

Everything you learned about public speaking is wrong

by Deborah Shames and David Booth, Co-Founders of Eloqui

Public speaking methodology is rooted in the 1950's. Speakers copied one another because it was considered the "right" way. Leading with a joke was recommended. And structure meant adhering to the principle of "Tell 'em, tell 'em again, then tell 'em what you told 'em."

Even physical gestures were prescribed, like standing behind a podium and gesturing without moving your hands above your face." No wonder most people, and especially women had anxiety or preferred not to speak at all-- rather than following these antiquated "rules."

According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death... This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy. – Jerry Seinfeld

After 25 years of Eloqui coaching, training and consulting, we understand why speaker anxiety affects 90% of the population-- and know how to reduce it.

In our experience, anxiety starts with memorized content. Learning a presentation word-for-word is not only time consuming, but a recipe for disaster. The speaker can't connect with the audience, or change gears if the content isn't resonating.

There's another demon to wrestle. A speaker's internal voice is going into overdrive. "Remember my last presentation when I forgot an important point? It could happen again." Or, "What if the audience is on their phone and giving me a poor evaluation?" or "What if the decision-maker leaves the room?"

The better way is to work off an outline. And utilize safety nets, like "I" statements (a speaker always knows their perspective) or storytelling.

When assembling content, most people were taught to begin with an agenda or talking points. Instead, start by identifying an Intention: the desired goal or purpose of a presentation.

Intention is also a great editing device. It is a guide for what to include and what to leave out of a presentation. And since audiences generalize how we speak is how we do business-- having a singular intention is critical.

Once a speaker has an outline and an Intention, there are additional ways to diminish speaker anxiety. Hook an audience with a compelling open, instead of the more traditional way of stating your name, position, and agenda.

Eliminate wind-ups like "Good morning" or "Thank you for being here" which waste a speaker's 30 second honeymoon period. And audiences are wondering when the presentation will start delivering something of value.

For a more successful open, include *your* perspective, even though the more traditional way is to use "we" as opposed to "I" statements. We're not advocating taking credit or being self-aggrandizing. But hearing why a presentation is important to a speaker draws us in and for the speaker, reduces anxiety. And after you hook us with a compelling open, we are ready to hear the agenda, as well as the tone and frame of a presentation.

Next, know the open and closing to a presentation *cold*. Since most anxiety begins about five minutes before speaking, and diminishes after the first few minutes, knowing these comments will mitigate anxiety.

However. Avoid rehearsing an open the same way, over and over again, or the content will start to *sound* memorized when delivered. Rehearse like a stage actor. Put the accent on all the wrong syll-ABLES. Mix up the phrases. (They don't need to make sense.) Or pretend you're speaking to an audience of children. These rehearsal techniques reinforce the speaker's comfort level with the material.

Another performer technique is to rehearse out loud vs internally. And take a page from the actor's playbook and do a "stumble through." *Mark* the presentation. Walk and talk the content to know the trajectory and what may need changing—without giving it full energy.

Now it's the day of the presentation. About 30 minutes before speaking, bridge. Go to a quiet space, or if it's not possible to leave the location, close your eyes. Don't interact with others. Clear your mind. Write down whatever needs to be done *after* speaking, like picking up dry cleaning, or returning a call. Drink room temperature water. If lunch or dinner is served have a few bites of protein. Then cover your plate, asking someone nearby to save it for you.

And don't do what most people do. Avoid going over your content close to show-time. You may forget something and then say to yourself, "what if I forget this when I'm in front of an audience?" But do remind yourself of your Intention.

You're ready. And you have something of value to impart. So, take your time. Opening and closing remarks are what the audience will remember most, so slow down. Speed signifies nerves and you don't want the audience to be anxious for you.

Traditional and old-fashioned modes of presenting are also commonplace in networking meetings. Professionals were taught to start AND end their self-introduction—sometimes called an elevator speech-- with their name and company. When a speaker starts this way, and audiences don't need or like your profession, they stop paying attention. But if a speaker delivers a compelling elevator speech, and *ends* with their name and services, they will be remembered.

To be memorable and persuasive, a speaker can also tell a case study, rather than listing their product and services.

Bottom line. When a speaker breaks the mold, goes against the norm, and delivers their presentations *their* way, the chances of success are greatly improved. Be out front. Be authentic. And own the room.