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# 4 public speaking fixes that can fill you with confidence

Taking the floor is all about connecting authentically with your audience. Here's how.



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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Around 30% of Americans fear public speaking. Terri Sjodin has researched thousands of sales presentations to identify the most common public speaking mistakes. She joins us to explain why we need to prepare well, avoid “data dumping,” and connect meaningfully with our audiences.



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**I**t's often said that people fear **public speaking** more than death, but in fact, people fear a great many things more than public speaking. According to the **Chapman Survey of American Fears**, corrupt government, economic collapse, nuclear weapons, climate change, and high medical bills keep people up at night far more than the idea of giving a speech.

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That said, 29% of Americans do list public speaking as a fear. That's more than snakes (26%), murder by a stranger (26%), devastating hurricanes (27%), and, yes, even dying (26%). But unlike the other fears on the list, which are either rare encounters or wicked hypotheticals, many people face public speaking regularly — even if they don't realize it.

“Initially, people think public speaking means you're speaking to a large group, but the size of the audience isn't the important part. Your most important presentation could be one-

on-one or one-on-100; it's still public speaking," **Terri Sjodin**, speaker, consultant, and author of *Presentation Ready*, tells Big Think.

Your next public speaking gig could be a TED talk, but it could also be your next sales pitch, team meeting, or interview for a dream job. They're all public speaking in an important way: You've been allowed to share your message with others, and you're reliant on your delivery and speech skills to make that message appealing.



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In her research, Sjodin asked thousands of sales professionals to evaluate their presentations and the presentations of others, and the data she collected points to several common mistakes presenters make.

We spoke with her to discuss these effective ways to correct them and markedly improve our public speaking skills.

### 1. “Wing it” in the traditional sense

The number one mistake the professionals in Sjodin's research confessed to was winging it. Foregoing practice, they stepped up to speak and hoped for the best. The reasons for such an approach are numerous: anxiety, **procrastination**, overconfidence, or the belief that unprepared remarks are more authentic.

Whatever the case, it's a mistake because solid preparation not only helps build clarity and connection with your subject. It also puts you in the best position to pivot and take advantage of unforeseen opportunities.

The solution to winging it is, ironically, to wing it — but in the traditional sense. As Sjodin points out, the expression comes from **acting circles**. Understudies would learn their parts in areas on either side of the stage (known as the wings) in case they were needed to step in for another actor.

As such, winging it was originally an act of preparation, and you can see its effects in today's great actors and speakers. Meryl Streep and Daniel Day-Lewis come to know their material so intimately that they can incorporate a smile, pause, or slight inflection exactly where needed for maximum effect.

While different formats will require different levels of preparation, generally speaking, the more you know the subject you will present on — whether that's a product, an upcoming initiative, or your own resume — the more effectively you can channel your mental energy.

## 2. Discover your “win-win”

Another common mistake people make is being overly informative. Granted, you want your presentation to instruct or educate, but too many speakers fall into the habit of presenting one fact after another after another after another. Sjodin calls this “data dumping,” and the result is that listeners stop listening after their attention and interest become buried beneath a mountain of unusable factoids.

The solution is to weave the necessary information together with a persuasive argument. **Persuasion** comes when you show how the information helps the listener meet a need, solve a problem, or do something they want. In sales, that typically revolves around saving time, money, or brain power. In an interview, it's showing someone why you're right for the job.

If you're unsure how to make your presentation persuasive, Sjodin's recommendation is simple: **Just ask**. Take a minute or two beforehand to discuss what your audience finds important, what they need to accomplish, or what would be a win for them. Because you're not winging it anymore, you should be able to incorporate that need smoothly into the presentation.

“As a persuasive presenter, you’re constantly trying to ethically, candidly, and beautifully communicate your message in a way that’s a win-win,” Sjodin reminds us.

### 3. Borrow from Aristotle

However, you can’t be truly persuasive if you fail to make a connection with your audience, and that can be difficult if your time is limited or you’re speaking to a large group of people.

To help, Sjodin takes a page out of **Aristotle**. The ancient Greek philosopher argued that people connect with speech when it contains three essential elements: ethos (credibility and evidence), pathos (storytelling and emotions), and logos (logic and reason).

“What we’re trying to advise people to do is just have the awareness to incorporate a lovely balance of ethos, logos, and pathos in their presentations. That way, you have the highest probability of [creating a connection with them],” she says.

Sjodin uses this balance herself when presenting these classic elements to anyone looking to raise their public-speaking game. While ethos- and logos-favoring audience members will connect with Aristotle and his Greek verbiage, it leaves pathos-favoring members out in the cold. To bring them back in, she connects Aristotle to the TV show *Star Trek*. Captain Kirk becomes pathos, Doctor Bones becomes ethos, and Spock is, of course, logos.

Of course, if an audience doesn't care for *Star Trek* or Aristotle, it still may not work for them. "That doesn't mean you shouldn't try," Sjodin notes. "Just know that even when you're trying your best, it may not land with some people. That's the gift and burden of being a presenter."

## 4. Read the room

It can be difficult to offer blanket advice on verbal missteps as these can be highly unique to the speaker. Broadly speaking though, they fall into six categories:

- Filler words and redundancies (e.g., "um" and, like, "you know").
- Jargon and acronyms.
- Inappropriate language (e.g., swear words).
- A lack of verbal clarity.
- Rate, speed, or volume (e.g., speaking too softly or loudly for the venue).
- Personal style issues (e.g., being too argumentative, confident, or demure).

Part of the solution is to simply become aware of the problem and **devise tactics** to counteract it. For example, if you discover you use a lot of fillers, train yourself to take a pause when you need to think instead. Similarly, if a friend says you use too many industry-specific acronyms, take the time to spell things out for your audience.

Sjodin also points to an often overlooked strategy: simply reading the room. If people are speaking in a softer cadence, then use the lower range of your register. If people are boisterous, try to get into the flow. It's not about being a copycat so much as having an awareness of the energy and expectations of the room.

Of course, you'll never be free of verbal missteps. Fixing this mistake **isn't a bid for perfection**. Rather, it's about understanding your audience and deepening your connection with them through empathy and emotional intelligence.

## The great equalizer

Fixing these common mistakes will enhance your presentation skills by helping you prepare what you need to say, bring that case to life with **creativity**, and deliver your message with authenticity.

However, Sjodin stresses that highlighting these mistakes shouldn't make people feel more pressure or that they aren't talented. Rather, her hope is that we will learn to recognize the pitfalls that trip us, alongside the strengths we bring, to become more comfortable public speakers.

That takes time and dedication, but Sjodin believes it is worth it because **communication skills** are the "great equalizer." Anyone can learn to communicate in a style that is persuasive, ethical, and authentic. And once learned, those skills are multipurpose. You can take them with you to any endeavor — not just at work but also in the support of a cause or participation in a community.

"If you can communicate in a way that shows your likability, that you've done your homework, and that you genuinely care, you're going to capture someone's attention," Sjodin says. "It doesn't matter where you grew up. It doesn't matter where you went to school. You can create beautiful messages."

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