

BIG PRESENTATION?

6 tips to go from stressed
to your best!





When you give an important presentation, without doubt one of your biggest hurdles is the stress or nerves you feel.

A little nervousness is a good thing because it keeps you on your A-game. But feeling too much of it comes across as discomfort, which makes your audience uneasy too, and hence they'll be hesitant about your message. What's more, intense nerves hinder your thinking, which makes it harder to convince people about your message.

So, here are six tips to keep your nerves under control.

1. Have a SIMPLE message, a SIMPLE structure and SIMPLE slides

If you're like most presenters, often you'll fall into the trap of cramming too much detail into your talks, which has drawbacks both for your audience and for yourself.

Of course, too much detail's bad for your audience because it makes it far harder for people to know what your main point is. But it also makes you more reliant on your content-filled slides, which only *fuels* your nerves.

Instead, craft such a simple main message that you can write it in a short sentence, stating what the audience should do. For instance, you might write something like these:

- 💡 "We should adopt the plan to merge our northern and eastern regions."
- 💡 "After attending this webinar, you should sign up for my podcast to get more great tips."

Having written your main message so simply, the next step is to choose a suitable structure for your talk (ideally in three parts), such as one of these:

- 💡 Problem, options, recommendation
- 💡 Then, now, how we got here
- 💡 Past, present, future

During your talk, a strong structure makes it much easier for you (and your audience) to keep track of where you are in your talk as a whole.

Now, with your clear main message and strong structure in place, you're ready to make your slides. On each one, it often helps to write a simple sentence in the notes pane summing up what point the slide makes. And on the slide itself, limit the content to one piece of evidence that supports the slide's sentence.

For instance, suppose in the slide notes you write "Last year's sales *decreased* year-on-year, reversing a three-year trend". On that slide, you might place a simple chart showing sales for last year and the three years before it.

Using those three types of simplification will make your talk much clearer and more compelling, giving you confidence in it, and helping you present it more smoothly.

2. Rehearse realistically



The implication here is that you should **rehearse** in the first place! If you don't rehearse at all, or you wait until the last minute, or you simply read through your slides in your head, you're not helping yourself get ready for the big day.

Rehearsing realistically means that you:

- 💡 Talk out loud.
- 💡 Gesture for emphasis.
- 💡 Practice with the technology you'll use on the day.
- 💡 Keep your pace comfortable.
- 💡 Stay well within time, so there's time for questions.

This lets you be sure of your talk's timing and be comfortable with the way you've structured and expressed your content.

To see and hear what your audience will experience, it really pays to video each rehearsal, too. If you'll present online (showing just your slide deck), I suggest when rehearsing you turn your camera towards your slides, so you capture how they'll look with your voiceover, or use the recording feature in your chosen web conferencing platform (if available to you).

If you'll also be using a webcam, turn it on when you rehearse so you get used to seeing yourself (although some platforms now let you hide the webcam picture to prevent you getting distracted).

When you watch each video, don't be hard on yourself! Just focus on honing one or two aspects of how you come across.

How many times should you rehearse and to what level of detail? That depends on what you might call the "novelty and gravity" of the situation. That is, it rests on:

- 💡 How new the content is to you.
- 💡 How new the speaker technology is to you, like the software and hardware you'll use for your talk.
- 💡 How big the opportunity is, in terms of audience size, seniority or how much is at stake.

Each audience differs, which means how you orient them to your talk – and how you call them to action – needs to differ too. That's one reason it pays to rehearse in exactly the same form as you'll use on the day, so you can really hone your message.

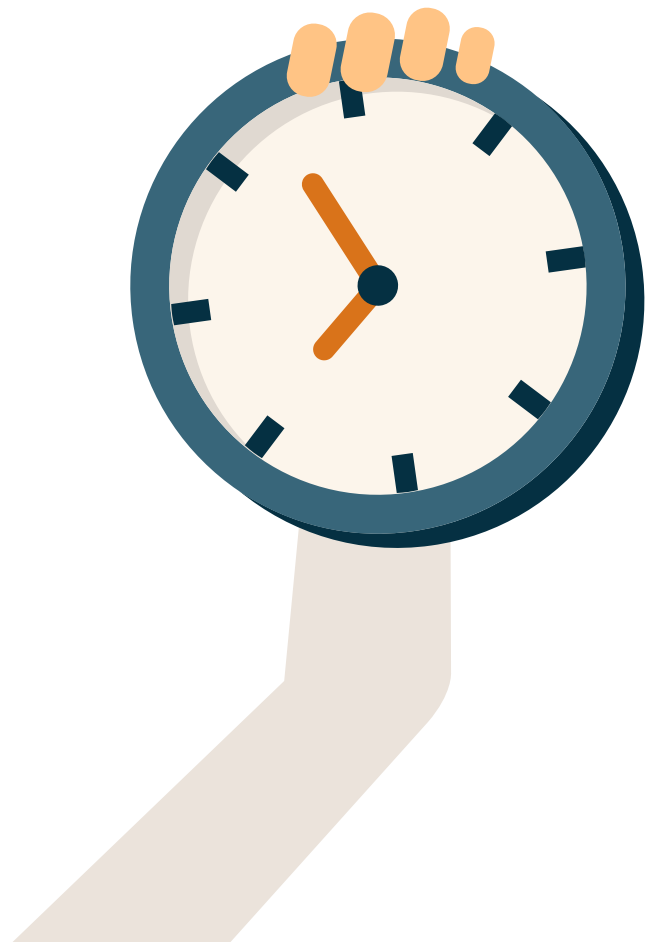
3. Give listeners (and yourself) time to think

One of the hallmarks of a nervous speaker is that they speak too fast. A great tip to help you calm down, and therefore slow down, is the [power pose technique](#) made famous by Amy Cuddy of Harvard Business School.

Another good way to naturally control your pace is to smile at appropriate times, and to gesture throughout your talk – even if you're presenting online and people can't see you. Your smiles will improve your vocal tone, as well as help you to relax, and the physical act of gesturing will help to dissipate your nerves.

When you rehearse, keeping within time will help you hugely here too: Just watch your rehearsal video to see if you're pausing long enough and often enough. If you are, then when you present for real, people will be able to take in your message, and you'll come across as poised. But if your pauses aren't up to par, at least you'll have given yourself time to practise again before the big day!

There's a problem with a steady pace though – it's not as exciting to listen to. So to solve that, the trick's to **vary** your pace, saying each phrase at a moderate rate, but also pausing frequently for several seconds at appropriate points. To help on that, Decker Communications suggested a [great scheme for pausing](#) whenever there's a comma, new sentence or paragraph break in your speech.





4 . Seek help

Running a big presentation's demanding, especially if you're presenting online or at a large venue. In either case, the technology involved gives you more to think about. So make it easier on yourself by getting people to act as host or as audio-visual technician.

In an online session, the host can help monitor the chat panel. Just be sure to rehearse your session with your host at least once and discuss how you'll work together to handle audience questions and the like.

For a big face-to-face presentation, like at a conference, get on good terms with the organisers and audio-visual team well ahead of the event. Here are a couple of great ways to do that:

- 💡 Ask them what they need from you.
- 💡 Offer to use social media and your website to help promote the event.

5 . Rule your tools

You can take a couple of steps to feel more in control of your technology. Which steps you take depend on how you'll present:

- 💡 If you'll present online, it's a good idea to have a second computer (or handheld device) logged in as a participant, so you can see what your audience is seeing. Not only that, but it also pays to connect a second monitor to the computer you're presenting from. That way, you'll have much more space on your computer desktop to open a copy of your notes or to keep the chat panel or other windows visible, while still easily seeing your slides.
- 💡 If you'll present face-to-face, use a remote clicker to control your slides so you can move around freely. And if you're using PowerPoint on your own laptop, you can even make your slideshow start automatically as soon as your laptop starts. That helps you feel – and look – really in control of your slideshow, which leaves a good impression in cases like presenting **to a top sales prospect or at a board meeting**.



6 ■ Plan for broken tools!



After setting up your technology, you'll feel more at ease if you've also thought about possible problems and taken steps to safeguard against them.

For instance, if you're presenting online, what would you do if your Internet connection or phone line dropped out? To guard against that, you could send a copy of your slide deck to your host and arrange to have her step through the slides if necessary. And, in case your landline plays up, you could have your freshly charged mobile phone at hand, or a headset if the tool you're using has integrated VoIP.

Whether you're presenting face-to-face or online, to offset possible technical issues, it's reassuring to have

a backup of your slides and notes – in another format and on another device. So, you might make a PDF copy of your slides, upload it to the cloud and also have it on your phone or tablet. And many people swear by having a paper copy of their slides and notes just in case.

On the day you'll present, it really helps to have some slack in your schedule before the event in case of delays. So to avoid unnecessary stress, arrive at the venue with ample time to spare. Then, in the time before your talk begins, you can always chat with your audience (either in person or virtually) to let everyone get acquainted and feel more comfortable.



Over to you

Before your next presentation, remember to implement these 6 simple tips:

1. Have a simple message, a simple structure and simple slides.

2. Rehearse realistically.

3. Give listeners (and yourself) time to think.

4. Seek help.

5. Rule your tools.

6. Plan for broken tools!

About the author

Craig Hadden works as an instructional designer, creating online training from his home in Sydney. He's fascinated by presentations, and at [his Remote Possibilities blog](#) you'll find many articles and videos about presenting. When he's prised away from the keyboard, he enjoys cycling and snorkelling. He'd love to hear from you, via either his blog or [@RemotePoss](#) on Twitter.



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