

By D. Keith Robinson

Public speaking can be very stressful. I know that whenever I get up in front of a crowd I go through a panic moment. It takes a lot of discipline, practice, and preparation to put on a good presentation and even knowing *what you need to know* can be hard.

A year or so ago, I [wrote on the subject of first-time speaking](#). Since that time, I've been able to use many of those tips as well as some new tricks to help get myself ready for speaking engagements. I also had a chance to spend time with a speaking coach, which helped more than I'd have ever guessed.

Now when I'm speaking, while not 100 percent comfortable, I do feel much better, and I'm able to not only make it more fun for me, I think I pass along that good feeling a bit more to my audience. I've got several good tips, tricks, and resources I hope will help some of you. These things should help whether you're speaking at a large conference, giving a small internal presentation to you coworkers or classmates, or giving a sales pitch. They're pretty universal.

Mental and physical preparation before your presentation

I've found that the more prepared I am, the more confident I feel. This makes for a better presentation. As you get comfortable speaking, you'll naturally feel more confident and the need to prepare (and time it takes) will not be so important. For newer and first-time speakers, I think you should spend as much time as you can getting ready. Well, don't make yourself crazy; just make sure you know and feel comfortable with your material and practice a few times.

If you've never spoken before, a meeting with a speech coach can really help. They talk with you, get an idea of your style and will offer you some specific advice on how to address the crowd, what your particular problems might be, and more. For example, when I went I was told:

- Speak slower.
- Talk to individuals in the crowd.
- Think before you speak. Take pauses.

These things were (and still are) very, very helpful for me to remember when I'm speaking. Going over them before I get up there reminds me and helps me be more calm and confident.

A few other ways to prepare yourself:

- Drink lots of water.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Avoid the urge to go out drinking the night before. If you do, moderate yourself. (Especially if you're at SXSW.)
- Eat.
- Breathe.
- Visualize a positive outcome.
- Hang out with the other speakers (if there are any) and ask them questions and for advice. This always helps me as they will usually build you up.

Preparing your support materials

The key to preparing your actual presentation is to remember that less is more. If you want to share your information with people who couldn't be there, try writing an article. Even detailed presentations have something missing. A few common, and good to know, guidelines to a good presentation:

- Keep text to a minimum. No more than five bullet points per slide and if you can keep them to one core idea—that's better. People will tend to read this stuff and not pay attention to what you're saying.
- Check the contrast and font size. Make sure that if you have text on the screen that people can read it.

Gain confidence in your presentations by following these tips

- Use pictures to get your idea across. They're easier to remember, less distracting, and make more impact. Have stories ready and use imagery to set the backdrop.
- Avoid complicated charts and graphs; they're hard for your audience to follow. Keep visual ideas very simple.
- Check the resolution of your presentation. Maybe go with 800x600 to be safe. I don't know how many times I've seen slides that don't fit on the screen. You never know for sure how it's going to work out when you get things set up if you don't have full control over the environment.
- Have simple-to-follow notes to go along with your slides and major talking points. They should serve as a reminder, not something for you to read from.
- Prepare more than you can speak to, but also be prepared to get cut short. Time flies up there.

Giving the presentation

Although you don't want to spend too much time while in the midst of your presentation thinking about what to say or do, there are a few things you should remember when speaking:

- Think positive.
- Tell stories. Stories will get your idea across much better than charts and graphs and numbers. They also have the added benefit of helping to engage your audience.
- Don't read your slides. They should support what you are saying, not *be* what you are saying. The same goes for your notes.
- Keep your intro short and strong. People want to know who you are, but they also want to get into the meat of your talk. A quick, solid, and clear intro is better than a meandering joke or list of accomplishments any day. Chances are, most people in the audience know a bit about you already.
- Keep it slow and steady. Pause when you need to take a breath; you'll think better.
- Don't agonize over mistakes, and don't say your sorry. Keep confident and if you mess up—move on.
- Pause to let strong ideas sink in. This can be hard to remember, but your audience needs time to absorb and take breaks too!
- Smile, joke, and laugh if appropriate. A little humor can go a long way, but don't overdo it.
- Learn from your mistakes. I know that I learn a little every time I get up and speak.
- End strong. Make your finally crisp, clean, and powerful.
- Be prepared for interruptions and questions. If you are doing well, you'll have lots of questions.

I hope this stuff helps some of you. I know that the advice I've been given over the years has helped me quite a bit. I'm still not a great speaker, but I'm getting better and I sure as heck feel more comfortable about it than I used to—which to me is more than half the battle.

[D. Keith Robinson](#) is a writer, designer, artist, and publisher living in Seattle. He's been a Web professional for nearly 10 years, and his career has included work with Boeing, Microsoft, and Sony. He launched his Web site, [To-Done](#), to share processes, tips, and tricks on personal productivity and "all things related to working to have a better life."

Additional resources

- TechRepublic's [Downloads RSS Feed](#) **XML**
- Sign up for our [Downloads Weekly Update](#) newsletter
- Sign up for our [IT Career NetNote](#)
- Check out all of TechRepublic's [free newsletters](#)
- ["An effective PowerPoint presentation requires more skill than clipart"](#) (TechRepublic download)
- ["Trainers: Just say no to 'uh' and 'um'"](#) (TechRepublic article)
- ["The right way to get into the tech public speaking circuit"](#) (TechRepublic article)

Version history

Version: 1.0

Published: August 3, 2005

Tell us what you think

TechRepublic downloads are designed to help you get your job done as painlessly and effectively as possible. Because we're continually looking for ways to improve the usefulness of these tools, we need your feedback. Please take a minute to [drop us a line](#) and tell us how well this download worked for you and offer your suggestions for improvement.

Thanks!

—The TechRepublic Downloads Team