too carefully. Some clients, when successful, become divas. It's hilarious to watch, and I love it because it's a sign of success. You get the only-brown-M&Ms-in-the-bowl phenomenon. It happens. But you'll have more fun if you remember that you are just another glorious human being, with all the rights and limitations pertaining thereunto. Don't take yourself too seriously.

9. You are not your speech. Never confuse yourself with your message. You are more (and sometimes less) than your message. The message can change. The speech should change. Speeches are not sculptured objects; they are monuments to a moment in time. You should never give the same speech for more than a few years running. Knowledge changes, audiences change, you should too.

10. In fact, you should never give the same speech twice. Speeches need to be tailored to each audience. The main points may be similar, or even the same, but you always need to customize your presentation to a particular audience because if you don't it means you're not thinking about that audience as much as you need to.

Public speaking is important, even life-changing and world-changing, but that doesn't mean we have to take it with desperate seriousness. All human endeavor is ultimately temporary, and we are but dust in the wind. So enjoy yourself, make it as perfect as you can, and trust to luck. Good hunting!

A version of this article first appeared on [Public Words](#).
