

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | MARCH 2026

TOASTMASTER



Prep for That Presentation!

TOASTMASTERS
INTERNATIONAL
2026 CONVENTION

VANCOUVER, CANADA | AUGUST 19-22

Vancouver Vibrancy

A place filled with energy and life—
come explore, learn, and network with us in vibrant
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada!



Take advantage of early bird pricing
by registering now at:
toastmasters.org/Convention

Publisher

Daniel Rex

Managing Editor

Laura Amann

Senior Editor, Executive & Editorial Content

Paul Sterman

Associate Editor

Laura Mishkind

Assistant Editor

Mackenzie Eldred

Graphic Designers

Brian Messick

Bambi Cash

2025-2026 OFFICERS

International President

Aletta Rochat, DTM

International President-Elect

Stefano McGhee, DTM

First Vice President

Gauri Seshadri, DTM

Second Vice President

Jean Gamester, DTM

Immediate Past International President

Radhi Spear, DTM

Chief Executive Officer

Daniel Rex

2025-2026 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Michael Bown, DTM

Region 1

Mark Lucas, DTM

Region 2

Chris Raneri, DTM

Region 3

Srinivas Saineni, DTM

Region 4

Andrew Horberry, DTM

Region 5

Jenilee Taylor, DTM

Region 6

Ramona Baylor, DTM

Region 7

Sujit Sukumaran, DTM

Region 8

Hani Nur Zaihanirah

Zaini, DTM

Region 9

Francesco Fedele, DTM

Region 10

Patrick Oluyide, DTM

Region 11

Monique Tonna, DTM

Region 12

Suganthi Periasamy, DTM

Region 13

Viola Lee, DTM

Region 14

TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL®

9127 S. Jamaica St. #400, Englewood, CO, USA 80112

+1 720-439-5050

toastmasters.org

CONTACTING WORLD HEADQUARTERS

For information on joining or building a club, visit:

toastmasters.org/membership

Article submission:

submissions@toastmasters.org

Letters to the Editor:

letters@toastmasters.org

For general magazine questions:

magazine@toastmasters.org

TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL MISSION:

We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



The *Toastmaster* magazine (ISSN 00408263) is published monthly by Toastmasters International, Inc., 9127 S. Jamaica St. #400, Englewood, Colorado, United States 80112.

Published to promote the ideas and goals of Toastmasters International, a nonprofit educational organization of clubs throughout the world dedicated to teaching skills in public speaking and leadership.

The official publication of Toastmasters International carries authorized notices and articles regarding the activities and interests of the organization, but responsibility is not assumed for the opinions of the authors of other articles. The *Toastmaster* magazine does not endorse or guarantee the products it advertises.

Copyright 2026 Toastmasters International, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. Not responsible for unsolicited material.

Toastmasters International, the *Toastmaster* and the Toastmaster International Emblem are trademarks of Toastmasters International registered in the United States, Canada and many other countries. Marca registrada en México.



The Privilege of Being Heard

When we join Toastmasters, we are given something remarkably rare: an audience.

From the very first speech—the Ice Breaker—we begin making choices about what we want to say. We take the story of our life so far and shape it into four to six minutes. What we include, what we leave out, and how we choose to tell it are decisions only we can make. No two Ice Breakers are ever the same, because no two stories—or two lives—are the same.

With every speech, we face familiar questions. *What is it I want to say? How do I structure it? How do I make sure it resonates with the audience?* Over time, I've added one more question—one that challenges me and sharpens my intention:

What do I want to change as a result of my speaking today?

Sometimes the answer is simple. I want to take a step forward. To stretch beyond my comfort zone. To build confidence, one speech at a time. At other times, the answer is more ambitious—it's about giving voice to something I care deeply about and believe needs to be said.

I remember giving a speech that allowed me to pay tribute to my two grandmothers—two very different women who shaped how I saw

myself and my place in the world. That speech mattered deeply to me, and I could sense the audience leaning in with me. It reminded me that authenticity is what creates connection.

Each time we stand up to speak, we have an opportunity—to say something meaningful, to be heard, and perhaps to influence change. That change might be subtle. It might start with us. Or it might spark something in

someone listening quietly from the back of the room, long after the meeting has ended.

I often say that when you become a Toastmaster, you are guaranteed two things: an audience and applause. An audience is a gift of attention. Applause is an act of generosity.

Speaking to an audience is a privilege—one I try never to take lightly. I remind myself that every speech is an opportunity to add value, whether through insight, vulnerability, humor, or courage.

So the next time you prepare a speech, pause and ask yourself: *What do I want to say—and what do I want to change?*

Because your voice matters. And only you can tell the story that needs to be heard.

Aletta Rochat, DTM
International President



14



10



22

Feature

14 PRESENTATION SKILLS: 10 Ways to Prepare for a Work Presentation

Set yourself up for success before you step up to speak.

By Joel Schwartzberg

Columns

3 INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: The Privilege of Being Heard

By Aletta Rochar, DTM

8 YOUR TURN: Keeping Cool in the Tank

By Ari Siegel

9 CLUB SPOTLIGHT: Bringing Toastmasters to Albania

By Norm Bour

24 5 QUESTIONS WITH: Saby Sengupta

Articles

10 NERVES: Fix Your Fear of Speaking

Understand the roots of public speaking anxiety, and gain tips to conquer it.

By Jennifer Fidler

12 NERVES: Taming Your Speaking Saboteurs

Use these tips to avoid sabotaging your speech.

By Sheila Kelly

17 PRESENTATION SKILLS: Creating a Strong Slide Presentation

How to make your visuals support your message—not compete with it.

By Diane Windingland, DTM

18 COMMUNICATION: Finding the Right Way to Say Goodbye

Deliver a eulogy that pays the proper tribute.

By George Kiser

20 TECHNOLOGY: 7 Generative AI Pitfalls for Communicators

How to spot and resolve these blind spots before they cost you clarity and trust.

By Joel Schwartzberg

22 PRESENTATION SKILLS: Practice and the NET Approach

Notice, explore, transform: Be present in your public speaking.

By Melinda Lee

Departments

5 Seen and Heard

6 Open Mic

Insights, inspiration, and interesting tidbits.

Cover Illustration by Andrew Kubik

Snapshot



Members of **District 71 (Northern United Kingdom and Ireland)** went on a seven-day bus tour around Ireland to raise awareness for Toastmasters and promote communication, leadership, and confidence. The tour took place in October 2025, during Ireland's Mental Health Month, and the theme was "Talk - Listen - Connect." They traveled 1,585 miles and stopped at 13 venues, and local Toastmasters clubs hosted events open to the public.

Traveling Toastmaster



Luis Cano, DTM, Yurit Flores, DTM, and Sandra Muñoz, all from Jalisco, Mexico, show off the flag of Mexico while visiting Rainbow Mountain, also known as Vinicunca, in Peru.



Suhaan Abdul Munaf, DTM, of Salmiya, Kuwait, displays Toastmasters International's 100-year celebration logo while visiting the Batu Caves in Selangor, Malaysia.

CLUB EXPERIENCE

Youth Takes the Stage

South Florida Toastmasters help young people find their voice with TEDxMiramar Youth.

By Kate McClare, DTM

Teens often wonder if anyone is listening to them. That wasn't a concern for nine young South Floridians who earned enthusiastic cheers and applause after speaking from the stage last October at TEDxMiramar Youth in Miramar, Florida.

Spearheaded by CeCe Espeut, DTM, who brought together nine other Toastmasters to serve as coaches, and held in collaboration with the TEDx speaking program, the event highlighted the voices of speakers ages 12–18.

Members were able to apply their Pathways mentoring and coaching skills outside of their clubs, while strengthening their leadership abilities.

TEDxMiramar Youth is not a Youth Leadership Program (YLP), and Toastmasters was not formally involved in the approval process. However, the two entities' purpose and process are similar, says Espeut, executive director of TEDxMiramar Youth and its adult counterpart TEDxMiramar.

"The YLP is designed to help young people develop communication and leadership skills through hands-on speaking experience and mentoring from Toastmasters members," Espeut explains. "Our collaboration applies those same principles in a real-world setting."

The Miramar youths worked one-on-one with Toastmasters coaches to research, organize, and deliver their talks (similar to how YLP participants work with their coordinators). Participants learned how to

give and receive evaluations, manage time, and support one another as a team.

"TEDx talks are not speeches in the traditional Toastmasters sense," says Espeut, who has presented from the TEDx stage several times. "They are idea-driven presentations with storytelling and authenticity at the center."

True to TED's motto, the speakers' ideas included a variety of thought-provoking takes on topics, such as mindfulness, motivation, self-growth, and living one's passion.

"Our goal was to empower young people to find and share their voices," Espeut says. "We wanted them to learn how to take an idea that matters to them, develop it into a well-structured message, and deliver it with clarity, confidence, and purpose."

"Ultimately, we aim to build confident communicators and ethical leaders who understand the power of their words to influence and inspire," she adds.



CARTOON



"Remember, when the mime's presentation is over, just clap without making any noise."

TOASTMASTERS NEWS

TOASTMASTERS COULD BENEFIT AUTISTIC SPEAKERS

Research finds clubs are a positive environment for those on the spectrum.

By Peggy Beach, DTM

A study suggests that participating in Toastmasters may have many benefits for autistic people, including improved communication skills, increased self-confidence, and stronger social connection. Dr. Sasha Zeedyk, an associate professor in the child and adolescent studies department at California State Fullerton, and Dr. Yasamin Bolourian, director of outreach and dissemination at the University of California, Los Angeles, Tarjan Center, conducted [the study](#) from 2021 to 2023.

Zeedyk and Bolourian became interested in Toastmasters in 2020. The two were invited to visit the [Orange County Asperger's Support Group \(OCASG\) Toastmasters Gavel Club](#) by the founder, Judi Uttal, DTM.

The researchers used an Organization for Autism Research grant to conduct the study.

An advisory team, including Uttal, four autistic Toastmasters, and a parent of an autistic Gavel Club member, provided guidance to the researchers during regular planning sessions. In the study's first phase, researchers interviewed 22 autistic Toastmasters.

Most said they not only developed stronger speaking skills in the program but also were able to participate in speech contests, create a social community, and form close relationships.

Bolourian notes that participants appreciated the speech evaluation process, which helped them appreciate other people's perspectives.

In the study's second phase, Zeedyk and Bolourian conducted a 10-week Speechcraft program with 18 autistic non-Toastmasters.

Each participant had a Toastmasters mentor, who helped with speech preparation.

At the end of the program, participants said they felt more confident and comfortable with public speaking.

"The numbers are trending in the right direction for other outcomes [as well], such as loneliness, anxiety, and leadership skills, but we didn't find clear evidence of improvements as a result of participation," Bolourian says.

"More research needs to be done," adds Zeedyk. "We need to have more people and a longer program."

The researchers also found that mentors enjoyed the experience and expressed a desire to help in future studies. Participants felt they benefited from having a mentor, although some expressed a need for additional mentorship and autism-specific accommodations. "We want to find a way to maximize the mentorship aspect of the program," says Bolourian.

"Feedback needs to be concrete, specific for autistic speakers to get anything out of it," Zeedyk elaborates.

Both researchers and Uttal agree that Toastmasters may be beneficial for autistic people.

"This study has shown the value of Toastmasters in helping individuals on the spectrum," says Uttal, "proving that it not only helps their communication skills, but also improves their sense of self and connects them to a community."

WORD OF THE YEAR

Top Word of 2025

In December, a Toastmasters LinkedIn poll asked members the question "What should the Toastmasters Word of the Year be?" After the votes were in—more than 1,200 of them—the winning word was:

Articulate.

Thirty-one percent of respondents chose that word, which was followed closely by **eloquent**, tapped by 29% of the voters. Twenty-one percent selected **envision**, while 20% opted for **impromptu**.

Members weighed in. Marvel Kummer, DTM, of Minnesota, wrote that she voted for

articulate "because that is where I have grown and stretched myself in Presentation Skills and Leadership Skills this year using technology."

However, Esohe Irabor, Ph.D., of Washington, D.C., advocated for eloquence as the top Toastmasters term, "because that's what the culmination of all the #skills we #build in #Pathways leads to."

Dictionaries also chose their words of the year. The Oxford University Press announced its victor as **rage bait**, which they defined as "online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating,

provocative, or offensive, typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular webpage or social media account."

If the choice of rage bait angers you, perhaps you'll be happier—or not—with Merriam-Webster's winner: **slop**. Definition: "Digital content of low quality that is produced usually in quantity by means of artificial intelligence."

Noting that their "human" editors picked the word, Merriam-Webster cited 2025 examples of slop as everything from bizarre videos and weird advertising images to AI-written books and talking cats.

Articulate

[ar-TIK-yuh-late]

Keeping Cool in the Tank

How Toastmasters prepared me for the TV show *Shark Tank*.

By Ari Siegel

When I joined Toastmasters, I never imagined speaking on national television. Then, over 10 years later, I found myself pitching my business, History By Mail, on the American show *Shark Tank*, facing five investors and millions of viewers.

What began as a way to improve my communication skills turned out to be essential training for one of the most high-pressure speaking situations I have ever faced. Toastmasters helped me develop a steady, clear, and adaptable communication style that made all the difference in the “tank,” where you present your business proposal and answer questions with the goal of persuading one or more of the investors to back it financially.

My business is a subscription service that delivers replicas of historical documents paired with guides that provide context and bring the stories of history to life. It is a product rooted in storytelling, and much of what I learned through Toastmasters prepared me to tell that story clearly and confidently on TV.

A barrage of questions followed my pitch. The sharks, as the investors are known, wanted to know everything, from our business margins to customer acquisition costs and long-term strategy. I had only seconds to respond to their rapid-fire questions. This is where my experience with Table Topics kicked in. Years of impromptu speaking practice helped me stay calm, listen fully, and respond with clarity and confidence. Toastmasters gave me the tools to think under pressure.

Not everything was off-the-cuff. In the months leading up to filming, I practiced my pitch for hundreds of hours. I watched past

episodes, cataloged every question ever asked on the show, and practiced my responses out loud. I even made life-size cutouts of the sharks so I could simulate delivering my pitch in front of them, even when they looked skeptical. This level of preparation was intense, but it built on skills I had already refined through Toastmasters: tightening language, crafting an opening hook, using vocal variety, and mastering transitions.

On *Shark Tank*, everything is live to tape; there are no do-overs. You get one chance to deliver.

It wasn't just the words I said, it was how I carried myself. At Toastmasters meetings, I learned how body language shapes perception. Standing tall, making eye contact, and smiling were habits reinforced again and again through evaluations. These nonverbal cues became second nature and helped me communicate trustworthiness and competence.

Many sharks say they invest in the person as much as the business. I knew that when I walked into the room, I needed to come across as someone they could see themselves working with—hardworking, coachable, and trustworthy. The ability to project presence and authenticity came from practicing these skills in Toastmasters over the years.

After every Toastmasters speech, I received feedback—honest, specific, and structured. Over time, I learned not to take constructive criticism personally. That resilience helped tremendously during my *Shark Tank* prep when friends, mentors, and producers gave me blunt input. I could absorb it, adjust, and improve quickly.

On *Shark Tank*, everything is live to tape; there are no do-overs. You get one chance to deliver. Thanks to Toastmasters, I was ready. I didn't have to think about my posture or pacing, which were now instincts. I could concentrate on connecting with the sharks and delivering the message with clarity and conviction. In the end, my preparation paid off. I secured a deal with investors Barbara Corcoran and Daniel Lubetzky.

I still drew on my Toastmasters skills after the episode aired. Demand for my business surged, media attention and customer feedback poured in, and History By Mail grew quickly. I found myself fielding media requests and new business opportunities I had not anticipated. The confidence and clarity I developed in Toastmasters helped me navigate all this with intention.

Toastmasters is not just for public speakers. It's also for entrepreneurs who need to pitch their vision. In my case, it helped me tell the story of History By Mail in a way that resonated with investors and viewers alike.

Ari Siegel is a former Toastmaster and founder of [History By Mail](#).



Bringing Toastmasters to Albania

How a new club set a high mark in a new country.

By Norm Bour



Members of Toastmasters Tirana in Albania.

Chartering a new club can be a daunting task, much less the first club in a new city, much less the first club in a new country. However, Endri Ndoni of Tirana, Albania, did all three when he helped charter Toastmasters Tirana, a hybrid and bilingual club, in Albania, in June 2024.

Even more impressive is that within a year of chartering, the new club achieved President's Distinguished status and managed to keep almost the same membership base number as in the charter roster.

Albania

Albania is often overlooked on the world stage, so founding a new club here was a major step onto the international Toastmasters stage. A small, mountainous country in the Balkan Peninsula, Albania sits directly northwest of Greece and is separated from Italy by the Adriatic Sea. The club is located in the capital city of Tirana, and is now part of District 109, which encompasses 16 countries in Europe.

Ndoni sees Toastmasters as a “great global bridge” to connect Albanians and Albanian immigrants around the globe. He is currently working to launch and sponsor more clubs in Albania and in the Albanian-speaking countries in the region.

As a professional management consultant, Ndoni has spent the past decade honing his speaking skills. He was terrified of public speaking as a teenager, but he decided to challenge that fear when he started college. Ndoni discovered Toastmasters while reading about speakers and watching videos of speeches online. He didn't have the opportunity to join a club at that time, but decided last year was the right moment to start his own.

“I was ready and charged to make Toastmasters accessible for Albania,” Ndoni says.

Team Effort to Charter

While Ndoni spearheaded the formation of the first Toastmasters club in Albania, he is quick to acknowledge that the groundbreaking step was a team effort, a point others also recognize.

Ndoni had already made connections with Francesca Gammicchia, DTM, of Milan, Italy, whom he had met 10 years ago. She was a longtime Toastmaster who had served in various leadership roles at the club, Area, and Division level, and was the 2023-2024 Club Growth Director. Gammicchia supported Ndoni and served as a sponsor, mentor, and founding member of Toastmasters Tirana.

Ndoni then planned a demo meeting. He posted about the event on LinkedIn, and his post received over 400 engagements and was seen by more than 30,000 people.

Gammicchia, along with founding members Kristi Tirana and Ledi Laka, helped Ndoni run the meeting, and many experienced Toastmasters from the District took on meeting roles. Over 100 people attended that initial event.

“Endri was the one to turn on the light, but then there were so many great people that kept the light on!” says Francesca Davidhi, of Maastricht, Netherlands, a participant in the demo meeting, past Vice President Education of Toastmasters Tirana, and the District's current Administration Manager.

Toastmasters Tirana chartered just a month later. The club now has 24 members.

The Impact of Toastmasters

The facts and figures surrounding the new club are impressive, but its impact is more about the people it has helped during its first year.

“People are amazed at themselves for their increased confidence, better techniques in public speaking and speech analysis, increased ability to give and receive constructive feedback, and proud to be part of a community that is supportive and focused on growth,” Ndoni says. Since joining the club, some members have been promoted to managerial roles and others are becoming leaders, he adds.

Although many members knew very little about Toastmasters, Ndoni saw their potential. As the first President of the club, he led by example to inspire his club. Despite not being aware of the Distinguished Club Program at first, the club went on to earn President's Distinguished status within its first year.

“We knew nothing, and yet we did everything right,” says Kristi Tirana, the club's first Vice President Public Relations.

Toastmasters also helped the members form stronger personal relationships with friends and family. The social activities after the meetings—dinners and drinks, karaoke, and barbecues on the weekends—helped foster stronger bonds and boost the community spirit among members.

“We currently have at least five new guests per meeting, and the community is growing stronger day by day,” Ndoni says. “This gives me confidence that we will, indeed, change the world one Albanian at a time!”

Norm Bour is a former member of Saddleback Sunrise Speakers in Mission Viejo, California, and was a frequent Toastmasters contest winner. He is currently a full-time nomadic adventurer and has visited 43 countries.

FIX YOUR OF SPEAKING



Understand the roots of public speaking anxiety, and gain tips to conquer it.

By Jennifer Fidler

If you're afraid of public speaking, have no fear—it's one of the most common phobias. You've probably heard the saying that most people fear public speaking more than they fear death. And that's true to an extent—nearly everyone has an impending fear of death; however, public speaking is something we all face having to do on a regular, even daily, basis.

Estimates suggest that around three-quarters of the general population report some level of anxiety about public speaking. An estimated 15-30% of them have a formal diagnosis of public speaking anxiety.

That fear of public speaking is called glossophobia, and having it can prevent you from participating in activities, receiving promotions at work, and even being able to converse individually.

The good news is there are steps you can take to combat this fear. But first, it helps to understand where the anxiety is coming from. Often, it reflects a worry of being perceived negatively by others or embarrassing yourself. From an evolutionary standpoint, this makes sense.

Back in the Stone Age, the only way you could survive and not get eaten by a saber-toothed tiger was by being part of a group. As soon as you left the group, you became vulnerable, and your chances of survival diminished rapidly. This meant you had to do everything you could to keep in harmony with the group. Standing out in any way was potentially dangerous.

Fast-forward a few thousand years: Speaking in front of an audience and sharing your thoughts and ideas makes you stand out. It is the same vulnerable feeling your ancestors had when they were alone in the wilderness.

When you're up there alone, your reptilian brain—the oldest part of your brain, the part in charge of basic survival functions—rings the alarm bells. Those bells cause you to start sweating and your heart to start pounding; your fight-or-flight mechanism kicks in and soon you are scanning the room for the fastest escape route.

As a social psychologist, this is fascinating to me. We have come such a long way as a species. We invented big metal tubes that fly through the air and transport us from New York to Europe, yet the most primal mechanisms in our brains are still running the show.

In my coaching practice, I regularly work with clients who suffer from public speaking anxiety. How they are affected varies wildly: from a slight nervousness, to getting the jitters and sweaty hands, all the way to complete blackouts.

A little bit of nervousness or even anxiety before you speak is actually fine. It is a healthy response by which your brain signals, *Hey, there is something important going on here. Pay attention!* This physiological response helps you stay focused and alert. And that's also the reason why seasoned speakers still experience the jitters before going onstage. They help!

It's only when these responses get out of hand and become debilitating that nervousness becomes a problem.

Overcoming Your Fear

Luckily, there are ways to harness those nerves and use them for good rather than grief.

Here are four practical tools—two you can use right away, and two that take more time—to calm your nervous system and help you refocus:

1

Pattern Interrupts

When you feel your nerves ramping up, try practicing what is called a pattern interrupt. The renowned hypnotherapist Milton Erickson is credited with popularizing the term and its usage, and helped his clients use pattern interrupts to immediately disrupt unwanted behavior or thought patterns.

Imagine you are about to go onstage and suddenly your mind goes haywire: *Why am I doing this? I didn't prepare enough. This is going to be horrible!*

Now is the time for a pattern interrupt!

How it works:

A pattern interrupt can be anything that startles your brain long enough (just milliseconds) to create a gap in the pattern, which you can use to redirect your focus.

Some of the most common ways to shake your thoughts up are:

- Holding out your hand and literally yelling at your anxiety, "Stop!"
- Clapping your hands and shaking your body
- Snapping a rubber band around your wrist

Every time you speak
at a meeting, your
brain learns that
what it fears is actually
not dangerous.

You can use any method that works for you. You just want to interrupt the pattern and tell your brain to focus back on your speech.

When to use it:

Whenever you catch your mind engaging in negative self-talk or thinking.

2

The Superman/Wonder Woman Pose

In 2010, social psychologist Amy Cuddy popularized the idea of using power poses as a quick confidence builder.

The idea is simple: You want to feel more confident immediately? Strike a power pose!

How it works:

Find a quiet place, preferably with a mirror. Place your fists on your hips, chest out, shoulders back, chin up. Put a smile on your face. Hold this pose for two minutes while gazing into the mirror. You will actually feel your emotions shift from feeling nervous and insecure to confident and strong.

When to use it:

Whenever you feel doubts creeping in or your confidence eroding, adjust your posture to a power stance.

3

Mental Rehearsal

While this technique needs more time to work, it is still very powerful.

Your brain cannot distinguish between reality and vivid imagination. That means it's easy to trick it by visualizing yourself doing something successfully, like giving a speech with confidence and skill. By regularly rehearsing a scenario mentally before it happens, your mind learns it isn't anything to fear. So if you want to calm your nerves before a big talk, mentally rehearse yourself thriving onstage ... over and over and over again.

How it works:

You should still rehearse your speech out loud several times before you step onstage. Practice saying it out loud to yourself, present it to friends, or entertain your dog with it.

In addition, rehearse it mentally. Simply close your eyes and imagine yourself giving your talk. What do you look like? How do you feel? (Hint: You want to imagine you feel incredibly confident.) Imagine the audience locked in on you, fascinated by your speech.

By the time you actually do step onstage, your brain knows: *We've done this before. Easy peasy. Nothing to be afraid of!*

When to use it:

This is a great technique to use when you have several weeks to prepare for a speech. Rehearse it in your mind until you feel really comfortable with it.

4

Toastmasters

The vast majority of people who join Toastmasters do so to overcome public speaking anxiety. It's a proven program that has helped millions learn to speak with confidence in a variety of situations, leading to improved relationships, professional advances, and new opportunities.

Of course, you need to do more than just attend meetings to reap the full benefits—you need to actually take advantage of opportunities to speak as often as possible, through meeting roles, speaker roles, and evaluations.

How it works:

Toastmasters uses the principles of exposure therapy to overcome the fear of public speaking. That is, you are gradually exposed to the very thing you dread most.

Every time you speak at a meeting, your brain learns that what it fears is actually not dangerous. You can practice speaking in a completely safe space, among people who understand your fears. You step into your discomfort with a support group that provides constructive feedback.

When to use it:

Reaping the benefits of Toastmasters takes time and repeated practice, but it is the most effective way to manage or overcome your fear, making the other tips on this list easier to use for momentous speeches.

Feeling nervous before a speech is a normal and healthy response. However, if you feel that your nervousness and anxiety are holding you back from being the best you can be, these techniques can help you tame the ravenous saber-toothed tiger in your brain, so you can get your nerves back under control.

Jennifer Fidler is a social psychologist, hypnotist, and speaker who helps people find happiness, confidence, and success. Her company, [Jennifer Fidler Coaching LLC](https://www.jenniferfidlercoaching.com), offers hypnosis-based coaching sessions, self-hypnosis and confidence workshops, and speaking engagements for university students, corporations, and retreats.

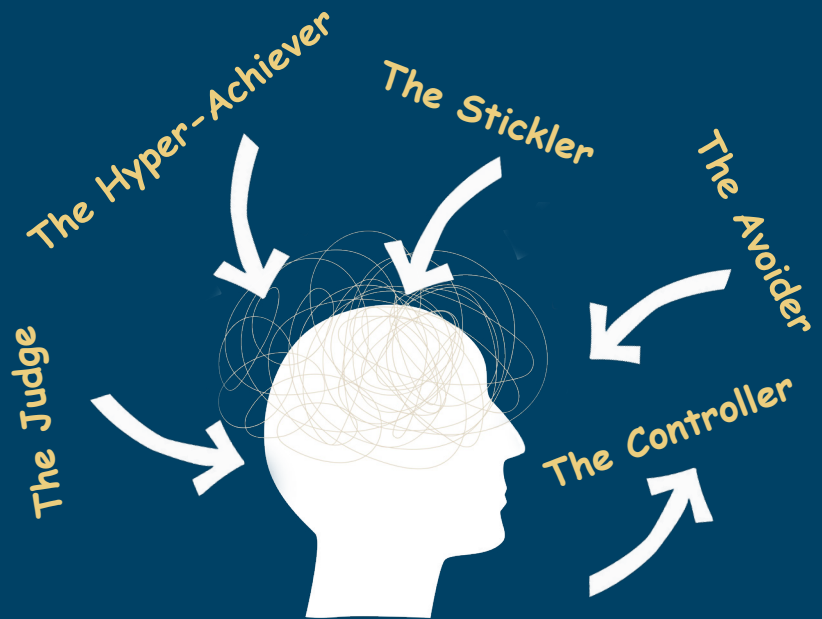


Trust

Taming Your Speaking Saboteurs

Use these tips to avoid sabotaging your speech.

By Sheila Kelly



You're being introduced as the next speaker. Your heart is pounding and you mentally rehearse your opening line for the hundredth time. Suddenly, a voice whispers in your head, *You're going to forget everything. They'll see right through you. You're not good enough.* Sound familiar?

As a Toastmaster, you've probably heard this voice, not because you lack expertise or preparation, but because of internal voices distracting you from your purpose. These forces are what the Positive Intelligence (PQ) program calls "saboteurs"—internal patterns of thinking that undermine your performance and wellbeing.

Developed by an executive coach, Shirzad Chamine, the saboteur framework identifies 10 patterns of self-sabotaging thoughts. These saboteurs typically form in childhood to protect you from physical or emotional threats. For example, someone who experienced chaos might believe that managing every detail prevents disaster. While these patterns once served a protective purpose, they can interfere with your adult effectiveness, particularly in public speaking.

The good news? Once you recognize your dominant saboteurs, you can tame their impact. As a leadership coach, I have worked with hundreds of clients, many of whom have weakened their saboteurs through PQ. Read ahead to learn more about the 10 saboteurs, how they can undermine speakers, and tips to weaken them.

The Judge

This is the Master Saboteur. Everyone has it to some degree. It creates harsh

self-criticism and negative judgments of others. This saboteur triggers the other saboteurs and works alongside them, creating more harm and stress.

This might be you if: When speaking, your Judge tells you, *I'm terrible at this* or *They think I'm boring*. It may also judge your audience negatively: *They're not smart enough to understand this*. The Judge is constantly on duty, judging yourself, others, and circumstances.

To weaken this saboteur: Notice it and label it: *That's my Judge talking, not reality*. Practice self-compassion and ask yourself: *What would I tell a friend having these thoughts?*

The Controller

The Controller needs to control situations, outcomes, and others' perceptions. During presentations, it demands that you rigidly follow your script, preventing you from adapting when audience energy shifts or questions arise.

This might be you if: You become anxious when your presentation doesn't unfold exactly as planned, or when you can't remember your prepared remarks.

To weaken this saboteur: Use talking points rather than a memorized script. Remind yourself that adaptability demonstrates competence. Start with low-risk experiments like Table Topics®.

The Hyper-Achiever

The Hyper-Achiever ties your self-worth to performance outcomes. You focus on impressing others rather than connecting with them, leading to an inability to recover from small mistakes.

This might be you if: Your value as a speaker is tied to giving a flawless presentation, rather than on serving your audience's needs. You race through Pathways, focusing on the achievement rather than the journey.

To weaken this saboteur: Shift your metric for success from "perfect delivery" to "meaningful impact." Forgive yourself when you make an inevitable mistake.

The Victim

This saboteur tends to blame others when things go wrong. Before speaking, it generates thoughts like *The audience won't like me* or *Terrible things always happen to me*.

This might be you if: You interpret suggestions for improvement as negative criticism, judging the evaluator rather than respecting their suggestions.

To weaken this saboteur: Replace *I can't* with *I do my best*. Remind yourself of all the positive points from your evaluator.

The Stickler

The Stickler has rigid rules and demands perfection in every detail for itself—and

The Victim

everyone else. Small imperfections create great anxiety, and you may get completely derailed by minor mistakes.

This might be you if: You obsess over every detail in your preparation. One stumbled word throws off your whole presentation. You get anxious about completing projects in the Pathways learning experience, losing focus on the learning provided.

To weaken this saboteur: Practice “good enough” in low-stakes situations like a club speech. Remind yourself that your audience wants you to succeed.

The Pleaser

Likability is important; however, the Pleaser makes you desperate for audience approval, and you can lose your authentic voice. The Pleaser may over-apologize or constantly seek validation.

This might be you if: You prioritize being liked over everything else, diluting your message or not sharing your opinion to avoid any possible criticism.

To weaken this saboteur: Remember that your role is to serve your audience's growth. Avoid over-apologizing. Don't mistake helpful tips as criticism.

The Hyper-Vigilant

Constantly scanning for danger, this saboteur keeps you anxious about potential disasters: forgetting words, technical failures, hostile questions. This hypervigilance creates visible tension and exhausts your mental energy.

This might be you if: You focus obsessively on everything that could go wrong during your presentation.

To weaken this saboteur: Develop contingency plans for realistic concerns like technology failures. Practice

The Pleaser

grounding techniques like taking a deep breath before your first word.

The Restless

The Restless always seeks the next thing, unable to be fully present. When speaking, this saboteur rushes through content, doesn't pause to let ideas land, and fails to notice audience engagement.

This might be you if: You race through your presentation, pacing back and forth, waiting for it to be over.

To weaken this saboteur: Practice your speech standing perfectly still. Remind yourself that depth of impact matters more than finishing quickly.

The Avoider

The Avoider focuses on the positive to dodge anything unpleasant. It procrastinates preparation, avoids practicing, and relies on “winging it.”

This might be you if: You avoid practicing your speech beforehand. You tell yourself *this is just too hard*, or you dismiss constructive feedback.

To weaken this saboteur: Set time aside to practice your speech and ask others what could be improved. Listen to their feedback and acknowledge your discomfort without letting it control your progress.

The Hyper-Rational

This saboteur is all intellect with no emotion. Presentations become data-heavy and lack stories and human connection.

This might be you if: Your favorite speeches are based on facts and data, or you view emotional elements of speaking as manipulative or unnecessary.

The Hyper-Vigilant

To weaken this saboteur: Remember that humans make decisions emotionally and justify them rationally. Practice incorporating one personal story into each presentation. Notice how some speakers balance logic and emotion.

The Path Forward

These 10 saboteurs pull you away from genuine connection with your audience. They create internal noise that interferes with clear thinking, authentic expression, and your ability to read and respond to listeners.

The key to managing your saboteurs is to recognize them quickly and shift to what Positive Intelligence program calls your “Sage” perspective—the part of you that responds to challenges with curiosity, creativity, and calmness.

When you notice a saboteur arising before or during a presentation, try these tips:

- 1. Label it:** *That's my Judge.*
- 2. Take a physical action to interrupt the pattern:** Take three deep breaths, feel your feet on the ground, and listen to your heartbeat.
- 3. Redirect to a more constructive thought:** *What does my audience need? or How can I serve them right now?*

With practice, you'll lessen the saboteurs' power, and your authentic voice will emerge—the one that truly connects with and serves your audience.

Sheila Kelly has worked with hundreds of individuals and teams as a professional coach, partnering with them to help them evolve their leadership as they tame the inner voice of their saboteurs. Learn more at thebigyes.com.

The Hyper-Rational

The Restless



Illustrations by Andrew Kubik

10 Ways to Prepare for a Work Presentation

Set yourself up for success before you step up to speak.

By Joel Schwartzberg

When we see a presentation we admire, it's easy to focus on what the speaker is doing in the moment: confident delivery, comfortable eye contact, perfected slides, and finalized content. What's not visible is all the prep work that happens in the days and weeks leading up to that spotlight moment.

Prepare wisely, and you'll speak with more confidence, sharpen your message, and ensure your audience is clear, not confused, about the main takeaways from your speech.

Prepare poorly, and you'll waste valuable time you can't get back.

How can you tell the difference between purposeful and pointless prep? These 10 steps can steer you in the right direction.

1. Know Your Point

Effective presentations center on a [single, clear point](#) you want people to remember at the end. Before outlining your slides or choosing examples, decide what you want your audience to know, feel, or do after your talk, and construct your presentation to support that point from start to finish.

Keep in mind, a point is not a broad topic like "feedback tools" or "leveraging social media." It's a phrase that conveys a specific impact and a means of achieving it. For example:

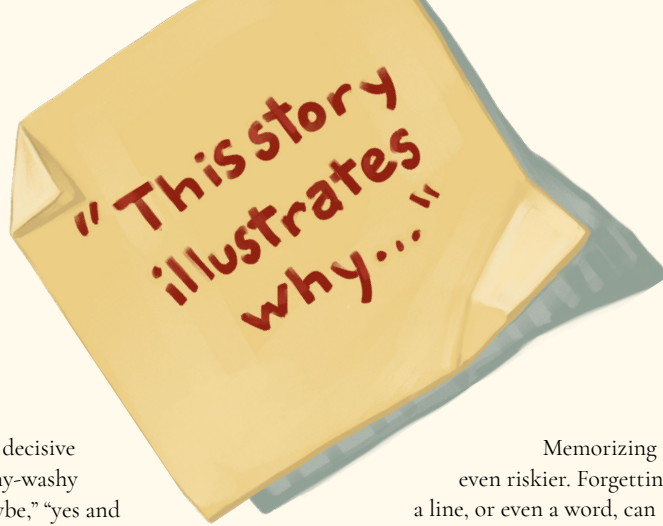
Topic: Feedback tools

Point: Weekly check-ins improve morale and productivity

Topic: Leveraging social media

Point: We'll attract younger consumers by converting influencers into brand ambassadors.

(Notice that points are complete sentences and topics are not. That's one quick way to know if you have a full point.)



Finally, take a decisive stance. Using wishy-washy language like “maybe,” “yes and no,” and “it depends” can diminish your authority and credibility. Powerful speeches support a contention; they don’t just explore it. (Leave those “book reports” to Wikipedia.)

2. Begin With the Audience in Mind

Many people mistakenly [start a speech](#) by thinking, *What do I want to say?* This approach is risky because if you don’t connect with what your audience wants or needs to know, you may come across as self-centered or out of touch.

Instead, focus on your audience first. Ask yourself three quick questions to stay connected to their expectations:

- Why is this presentation relevant to this audience?
- Why do they need or want to hear it?
- How do I hope they respond to it?

3. Open Strong

Your first remarks are among the most memorable, so don’t waste that early attention with pleasantries, acknowledgements, business items, or personal history. [Lead with a hook](#) that signals your point, such as a quick story, a surprising statistic, or a provocative question. An opening hook doesn’t need to be entertaining—only engaging.

Following the hook, explain the problem or need you’re tackling. This ensures your audience senses relevance from the start.

4. Don’t Script Yourself

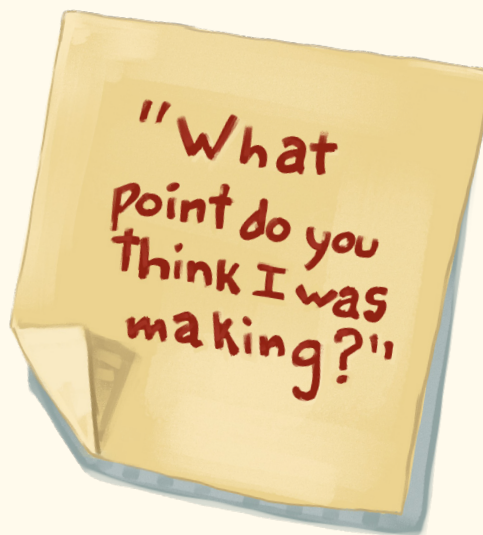
Writing your speech [word-for-word](#) may feel safe, but it can easily work against you. Reading word-for-word can make you sound flat and disconnected, and pull your focus away from your listeners.

Memorizing is even riskier. Forgetting a line, or even a word, can make you freeze or stumble, throwing you off and making you seem unfamiliar with your own presentation—a credibility killer.

5. Build Useful Notes

Rather than relying on a script, fill a single card with [brief notes](#) listing the things you’re most likely to forget, such as key points, memorable phrases, names, numbers, and dates. Write short reminders, not complete sentences, and use bullets the way you would on a supermarket shopping list.

Besides improving your eye contact, having succinct notes strengthens your command of the material, helps you become comfortable speaking freely, and enables you to adapt to audience reactions. With a fully written speech,



you’re stuck with the words in front of you. Think of your notes as a safety net, not a script.

6. Tell Purposeful Stories

Storytelling is a powerful tool, but share relevant stories—not just riveting ones—by choosing narratives, case studies, and examples that support your point.

To reinforce that purpose, follow up your stories with phrases like “This story illustrates why ...” “This case study proves that ...” or “This example demonstrates what happens when ...”

If your point inspires the audience through a story, that’s a win. If audiences remember the story but not the point, that’s a miss. When audiences remember both the story and its message, the point sticks like superglue.

7. End With Impact

Last impressions matter as much as first impressions. [Close your speech with a sentence](#) that reinforces your point and leaves your audience with a clear next step or a hopeful sense of what’s ahead, like “Please volunteer at your local animal shelter” or “My hope is that this campaign will restore the trust consumers placed in our brand for over 25 years.”

8. Practice With Purpose

Because your brain can think but not speak, and your mouth can speak but not think, you need to practice having them work in sync. This means [rehearsing out loud](#) and in real time.

Hearing yourself confidently articulate points teaches your brain that the task is safe and familiar, which helps calm nerves. Out-loud rehearsal also reveals clunky phrasing, confusing logic, weak transitions, and stories that need trimming.

You don’t need an audience, but don’t speak to a mirror—you’ll focus on your appearance instead of your points.

If you’ll be using a hand-held microphone, it’s a good idea to practice that way, especially if you’re holding notes in your free hand. You don’t need a real microphone, of course—a flashlight or the classic hairbrush will do the trick.



If you can get an audience to watch you practice, don't ask "How did I do?" They'll probably just say, "You did great!" or offer trivial feedback.

Instead, ask them specific questions:

- "What point do you think I was making?"
- "What did I do that made that point clear and memorable?"
- "Where did I lose your attention?"

This guidance enables them to assess your most important goals as a presenter.

9. Test Your Setup

Last-minute surprises are never welcome. Prepare a checklist of logistical details to review in the days and hours before your presentation, including:

- The use of microphones, podiums, and confidence monitors (a screen at the foot of the stage that allows speakers to see their slides or notes)
- Who will introduce you, and what materials they'll rely on for those remarks
- Objects in the room that might obstruct your view of the audience
- The compatibility and functionality of your devices
- Where to put your notes, laptop, materials, water, and/or clicker

10. Manage Your Nerves

Ultimately, your public speaking anxiety isn't a fear of speaking. It's a fear of

messing up in public. The good news is that there's an antidote: confidence. But how do you build it?

First, prep your body by giving it adequate sleep, eating well, hydrating, and limiting big meals and carbonated drinks.

Second, know your point so well that you can state it in under 10 words (If you don't have a point, you **SHOULD** be nervous.)

Third, prep yourself with mini pep talks, like:

• "I got this!"

A 2019 study found that students who recited a positive affirmation aloud immediately before giving a presentation had lower anxiety than those who didn't.

• "I'm excited. I'm excited. I'm excited."

Psychological research shows that reframing anxiety as excitement is as easy as telling yourself, "I'm excited. I'm excited. I'm excited" before you speak. Your brain will follow your lead, transforming your nervous energy into enthusiasm. While audiences sympathize with nervous speakers, they respond to enthusiastic ones.

• "I'm here to present—not perform or impress."

You're actually not nervous about public speaking; you're nervous about making a bad impression and embarrassing yourself.

Shifting your mindset from performance to presentation can reduce your anxiety by focusing on doing a job rather than protecting a reputation.

• "Make them know what I know."

This phrase reinforces a service mindset and turns it into a compact to-do: "Make them know what you know." That's the goal. Nothing matters more.

• "What would I do if I were fearless?"

The advice to "visualize success" has never worked for me, but asking yourself a more specific question—what would I do if I were fearless?—can reframe the task of public speaking as less nerve-wracking and more doable.

PREPARE now so you don't have to REPAIR later. What you do in the minutes, hours, days, and weeks before you speak matters—and these tips will help you land powerful points from your first word to your last.

Joel Schwartzberg is a presentation coach, executive communication specialist, and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team and Get to the Point! Simplify, Sharpen, and Sell Your Message. Follow him on [LinkedIn](#).*

Creating a Strong Slide Presentation

How to make your visuals support your message—not compete with it.

By Diane Windingland, DTM



The room dimmed. A slide appeared: lines of text in a tiny font, a spaghetti tangle of arrows, and five bar charts squeezed onto one frame.

Somewhere in that mess was a point. But the audience was too confused to catch it. The speaker turned toward the screen and began reading from the slide, word for word.

Contrast that with a different scene: a single image of a cracked bridge, captioned with one short, bold headline: “Tiny flaws, massive failures.” The speaker stood beside the slide, silent for a beat. Then she said, “Let me show you where small misalignments turn into structural failures.”

Whether you’re presenting at meetings, leading workshops, or pitching ideas, visual tools can either elevate your message or bury it. In the examples above, the first visual buried the message; the other brought it to life. That’s the difference between visual noise and visual clarity. Visual clarity isn’t about making slides pretty. It’s about purpose. A clear visual reinforces your point, guides attention, and helps the audience see what you mean.

Why Visuals Matter

We process visuals faster than words. People also remember images better than text alone. A well-chosen chart or photo can instantly anchor a complex idea. But when visuals are overloaded or irrelevant—dense text, decorative clutter, mismatched fonts, or the classic six-bullet slide—they create noise.

If an element of your slide hasn’t earned its place, then it’s likely adding confusion rather than clarity.

Three Strategies for Clearer Visuals

These three tools, adapted from my recent book *The Clarity Code: How to Communicate Complex Ideas with Simplicity and Power*, offer immediate improvements to a presentation with slides.

1. Start With the Message, Not the Slides

Before you open PowerPoint or Canva,

step away from the computer. Grab a notepad, whiteboard, or sticky notes. Plan your message first.

Ask yourself:

- What is the core point I need the audience to understand?
- Who is the audience, and what do they care about?
- What’s the best way to support this message visually?

Think first. Design second.

2. Write Headlines, Not Just Titles

A clear headline tells your audience not just what they’re seeing, but why it matters. A slide titled “Survey Results” tells your audience nothing about the takeaway. Instead, use a headline that conveys meaning.

For example:

- Instead of “Q2 Sales,” write: “Q2 Sales Jumped 15% After Product Launch.”
- Instead of “Survey Results,” write: “Customers Cite Long Wait Times as #1 Frustration.”

A strong headline guides interpretation, reduces miscommunication, and helps your slide fit into a coherent narrative. If someone reads only your slide headlines, they should still grasp the story.

3. Reveal Information Step-by-Step

When everything appears at once, people read ahead or tune out. Reveal your ideas gradually—one point at a time—as you explain them.

Use this strategy when:

- presenting bullet points
- walking through a timeline
- explaining a process or flowchart

Simple “Appear” or “Fade” animations are enough. Avoid distracting transitions. Reveal ideas to pace, not to impress.

Other Visual Clarity Habits

Here are additional practices that improve clarity without requiring design expertise:

Keep one idea per visual. Too much information overwhelms the audience. Each slide should clearly convey one idea, with generous white space and minimal text.

Guide the eye with color and layout. Use color purposefully to highlight, align elements cleanly, and choose fonts and contrast levels that make text easy to read from a distance.

Talk about the slide—don’t read it. Your voice adds meaning. Use the slide as a visual prompt and interpret it for the audience.

Try this rhythm:

Show. Click to reveal the visual and pause briefly.

Point or gesture. Use your hand or a pointer to direct attention.

Narrate. Explain what they’re seeing: “Notice how the green bar peaks right after the campaign launch.”

Pause. Let the message settle.

Connect the dots. “This spike shows that timing the rollout with the ad campaign doubled engagement.”

Emphasize the takeaway. “The lesson is clear: Aligning launches with marketing campaigns is a key driver of engagement.”

Clarity in visual tools starts with intention. When visuals are chosen wisely, simplified thoughtfully, and delivered with purpose, your audience doesn’t just understand your message; they stay engaged and remember it.

Diane Windingland, DTM, is a communication coach from Spring, Texas, and a member of Frankly Speaking Toastmasters in Spring, Texas, and PowerTalk Toastmasters in Minnesota. Learn more at virtuallspeechcoach.com.

Finding the Right Way to Say **Goodbye**

Deliver a eulogy that pays the proper tribute.

By George Kiser

As we sat around the dining room table, my sister and I discussed who would give the eulogy at our dad's funeral.

We considered not having one at the service, but I knew Dad deserved it. At 93, he was the longtime patriarch of the family. He was bigger than life, so I volunteered to give the eulogy.

For many of us, a eulogy is the most important and difficult speech we will ever give. Whether we are asked to speak about a parent, sibling, spouse, or friend, saying goodbye to them in front of friends and family is tough. You have the opportunity to tell the audience what kind of person they were and how their absence will affect those who knew them best. So it's important that you are prepared.

Creating the Eulogy

1. Find an Organizing Purpose

When preparing a eulogy, first ask yourself, what is the purpose of my speech? The answer seems simple—you want to honor the person. But beyond that, what do you want the audience to take away? Do you want to inform those attending what your loved one accomplished in their life? Do you want to inspire them to live a life like your dad did or to be the best mother a daughter could hope for? Do you want to regale those in attendance with stories and anecdotes about a brother who was larger

than life? Or do you simply want to let the audience know why you will miss your best friend?

2. Outline Your Points

Once you decide the purpose of your speech, put together a robust, detailed outline that supports your purpose. For example, if you want to share their accomplishments, you can give a chronological account of their life. To present a lighthearted picture, arrange your speech around specific events or photos of them. To portray their character, organize your speech around their work, hobbies, vacations, or things you remember doing with them. Share specific examples, and consider telling stories the audience may not have heard before.

3. Find an Opening Anecdote

Just like any other speech, the eulogy needs an opening that captures the audience's attention. In this case, it helps to start with a phrase, word, or summation of who your loved one was; something you want the audience to remember. It can be as simple as "my dad was a great man, person, father, all wrapped up in a blue Kentucky Wildcat blanket." Or it can be playful: "John was the only person who could be the life of his own wake, and I am here to make that

happen." Or "you knew him as Mayor Gray, but I knew him as my brother and best friend." Use the rest of your eulogy to explain why they were a great person.

4. Choose Meaningful Closing Remarks

In addition to an engaging opening, you should have a strong and memorable closing. People have short attention spans and often only remember what they heard last. Use the closing as your last chance to say something meaningful about your loved one.

5. Practice, Practice, Practice

Whenever you have enough time to go through your speech, do it. If you have an opportunity, present your eulogy to your Toastmasters club and ask for specific feedback. Your speech should be no more than 10-12 minutes, and allow yourself time to pause if you feel tearful and need to compose yourself. Don't be afraid to refer to your written script. In addition to being



an emotional event, funerals often happen rather quickly, leaving not much time to prepare your speech.

Handling Your Emotions

Despite your best efforts, you will likely have a time when you are overcome with emotion, perhaps you will even break down or come close to tears. When you feel that urge, step back, take a breath, and wait for the feeling of emotional eruption to pass. When you are ready, step back up and continue. If you mumbled some words before you stopped, repeat them and continue with your speech.

You do not need to apologize for your own interruptions. The audience knows this is difficult, and they appreciate your efforts. Just know that you won't always break down in the same part of your speech that you did during practice. You may become overwhelmed in a

part of your speech that you didn't think was going to be difficult, and it may happen more than once.

Remember that you will not be the only one with emotion either. There will likely be people in the audience crying, and they might be audible during parts of your speech. You can't control that, but you can make a conscious effort to know where those people are seated so you can look another way when you become emotional or when they start to react. When I gave the eulogy for my dad, I located people on both sides of the room who were friends of my dad's brothers-in-law. They were interested in what I had to say, but not emotional. When I felt my emotions creep up or saw someone else getting emotional, I looked straight at them.

And don't be afraid of humor. This is a sad event, but a little smile can help everyone get through the service. There is no better way to demonstrate a person's demeanor, or their character, than a humorous story. Let yourself and everyone else laugh a little with you.

The Venue

Once you arrive at the venue, find out where you will be delivering the eulogy. If you have notes or a written speech and want to have them waiting for you at the lectern, find out if you can place them there before the service starts. I would also suggest putting a water bottle within your reach.



Remember, this is not your ordinary Toastmasters speech. You do not need to walk around, gesturing, entertaining the crowd. If there is a lectern, use it.

Lastly, there may be others who talk before you, and they may say some of the same things you had planned to say, but don't panic. If you think your words would be redundant and would lose the intended impact, skip them. This happened before my speech when the preacher mentioned how many Georges were in our family. I didn't want to repeat it so I cut it. But resist the temptation to make big changes or leave out portions of your speech because someone else said something similar. You took the time to put together a heartfelt tribute so you should give the speech as you intended.

Giving a eulogy is tough, but it's also an honor. You have an advantage; you have Toastmasters training. Make your loved one proud by sharing a tribute to their life and legacy.

George Kiser is a member of South County Toastmasters Club in St. Louis, Missouri. He practices asbestos defense litigation in Illinois and Missouri and has been a lawyer for over 35 years. He is married with two children and gave the eulogy at his father's funeral wake.



7 Generative AI Pitfalls for Communicators

How to spot and resolve these blind spots before they cost you clarity and trust.

By Joel Schwartzberg

As a writer and speechwriter, I've relied on a constantly evolving set of tools to clarify, organize, and proofread my communications. I owned a dog-eared thesaurus for many years, which gave way to built-in word processing features like spell-check. Now, we have generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Perplexity, Claude, and Grammarly, which inspire both fear and fascination.

Like every powerful communication tool—from the printing press to the personal computer—GenAI requires a human hand to guide and

refine its output. This means knowing GenAI's blind spots. While many AI critics focus on frequently appearing words like “delve” or punctuation like the em-dash, the real problem is flawed verbal patterns, not individual words or punctuation. For example, the presence of a single em-dash isn't an AI flaw, but using it three times in one paragraph may signal AI tinkering.

With help and insight from other human thinkers and communication experts, here are seven of GenAI's biggest Achilles' heels and how to fix them with preventive prompts and targeted review tactics.

1 INACCURACY

As most AI experts will tell you, AI can be confidently wrong about important aspects like facts, names, dates, quotes, and attributions. Don't be misled by this tone of authority.

In their 2024 book *Machine Learning Evaluation: Towards Reliable and Responsible AI*, American University computer science professor Nathalie Japkowicz and mathematics and statistics associate professor Zois Boukouvalas write, “Just because an AI sounds confident doesn't mean it's always correct or unbiased. Some tools, like Gemini, are designed to be helpful but may provide incomplete or misleading answers.”

How to Fix It: Prompt for accuracy. And then double-check the answers with the cited source. Examples of accuracy-enforcing prompts:

- “Cite reputable sources with links for all claims.”
- “Avoid assuming facts. Tell me if you are uncertain.”
- “How do you know this claim is true?”

A quick note of caution: As you feed AI information, remember that your words and ideas are no longer private and can be searched for and used by others with no attribution.

2 MISPLACED PRIORITIES

If you're struggling to organize your content, AI can offer smart starting suggestions on structure. But that structure will be based on AI's presumptions if you're not clear about those priorities at the start. As you finalize your content, ask yourself: *Is the most valuable idea leading the way?*

How to Fix It: Prompt for priority. Examples of prioritization prompts:

- “The most important takeaways for the audience are X and Y. Prioritize those above the others.”
- “Organize this list in the order of what would be most interesting to tech-savvy real estate agents, with the most interesting tactics at the top.”

3 VERBOSITY

AI loves to over-explain concepts, often in long, inefficient paragraphs. You know less is more, but AI? Not so much.

“AI has a habit of writing like a high school student looking to hit a word count for their book report,” Ben Guttman, author of *Simply Put* and an adjunct lecturer of digital marketing, says. “When you're trying to

communicate effectively, all that fluff ends up just getting in the way of the point you're trying to convey."

Much of this wordiness stems from what speechwriter and executive speech coach Teresa Zumwald calls "a relentless use of passive voice."

"AI is famous for using passive voice when active voice is stronger, better, clearer, and shorter," Zumwald says.

AI often needlessly repeats points or rephrases ideas, which wastes space and stalls the flow of information. When you incorporate AI's suggestions and findings, be sure to keep your voice and words concise, active, and efficient. If a voice inside your head asks, *Didn't I say this already?* it may not be your imagination.

How to Fix It: Prompt for brevity and check for repetition.

Examples of verbosity-vanquishing prompts:

- When asking for ideas and suggestions: "I need to understand this in a concise manner. Stay under 750 words."
- When reviewing organization: "Make sure sections and quotes are not thematically redundant."

4 ADJECTIVE OVERLOAD

AI has a soft spot for vague adjectives like "innovative," "dynamic," and "exciting." But as any good journalist will tell you, adjectives have limited power to convey relevance, especially compared to examples, data, and stories. Your job is to add unique descriptors and detailed examples when you want to highlight something amazing or exciting, and to overrule AI when it wants to hype something you don't.

How to Fix It: Prompt for details over descriptors. Examples of prompts that prevent adjective overload:

- "Avoid vague adjectives. Give concrete examples instead."
- "Cut marketing jargon. Focus on facts and clear benefits."

5 INAUTHENTICITY

AI knows a lot, but it can't capture your unique voice and perspective, much less your sense of humor.

Speaker and writer Allison Shapira, author of *AI for the Authentic Leader*, explores and researches ways communicators can retain authenticity even when using AI for support.

"You can use AI to brainstorm the message, and practice the message," Shapira says, "but always filter and deliver it through the lens of your authenticity, expertise, and humanity."

A crucial rule: When AI provides feedback, never cut and paste it without reviewing it—especially for authenticity. Ask yourself, *Would I put it like this if I said it aloud?*

How to Fix It: When brainstorming or gathering research and ideas, prompt for authentic voice. Examples of authenticity-preserving prompts:

- "Use simple, conversational language I can understand."
- "Adopt the tone and voice I use in the short text I've pasted below."
- "Don't be preachy; just present the facts."

One More Tip Before You Unplug From AI

Even if you apply AI's suggestions, run your piece through the tool again. And again. Like feeding pasta dough through a roller, each pass produces something newer. Those variations give you more, perhaps superior, options to consider.

I personally like to see edits within the text, in the style of "tracked changes." With any AI program, that's easy. Just ask the tool to "redline" the edits. (Saying "please" or not is up to you!)

6 UNQUESTIONING SUPPORT

AI likes you and wants to please you. That may sound creepy, but it's part of AI's logic to respond to your prompts. That devotion, however, can sometimes compete with reasonable judgment.

"Even though AI is designed to be an authoritative resource, it's also programmed to be agreeable—sometimes, too agreeable," says AI implementation specialist Veronica Phillip. "As a result, some of its outputs may be misleading, incomplete, or overly optimistic, reflecting what it thinks you want to hear rather than what you actually need to know."

"GenAI's goal is to keep you using it, so it tends to give you the answers it thinks you want," says Pinaki Kathiari, CEO of the digital communications agency Local Wisdom. "This doesn't mean you should avoid AI. But review high-stakes messages with a trusted communicator to ensure they serve their real purpose and intended audience."

How to Fix It: Prompt to test your concept's viability. Examples of relevance-reinforcing prompts:

- "Will this topic resonate with an audience of X?"
- "Give me five reasons someone might disagree with my stance."
- "Is my topic fresh, or have many people made the same assertion?"

7 GRANDILOQUENCE

Excessively flowery and pompous writing—like the word "grandiloquence" itself—can signal AI's thumbprint, which often tries to impress audiences, not just inspire them.

"AI's tendency toward bloated verbiage reminds me of a valedictory speaker at my niece's high school graduation who seemed intent on demonstrating how smart he was. When he mentioned the senior class's 'jocularity,' I almost fell out of my seat," says presentation trainer and keynote speaker Lisa Braithwaite. "In those days, I would've said he wrote his speech straight out of the thesaurus. Today, I would suspect he relied entirely on AI, with little to no review of what it regurgitated."

Always ask yourself, *Does this sound like I'm trying to inform and inspire them with my ideas, or impress them with my words?*

How to Fix It: When asking for input on your written content, prompt for conversationality. Examples of prompts that prevent style from defeating substance:

- "Make sure my language could be understood by an audience of X."
- "Make sure my language is conversational, not pretentious."

Remember, AI is a resource, not a replacement. You may need it, but it also needs you. If you stay mindful of AI's flaws, your voice—not a machine's—will ring loud and clear.

Joel Schwartzberg is a presentation coach, executive communication specialist, and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team and Get to the Point! Simplify, Sharpen, and Sell Your Message*. Follow him on [LinkedIn](#).

Practice the NET Approach

Notice, explore, and transform: Be present in your public speaking.

By Melinda Lee

For a long time, I believed that my voice only mattered if it was polished, practiced, perfect. I believed that unless I said things “the right way,” I didn’t deserve the floor. Perfectionism became my armor. Over-preparation became my safety net.

Until I realized something that changed everything: You don’t need to be perfect to be powerful. You just need to be present.

Being present means allowing the noise in the mind to soften, so you can sense, see, and feel what’s actually here—the people, energy, and moments around you. Presence is when your attention moves out of your head and into what’s unfolding right now.

The Power of Presence

Presence is foundational to public speaking. It is what allows technique to land. It is what steadies us when fear shows up.

We are living in a time when communication is louder than ever, yet many people feel unseen, unheard, and unsure of their voice. Why? Because self-doubt causes them to either hold back, or over-explain, their message. It becomes lost.

That’s why this moment matters. Not just for improving speeches, but for shaping a new era of communication.

The NET Approach

One of the most common fears in public speaking isn’t forgetting the words—it’s the moment before we speak. The racing heart. The tight chest. The thought *What if I mess this up?*

The NET approach is not about eliminating fear. It’s about learning how to work with it.



Melinda Lee speaking at the Toastmasters 2025 International Convention, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

We remember that speaking isn't just about us; it's about how we make others feel. That's where true confidence lives.



Melinda Lee at the 2025 convention.

Over years of coaching leaders and speakers, I've taught a simple framework to move through that moment with clarity and self-trust. I call it the NET approach: Notice. Explore. Transform.

It's not about eliminating fear. It's about learning how to work with it. Imagine stepping onto a stage—or into a meeting that matters. A wave of nerves hits. In that moment, you have options. You can fight the fear. Suppress it. Judge yourself for feeling it.

Or you can move through it.

1. NOTICE: Awareness Before Action

The first foundation of confident speaking is awareness. When pressure rises, what happens inside you? If we don't notice our internal reactions, we can't change them. That's why we begin with a pause.

I use a simple internal check-in that I call the BEME Scan, which invites speakers to "BE ME":

- Body: What physical signals show up? A racing heart? Tight shoulders? Dry mouth?
- Emotions: What feelings are present? Fear? Pressure? Excitement?
- Mind: What thoughts are firing? *Don't mess this up. They're judging me.*
- Environment: What about the space feels supportive or constricting?

There's no fixing at this stage. No judgment. Just noticing.

Awareness creates space. And space creates choice.

2. EXPLORE: Gently Uncover the Story Beneath

Once we notice what's happening on the surface, we can explore what's underneath. Often, beneath every reaction is a story, a moment when we learned something about

our voice. Maybe it was being interrupted. Laughed at. Told to "be quiet." Or only praised when we were "perfect."

When we name the story—even lightly—we loosen its grip.

A powerful question I invite speakers to reflect on is: *When was the first time I felt like my voice didn't matter?*

This isn't about reliving the past. It's about understanding it—so it no longer runs the present.

3. TRANSFORM: From Old Story to New Choice

After awareness and exploration, the body often holds residual tension. So we move. Literally. Shaking out the arms, the shoulders, the whole body.

Then pausing—standing tall—in a moment of stillness. Most people live in a state of low-grade tension—they have butterflies, shortness of breath, and tight shoulders. All of this is meant to protect us. When we release the tension, it dissolves. Stillness lets the nervous system integrate. Then we are left with presence.

This isn't silly. It's neuroscience. Movement helps release stored stress. Stillness helps anchor confidence.

At this point, we invite a future-focused vision. Imagine walking into a room that matters. A boardroom. A stage. A conversation with someone you love. You speak calmly, clearly, and fully yourself.

Ask yourself:

- What do people hear in my voice?
- What do I want them to remember?
- What do I want my voice to be known for?

This version of you isn't far away. It's already here, waiting to be practiced.

The Ripple Effect of Your Voice

One of my favorite moments in workshops is when participants share a single word describing how they want others to feel when they hear their voice.

"Grounded."

"Safe."

"Inspired."

"Clear."

When those words echo around the room, something shifts. We remember that speaking isn't just about us; it's about how we make others feel. That's where true confidence lives.

Imagine teams that speak with clarity instead of caution. Leaders who communicate with courage instead of fear. Communities where every voice is respected—not just the loudest ones. That's not just a personal win. That's a ripple.

Most people never pause long enough to examine what's driving their communication. But if you're reading this, you just did. You noticed. You explored. And you can transform.

Because shaping the next era of communication isn't about being louder. It's about being more present. More intentional. More human.

Your voice doesn't just fill a room. It echoes across generations. So the question is: What kind of ripple will you create?

Melinda Lee is a nationally renowned motivational speaker and coach who presented an education session at the Toastmasters 2025 International Convention. Learn more about her at speakinflow.com/about.

5 QUESTIONS WITH...

Saby Sengupta

Speechwriting advice from an expert.



More about
Saby

Hometown:

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Number of years in Toastmasters:

≈15≈

Profession:

Behavioral change
consultant and executive
public speaking trainer



Favorite TV Shows:

Game of Thrones, Friends,
Suits, and more recently
loving The Morning Show



This month we're talking to Sabyasachi "Saby" Sengupta, 2025 World Champion of Public Speaking. Saby shares insights on speechwriting and topic selection to help members from the club level to the world stage.

What is the first thing you do when you sit down to write a speech?

I write the bullet points of the speech and then start with the middle and ending. The opening at the very end.

What's your best tip for coming up with a great story or topic to share?

My friend Percy told me that speeches centered around careers, jobs, or studies generally don't perform very well ... because of the limitations of time.

You only have seven minutes, and a lot of that time gets spent building context: the situation, the background, and then the problem. On top of that, not everyone in the audience can relate to issues like not getting into a college, getting fired, or missing out on a promotion—experiences that are often heavily influenced by cultural context, and unless you take time to explain that context, the emotional impact can be lost.

How do you know when you've found a great speech topic?

It really comes down to trying it out in front of a live audience and paying attention to their reactions. There's no better proof that a speech works than the audience's response. The moment I deliver it live and see how people react—that's when I know whether the speech truly has merit or not.

What is the best piece of advice you've been given or discovered for yourself around speechwriting?

Never start with the opening. Best openings happen when the story and closing are locked in.

Which part of the speech is the most challenging for you to write and how do you conquer it?

For me, the conclusion is the hardest part to write. It's where you want the speech to become memorable. It's also your best chance to make the story universal. A strong conclusion brings the audience into the story in a way that feels natural, meaningful, and lasting. That's why the conclusion matters so much—it's what people remember, what they resonate with, and what they can actually apply in their own lives.

LISTEN BETWEEN MEETINGS

Get inspired with exclusive interviews, communication strategies, and Toastmasters stories.



THE TOASTMASTERS
P  **ODCAST**

THE OFFICIAL PODCAST OF TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL

LISTEN ON





toastmasters.org