
Speak with Confidence in Class

Contributing to class discussion and giving presentations are part of many courses. Most people are anxious about public speaking. This is a normal feeling. In fact, having anxiety about something often means that it matters to you. Participating orally in class not only helps you engage with the course, it can also assist with comprehension and build confidence. You can use the following techniques.

Why Are you Nervous?

Anxiety is common before public speaking. Try to determine the source of your nervousness. Is it fear of a bad grade? Saying the wrong thing? Getting emotional? Speaking about something controversial? Once you have pinpointed a specific source, remember that your anxiety may be exaggerating the situation. Reframe your worry into something more positive. For example, instead of thinking “I’m going to look foolish and not speak clearly” you could think “I am going to be prepared and speak confidently.”

Start a Daily Practice

Practice public speaking as often as possible. Make a goal to stretch yourself at least once each day. These can be anything from raising your hand in class, to talking to someone in the line at Tim Horton’s, or starting a conversation with a classmate you haven’t spoken to before. If you are aware that you speak quietly, practice talking in a louder voice. Or if you tend to speak quickly, practice slowing your rate of speech.

Find a Mentor

Do you know someone who is a confident speaker? Ask them for advice, and what they would do in your situation. Or you could book a tutor at the Learning Centres to practice. Have a conversation with them about a class topic or practice your presentation with them. Ask them to offer you both positive feedback and to suggest areas where you might improve. Remember, your audience wants you to succeed.

Cultivate Confidence

Prepare before class by understanding the topic. Review course material, take notes and use active study strategies such as flash cards or explaining a concept to a friend. Come up with 3-5 speaking points that you could share during class discussion. Practice talking to these points in a loud and clear voice.

Imagine Your Success

Being nervous can bring forward fears of what might go wrong, while positive thinking is proven to decrease anxiety. Visualize speaking clearly and giving a great presentation. By focusing on what will go well you can alleviate some anxiety and build confidence.

Breathing Exercises

Staying calm before speaking can help you overcome your fear. Deep breathing, with your eyes closed, can keep you centered and focused. Repeating the simple exercise of inhaling deeply, holding your breath for a few seconds, and then exhaling is a common technique for keeping calmer. Remember that you are often most nervous just before speaking publicly, while after you have started nervousness tends to decrease.

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Be Clear and Concise

When speaking it's important to have a clear point to make. Providing examples can be especially helpful. Avoid rambling. It's better to be succinct and to the point than to speak too long and risk losing your audience's interest.

Project Confidence While Being Relatable

Confidence can be expressed in several ways. This includes making eye contact, smiling, speaking slowly, and pausing after important points. You can also use gestures (sparingly) to emphasize key ideas, maintain a confident posture (e.g., stand upright, look at your audience), and speak with conviction. Make what you say relatable by using examples relevant to yourself and/or your audience, or sharing a brief story directly connected to the topic. Repeat your main points at the end to help your audience remember the key takeaways.

Impromptu Speaking

Impromptu speaking occurs when you present or communicate something with little to no preparation. Developing impromptu speaking skills can be helpful in many situations, including speaking in class. Spontaneous speaking can feel disordered or be hard to follow. Below is a guide for impromptu speaking:

(adapted from <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/commbusprofcodn/chapter/methods-of-presentation-delivery>)

1. Take a breath. Collect your thoughts and plan the main point(s) you want to make.
2. Talk slowly. Thank the person for inviting you to speak. Don't speak to your uncertainty or anxiety, such as being unprepared, being called upon unexpectedly, or feeling nervous.
3. Make your point concisely but with enough detail to provide context for the topic. Including a clear example may be helpful.
4. Use numbers, if appropriate, to provide a structure. E.g., "Three effective ways to work well in teams are..." Timeline structures are also effective, such as "past, present, and future."
5. Thank the person again for the opportunity to speak.
6. Stop talking (it is easy to "ramble on" when you don't have something prepared). If in front of an audience, don't keep talking as you move back to your seat.

Celebrate Your Success

Recognize the courage it takes to speak to your class. What were two or three things that went well? Where are areas for improvement? Keep in mind that, even if you felt anxious while speaking to your classmates, often your anxiety may not be noticeable to them.

Find Support

Join a support group, like Toastmasters, that can help you improve your public speaking.

References

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