

Speaking Confidently

by Michelle Muratori, Ph.D.

As a college student, you'll likely participate in group projects, class presentations, and discussion groups for which you will earn a grade. Even when you're not formally evaluated, strong verbal communication skills can help you interact well with others and successfully advocate for your own needs.

Whether you are asking a professor about a research opportunity or internship, seeking to join a student organization, interviewing for a part-time job, or meeting people at social events on campus, the ability to clearly and confidently articulate your ideas will be a great asset. Later in your professional life, competence in verbal communication will pay off, too: There will surely be occasions on which you need to interact with others, and good oral communication skills will help you foster positive working relationships with them.

If you had to rate your oral communication skills on a 10-point scale, with 10 being "very strong," what number would you give yourself at this time? Similarly, if you were asked to rate your self-confidence in public speaking, how would you assess yourself on a 10-point scale? If your self-ratings are not as high as you would like, take this opportunity to cultivate these important skills before you leave for college.

If you are a self-proclaimed *glossophobe* (one who suffers from fear of public speaking), you may find comfort in knowing that these skills do not come naturally to everyone. In fact, the very thought of speaking in public causes many people to feel downright petrified and develop sweaty palms, nausea, anxiety, and other forms of physical distress.

It's important to remember that some people who make the art of speaking seem effortless were not always self-assured. Well-known actors such as Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson, Robert De Niro, Julia Roberts, and Harrison Ford have battled shyness or stuttering, yet have gone on to be very successful in their careers. Eleanor Roosevelt and Sir Isaac Newton reportedly experienced similar struggles. If you share these concerns, it may help to know that you are in good company.

Although it may be more enjoyable to focus exclusively on developing your strengths, you may later regret not paying attention to skills that need improvement. If one of your relative weaknesses is verbal communication, now is the time to work on building those skills. Fortunately, there are many activities available to middle and high school students that can help you improve your speaking skills and build your confidence:

- Get involved in extracurricular activities such as Mock Trial, or join your school's debate club to gain experience in public speaking.
- Take a drama course or join the theater club at school. You might discover that your fear of speaking is not as intense when you are given lines to deliver. Playing the roles of differ-

ent characters may help you develop more confidence as a speaker while allowing you to explore your own creativity. (There's a reason so many people are into theater!)

- Become active in Toastmasters International, an organization dedicated to helping people develop their speaking and leadership skills in a nonthreatening environment. With a learn-by-doing approach, Toastmasters offers a Youth Leadership Program and an Interpersonal Communication program for teens to improve their communication skills—and at a minimal cost.
- Read biographies of individuals who have overcome shyness, stuttering, or a fear of public speaking. These stories may leave you feeling inspired to conquer your own fear.
- Practice what makes you uncomfortable, and then do it again! Try out new public speaking strategies in front of the mirror, in front of family members, in front of other people you trust, or even in front of a webcam so you can record and see yourself in action. Be open to feedback about how you come across when you speak, especially if you receive the same feedback from different people. Focus only on feedback you find helpful and constructive.

Overcoming fear of public speaking and improving one's verbal communication skills requires practice, patience, and persistence. And don't expect your nervousness to magically disappear even after you become more confident and competent; remember that feeling nervous does not mean that you are doomed to deliver a poor speech. Instead, you might think of it as excitement turned inward and employ strategies to calm your nerves and center yourself. Above all, give yourself ample credit for having the courage to step outside your comfort zone and challenge this fear. ■



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