

Overcoming Nerves and Stagefright

Fear is excitement without the breath

—Fritz Perls

When we are issued with a challenge, we have a choice. We can step up to meet the challenge, or we can run away.

You have chosen to participate in Speechcraft. You have chosen to step up to meet the challenge of public speaking. But there may be some occasions when nerves or stagefright rear their ugly heads, before or during a speech.

You can use your nerves to your advantage. Indeed, most professional speakers feel a surge or nervous energy before stepping out on stage. The key word is **energy**, not **nervous**.

Think for a moment about the physical symptoms you experience before speaking:

- Your heart pounds
- Your stomach churns
- You sweat
- You want to move—you fidget, or shake, or twitch
- Your mind goes blank
- You feel compelled to visit the bathroom

Nerves are your body's way of rising to meet a challenge. Adrenaline is surging through your veins. You have a choice: flight, fight, or freeze. As a public speaker, though, you have a fourth option. You can channel your nervous energy into your speech.

How? By using your breath. Any time you experience the physical symptoms listed above, take a deep breath. As my Pilates instructor would say, breathe deep into your diaphragm. As you breathe, your physical symptoms will change. Your mind will regain its focus. Your heart and your stomach will calm themselves. Now, you can direct your energy as you choose. To deliver the speech you want to give.

There are some other practical steps you can take to overcome nerves and stagefright. You will be able to better manage your nerves if you are fully prepared; if you are completely familiar your audience, your speech, and your venue:

1. Research your audience. What do they expect of you, and how can you best meet their expectations?
2. Research your speaking venue, and visit it if possible before your speech. Consider the lighting, acoustics, the speaking stage, the availability of a microphone or audio-visual equipment. You don't want any surprises when you step up to the lectern.
3. Prepare your speech meticulously. Use your Speechcraft materials to craft a speech which conveys your message clearly and economically.
4. Practice your speech many times before you deliver it. Practice using vocal variety and body language to add colour and emphasis to your message.
5. Seek feedback from as many people as possible, so you can refine your words—and the way you deliver them.

Disarming Your Inner Critic

Sometimes, though, you need to do more than breathe. You may follow all the steps listed above, yet still succumb to nerves and stagefright. Perhaps you have to face your sternest challenge yet: disarming your Inner Critic.

What is the Inner Critic? He or she is the voice in your head that tells you you're no good, that you don't have anything worth saying, that you have no business speaking in public. Here's the first thing you need to know about dealing with your Inner Critic:

It's not about you.

This may sound strange. After all, the comments the Inner Critic makes can be intensely personal. They're tailored to your specific weaknesses—whether real, or imagined. But they're not about you—they're about your Inner Critic. It's you Inner Critic who believes that he or she is no good, has nothing worth saying, and so on. Your Inner Critic is projecting his or her own fears onto you. Once you realise this, you come to the second point:

Your Inner Critic is only trying to help.

You see, your Inner Critic fears being made to look the fool. When you speak in public, you put yourself on show. You offer your ideas or experiences to an audience, and there is always a risk that the audience could reject you. Your Inner Critic believes it is safer to keep your mouth shut.

So where does this Inner Critic come from? He or she is made up of all the negative comments you've heard in your formative years, and taken to heart. Your Inner Critic may be the voice of a parent, a teacher, or some other influential elder. This is not because your parents or teachers were innately vicious. It's just that the people closest to us are the ones who convey the expectations of the broader society. And there are a lot of people in any community who would rather run away than step up to a challenge.

Now, you might find it hard to believe that your Inner Critic is trying to help you. After all, some of his or her comments can cut you to the bone. But your Inner Critic is not a skilled communicator. That's why your Inner Critic shys away from public speaking. His or her carping tone of voice cannot hide an underlying fear. Which brings us to the third point:

Your Inner Critic is to be pitied, not feared.

After all, you're prepared to stand up and speak your truth. Your Inner Critic would rather run. Who is the stronger of the two? Even so, your Inner Critic does possess some positive qualities, which you can use to your advantage. Which leads to our fourth point:

Work with your Inner Critic, not against him or her.

On one hand, your Inner Critic is good at finding fault in everything you do. On the other, I'd guess that your Inner Critic has a good knowledge of the fundamental principles of effective writing and speaking. If you're going to be a nitpicker, if you're going to be a grammar-nazi, you need to know the rules. Inner Critics love rules, which leads to our fifth point:

You set the groundrules.

Why not? You're a strong person who speaks up, while your Inner Critic is just a voice in your head. Time to take charge. From now on, you set the groundrules for your working relationship:

I welcome any comments from you, my Inner Critic, subject to the following four conditions:

1. *I will listen to your comments after my speech, not before, or during.*
2. *Your comments will be specific. If you see an area where I can improve, you will give me a specific example. You will not offer generalisations,*
3. *You will devote as much time to telling me what I did well, as you will to telling me how I can improve. Again, you will give specific examples of what I did well.*
4. *You will watch your tone of voice. No put-downs, nothing snarky. You will be polite.*

It may take a little time, but with persistence you will change the behaviour of your Inner Critic. Make him or her accountable to you, not the other way round. And remember to breathe!