
Anxiety

Most student speakers worry about whether they will be too nervous to give a good speech. If you keep in mind a couple of simple principles, that nervous energy will work in your favor.

First, it's normal to be nervous. Actors, musicians, rodeo stars, even college instructors are working from nervous energy that we call performance anxiety. This anxiety heightens your senses and gives you the appearance of being engaged in the topic. That edge of tension is a good thing for most presentations. Remember the note above, in the section on ethos, where a speaker should not expect to be perfect because that would appear to be wooden or mechanical. Tension can create an emotional connection to the audience that enhances the speaker's ethos.

Second, no one can see your nerves! No matter how tense or shaky you might feel, the audience can seldom see what you are feeling. For most students, the feeling of nervousness is much more pronounced than the actual appearance. Only on rare occasions will a speaker have symptoms that are impossible to ignore. An opera singer who "chokes" during an aria is going to have some difficulty holding onto her credibility, but there is much less at stake in the speech

classroom. Why? We don't expect professional-level performance in the classroom.

Finally, while there are lots of physical exercises and mental visualization tricks that can help reduce the symptoms of nervousness, the best way to deal with performance anxiety is to practice, practice, practice. The more confident you are in the performance you intend to present, the more likely that your prepared performance will kick-in and any nerves you're feeling should fuel the speech to provide added emotion.

Communication Anxiety

Facing an audience is terrifying for many people. This is context-based anxiety or situational-anxiety. We know the audience is out there and lots of people are going to be staring at us when we speak. While a very shy person might find an audience of one far too intimidating and be nervous about having a conversation, most of us can speak comfortably in small groups. The classroom situation is different. All eyes are on the speaker, the group is fairly large, the instructor is watching with paper and pen at the ready to take notes, and suddenly it's time to open your mouth and give your speech.

The physical symptoms you feel are the same as those when you are startled or on alert. The heart beats faster, we

breathe more shallowly, our muscles flex, our hearing and eyesight sharpen – this is called fight or flight, an instinctive survival reaction. If we don't run away or stand our ground to fight for our lives, our bodies have to do something with the excessive adrenalin that is now racing through us. Every expert has his or her own suggestions for dealing with the physical symptoms: take a deep breath, tense the muscles in your legs, dig your heels into the carpeting, and lots more.

The emotional symptoms are equally as real. A speaker might feel that they are going to perform poorly or that the audience isn't going to like the speech. The physical symptoms can fuel the emotional symptoms and vice-versa. Remember that you have greater expectations for yourself than does anyone in the class – they are all worried about their own performances, not yours!

As noted above, while there are lots of exercises and techniques to help control physical and emotional symptoms of anxiety, there is no substitute for thoroughly practicing your speech. No exercise will make a speech better if it has not been carefully prepared and thoroughly practiced.

It's important to understand how you view yourself – what sort of self-concept you have and who helped you form it to determine where that anxiety originates. *Self-concept* (or *self-esteem*) describes how we view ourselves in relation to

others.² If a teacher told you in grammar school that you were an excellent speaker, you may have more confidence in your ability to give a speech than someone who has been told that they don't speak well. Our self-concept develops through *reflected appraisal* (or *social comparison*) which social science tells us is how those people who are important to us value and describe their reactions to our behaviors.³ Because public speaking is done before a live audience that is focused on your performance and will be reacting (or valuing) your performance as it evolves, it is perfectly understandable that giving a speech can create anxiety.

In fact, a classic study titled “Pygmalion in the Classroom” was devised by two researchers to test whether teacher expectation had any influence on student behavior. Here is a summary of their classic study:

In order to test their hypothesis that teacher expectation about pupils' intellectual abilities was a crucial factor in student achievement, Rosenthal and Jacobson posed as psychologists who claimed to identify those

² Blascovich, J., & Tomaka, J. (1991). Measures of self-esteem. In J. P. Robinson, P. R. Shaver, & L. S. Wrightsman (Eds.) *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes, Volume I*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

³ Wiltfang, G. L., & Scarbecz, M. (1990). Social class and adolescents' self-esteem: Another look. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 53, 174-183

children who would display "dramatic intellectual growth" on the basis of a sophisticated IQ test. After administering their test, they identified those pupils who, would develop academically more quickly than their peers.

A few months later, Rosenthal and Jacobson returned to re-test the children and found that those who had been identified as possessing "academic potential" had improved their IQ scores significantly. Those identified as "non-achievers" had not. Since Rosenthal and Jacobson did not tell the teacher that the "potential achievers" were selected at random, the only variable was teacher expectation and reflected appraisal.⁴

⁴ Rosenthal, R., and Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*. New York: Rinehart and Winston.