



## USE YOUR WORDS

Whether you're having a tough conversation or addressing an audience, follow these eight tips to be a more confident communicator.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

**PUBLIC SPEAKING** ranks as one of our top fears: In a 2019 survey, it beat out spiders and zombies on our dread-o-meters. You don't need to be prepping a TED Talk to start quaking either. "Some of the most important speaking situations are one-on-one or in small groups. That might be for an interview, asking a donor for money, or getting someone to approve your loan or research," says Christine Clapp, president of Spoken with Authority, a presentation-skills consultancy in Washington, D.C.

Why all the trembling water glasses? Exposing our inner thoughts can trigger fears of rejection (*What if everyone hates what I say?*), and feelings of rejection activate the same neural pathway as physical pain. Our blood pressure rises; our stress hormones spike. It's no wonder stating your views at a school meeting is daunting.

If you're really, really nervous, there are some visualization techniques you can use. Andrea Sampson, CEO, founder, and executive speaker coach at Talk Boutique in Toronto, recommends this: "Take a moment. Close your eyes, and imagine that you've just finished giving that talk. You're walking out of that room, or you're sitting down, and you know you nailed it. You absolutely nailed it. And you can feel the excitement of 'It's done.'"

Imagining your way out of a scary situation is one solution. But if speaking your mind doesn't come naturally, it's well worth risking some jitters to do it, says Melody Wilding, an executive coach in New York City. "The biggest mistake of all," says Wilding, "is to stay silent. In trying to shield yourself, you make yourself invisible." Luckily, our experts have tools to guide you through the thorny situations that require you to project calm and charisma.

### Prep your main points.

Before going into any important conversation, think through what your "headlines" will be, says Wilding. These are points you want to be sure to hit—for example, "I really value our friendship, but I don't feel comfortable loaning money to friends." Keeping these top of mind prevents you from getting flustered—and helps you stay focused while still coming off

as genuine and spontaneous. If you try to script every word in advance, you may appear inauthentic, says Wilding.

### **Silence your inner critic.**

You have a genius idea to share or an uncomfortable topic to broach. “The biggest problem is overthinking,” says Wilding. “We become so preoccupied with saying the perfect thing or worrying about how listeners will react that we choke.” Instead of imagining disaster, flip your focus: *What good could come if I speak up?* You might get a green light on your passion project or more respect from your in-laws. When you consider how your words can help other people, it can propel you beyond your own insecurities, Wilding says. Or you could psych yourself up by reframing those butterflies that are banging away. One 2013 study from Harvard Business School asked subjects to give a speech. Those who were instructed to interpret their anxious physical sensations as “excitement” were rated as more persuasive and felt more confident than those who were told to calm down beforehand.

**Use your body.** Whether it’s in front of 1 or 100, how you carry yourself will give your audience instant clues about you, says Vanessa Van Edwards, author of *Captivate: The Science of Succeeding with People*. “The more space we take up, the more confident we feel. Make your body expansive,” she says. If you are standing, pretend you have a string on the top of your head to the ceiling, pulling you up taller. Keep your feet at least six inches apart and your shoulders back. If you are sitting, position your arms on your armrests, or spread them out on the table.

(No slouching!) Research suggests posture tweaks can help you feel more confident on the inside too.

**Use your hands.** Keeping your hands in your pockets or fiddling with your phone are common tells you are nervous, says Sampson. Stash distractions, and leave your hands open and visible. “That builds trust with your listener—you have nothing to hide,” she says. Using hand gestures can be a powerful way to command attention and amplify your message, says Van Edwards. “If you have three points to make, hold up a finger at the start of each one. If you want to emphasize your ‘big’ idea, hold your hands a beach ball length apart.”

**Breathe.** A common mistake when we talk is rushing—talking too fast and not pausing to breathe. “You may keep talking until you run out of air,” says Van Edwards. That results in vocal fry, meaning your voice becomes annoyingly creaky. The fix: Pause often for a full breath—at the end of a sentence, when you go to change a slide, or after you make a point. Speak as you exhale. “Speaking on the out breath gives you resonance and will make your voice deeper and more confident-sounding,” says Van Edwards.

### **Pause between points.**

Silence is a secret weapon in effective communicating, notes Sampson. At the end of an important point, count to three in your head to let it sink in. “People are uncomfortable with silence, so they will be riveted,” she says. Silence can also cool down the temperature in a heated personal back-and-forth. If your partner says something provocative, count to three

before responding. It can also give you an upper hand in negotiating. For instance, ask for time off...then simply wait for the other person to reply rather than backpedaling or overexplaining.

**Get rid of “fillers.”** Wiggle words and phrases deflate your verbal power: “This may be stupid, but...” Ditto conversational “fillers,” like “um” and “ah,” which can signal you are nervous or don’t know your stuff cold. The first step is to become aware of them. Apps that track “fillers,” such as Orai, can help. “Next time you catch yourself about to say ‘um,’ pause and take a breath instead. With enough practice, it can become your new habit,” says Van Edwards.

**Make a connection.** In a crowded room or in a tête-à-tête, you want to establish a connection between you and your listener(s), says Debra Roberts, LCSW, communications expert and author of *The Relationship Protocol*. Resist the urge to look around or above people’s heads. Make eye contact. (In a meeting, homing in on a few friendly faces is fine.) Meet a gaze for three seconds, then look away so you don’t make anyone squirm. “You want a soft smile with definition in your cheeks and some crow’s-feet,” says Clapp. In addition to making those around you feel at ease, smiling sends signals to your brain that all is well.

Even as you add polish, be sure to let your authentic emotions shine through—your zeal for a cause, a laugh at your own gaffe. “We respond to realness,” says Van Edwards. “We all have our own brand of charisma. Try to be the most enthusiastic and comfortable version of yourself.” ✖

### **OWN THE ZOOM**

**Photo-bombing toddlers. Errant pets. Distracting decor.** In this new age of online meetings and chats, even the poised among us can get flustered. Stand up to talk: “You will get more air into your lungs, and you will project your voice with more confidence,” explains Clapp. In bigger groups, she suggests placing a picture of a loved one right above your computer camera. “Now you have someone to make eye contact with,” Clapp says, “instead of scanning a shifting gallery of faces.”