

Speaking as a Performing Art: 15 tips that are sure to make you a better public speaker

Doug Lawrence has been a professional singer, music director, and speech coach. He is a highly respected concert artist having sung for almost forty years in venues such as Carnegie Hall, Hollywood Bowl, and throughout Europe with conductors like Leonard Bernstein and Michael Tilson-Thomas.

In the last forty years, in addition to singing, he's done tons of speaking in front of groups of all sizes. Here's the big surprise: Singing and speaking have everything in common—except for maybe really good tunes. The main goal is to engage your audience and make them listen to you, so everything a singer does, a speaker ought to do too. Here are the absolute necessities of an engaging performance or presentation that Doug compiled:

Circulate with your audience. Before every concert, speech, and seminar, try to mingle with the crowd, ask questions, and let them know you're glad they came. This isn't always possible in the real world, but when it is, you'll have an opportunity to feel a bond with the people you're about to perform for and undo some of the jitters that are a natural part of being “on.”

Command attention. The breastbone, or sternum has to be high if you want to project authority. You might want to pretend you're a rooster showing off. Relaxed sternum = loser, high sternum = winner!

Snarl. If people can't hear you, they won't listen to you. Add some nasal resonance to your voice, but keep smiling. Snarl is that nasal sound you get when you speak partially from your nose instead of your mouth. It generates overtones above 2,800 cycles per second that make any room “sing.” Pretend you're trying to yell and warn a child that's about to run out in front of a bus—like yelling, “STOP!” This works whether you're using a microphone or speaking without one

Bite your tongue. If your mouth gets dry in the middle of your presentation, try gently biting your tongue. Opera singers use this all the time to release saliva which moistens your mouth.

Always perform a sound check before you speak. A good sound person will adjust the EQ to your voice and its idiosyncrasies. If you're comfortable using a hand mike, do so—work close to the mike and you'll have a better chance of being heard. If you turn your head, make sure you turn the mike with your head. Lapel mikes usually work fine, but for softer speakers they're very frustrating. Wrap-around mikes that fit over your ear are the best for intelligibility. If you speak often and you know your venues will support this technology, buy a really good one and take it with you.



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Use your eyes all the time. Hand gestures, pacing around the platform can all be useful tools in presentation, but the eyes...ah, the eyes have it! If you can't engage people with your eyes you will eventually lose your audience's attention. Your eyes always tell people whether or not you believe in what you're saying! Scan the room, select a person to make a point to, and look right at them. It's a little intimidating for them, but it keeps you focused on the individuals who make up your audience. Keep moving to new people—right, left, middle—it works! If all else fails, look at each person as though you've loved him or her all your life—like mom, or your child.

Move away from center to make your point. When you come to a place in your presentation where you really want people's attention, move to the left or right of your primary speaking position. This will always make people look up at you. If you are a constant mover or shaker, stand still for a few moments—it will have the same effect.

Get quiet. If you really want to get people's attention, get quiet suddenly. It will scare the sound guy to death, but it's guaranteed that the audience will pay attention. Singers use this trick all the time. That's the "you could hear a pin drop" effect. Believe me, that's what sells your talk!

"Underline" certain words with a pause or repetition. If you really want to make a point, slow down, pause, and say the word or phrase that you most want people to hear with a calculated emphasis on each word. The sudden switch in style gets attention. Also try repeating a word or phrase before you make your big point. For example: "You know (pause) you know (pause) you know, the thing I want you to remember is..." Songs are full of repeated text, a device that locks down meaning!

Take a risk and be vulnerable. Say or do something that's totally out of character for you. Use a "pretend" voice like Mickey Mouse or Barry White for effect while you're telling a joke or saying something shocking or humorous. Whether your persona is reserved or funny, it's endearing to have a little fun. This trick humanizes the most serious topics.

Tee it higher. Raising the overall pitch of your voice for a few seconds will create urgency. It shows your passion for the subject matter and also relaxes your exhausted larynx. Low pitched voices relax the room—high pitched voices increase the adrenaline flow of the audience.

Know when it's time to go. You don't have to be a genius to know you've overstayed your welcome. Check your "presentation barometer" often to see if everyone is still with you. Change something—anything—if you're starting to lose the crowd. If all else fails, stop talking, start thanking, and get off the platform. People will love you more for knowing when to stop than for all the wonderful content you brought to your topic!

Use Q and A as an "encore." Singers usually prepare an encore because this practice makes the audience feel special and makes them think you like them more than other audiences you've encountered. Q and A functions something like an encore. You may think you told them stuff they needed to know, but questions often reveal the important things you left out of your content. Where this opportunity exists, use it as a tool for picking up the pieces you left dangling in your talk and warm the crowd to your candor and self-effacing graciousness.

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. That's how Doug got to Carnegie Hall! Where possible, memorize your material like singers memorize their songs. Remember, the more you rehearse, the freer you will be to make your talk fresh and engaging.

Perform for a hero. Several years ago Doug was asked to sing a command performance for the Queen

of Spain. He worked harder on that concert than any concert he had ever sung. It was very successful and he was proud of my preparation. From that time on he imagined he was about to sing for the queen, it made him twice the performer he had been previously. Pick a hero, and give them your best shot!

This presentation was made possible by Guy Kawasaki. Guy is the co-founder of the Web site [Truemors](#) and the author of eight books.

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