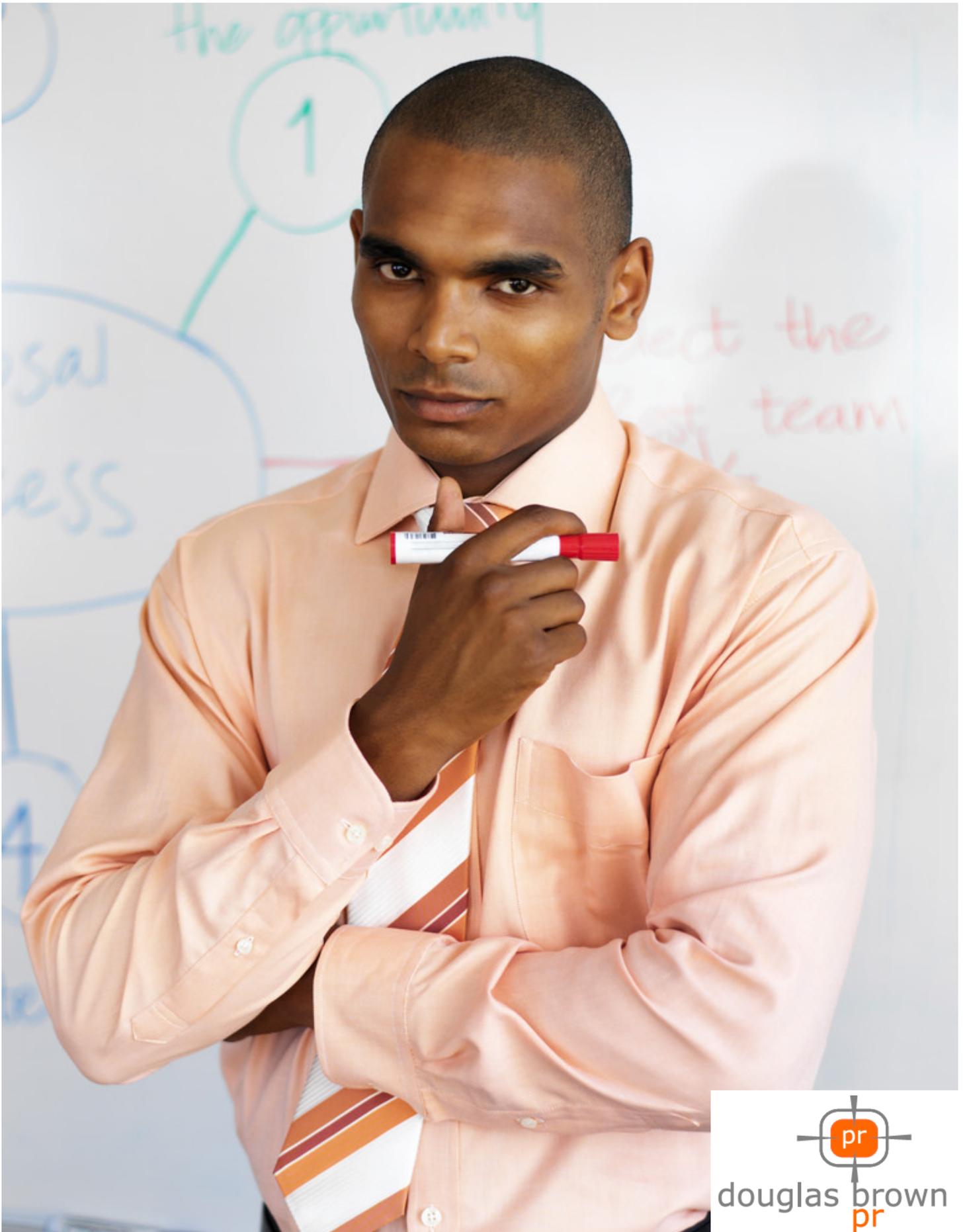


A starter guide to public speaking and presentations



Stand up, speak up, and shut up

A presentation, or public speaking opportunity is probably the most powerful form of communication we can use to influence others. The human face, voice and body language are more powerful influencers than any TV programme, radio feature or piece of printed material.

If you get an opportunity to speak to an audience directly you have an opportunity to make friends and influence people like no other.

Yet speaking in public is a cause of much angst and worry for many people (A survey by the Wall Street Journal found that 97% of *top* business executives have major concerns about nerves when required to make a business presentation). If the captains of commerce and industry fear public speaking what hope for the rest of us?

With the following tips from Douglas Brown PR, you'll find speaking in public isn't something to fear, or worse still avoid. Remember people want you to succeed and public speaking isn't complicated – its just a matter of standing up, speaking up and then shutting up!

Handling those nerves

Feeling nervous?

In a list of the human race's greatest fears, public speaking is right at the top – so if you are nervous about speaking in public you are not alone.

Because they are a natural response to doing something we are unfamiliar with it's hard to eliminate them altogether (though the more you speak in public the easier it becomes), but by understanding the cause of the stress and the physiological outcomes (and how these loop back to reinforce the stressors) it is possible to "break the cycle".

Nerves can be overwhelming, and can harm your ability to get your message across. What's key is to remember nerves are quite normal. Don't dwell on how you feel. The more you think about how nervous you are the more your body will respond to the stressor – and the more your body responds (sweating palms, shaking hands, sweating brow

etc) the more you will think about it And so on and so on until you are a gibbering wreck hiding in the corner.

The origins of stress

Whether it's forgetting your lines or realising your flys are undone, fear of public speaking really boils down to fear of the unknown and of being ridiculed, rejected, and publicly humiliated.

But ask yourself, have you ever sat and hoped someone you have gone to hear speak will break down and fail? The answer is almost certainly "no!". We *want* people to succeed – especially if we are giving our time to hear them speak and we might benefit in some way.

Your audience wants you to be successful – they aren't setting out to pick fault. So if you respect this, and prepare properly, and follow the simple hints and tips for speaking in public here, you'll get a win / win situation in which you get to tell your story and your audience learns something.

The physiology of stress

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand. It can be caused by both good and bad experiences. When people feel stressed by something going on around them, their bodies react by releasing chemicals into the blood. These chemicals give people more energy and strength, which can be a good thing if their stress is caused by physical danger. But this can also be a bad thing, if their stress is in response to something emotional and there is no outlet for this extra energy and strength.

Many different things can cause stress -- from physical (such as fear of something dangerous) to emotional (such as worry over your family or job.) Identifying what may be causing your stress is often the first step in learning how to better deal with your stress.

Internal Stress is common in people nervous about speaking in public. Have you ever caught yourself worrying about things you can do nothing about or worrying for no reason at all? This is internal stress and it is one of the most important kinds of stress to understand and manage.

Internal stress is when people make themselves stressed. This often happens when we worry about

things we can't control or put ourselves in situations we know will cause us stress.

Stress is essentially a mental phenomenon – but what we experience are the physiological outcomes – ie what it actually does to our body. When stressed we might sweat more, tremble, feel butterflies, find our thoughts distracted and difficult to focus. We might feel hot, and our voice might go up as our throat tightens.

The physical effects vary from person to person – but most go originate in our distant past when our ancestors need many of these bodily responses to deal with the very real *external* stress sources they experienced.

The “fight or flight” responses are all designed to help you run faster and more accurately or fight harder and more aggressively – not the best or most appropriate things when all you want to do is speak to a group of people.

It's difficult to control these physiological responses directly but we can address them indirectly. One of the sneaky things about this self generated stress is we feed it ourselves – the more nervous you feel the more your body responds, and the more your body responds the more aware you make yourself of its responses by focussing on them.

This creates a vicious circle of self fulfilling stress – the more you get stressed the more you think about how stressed you are and the more stressed you become.

Managing this stress in a public speaking setting is about accepting you will feel a little tense (even the best actors and public speakers get “stage nerves”) but the secret is to avoid *focussing* on them.

Try walking around a bit, shaking your arms (this helps burn off some of the adrenalin your body has created to prepare you for running away from the external stress source), try taking some deep breaths, listen to some relaxing music, chat to someone – anything to distract your mind from the physiological outcomes of your stress response system.

Smile and keep upbeat – this raises your mood levels and improves your self-confidence. When we

smile our brain releases endorphins, the chemicals that tell us we are happy. By shaping your face into a smile before speaking you can fool your brain into thinking you are happy, over-riding the stress responses.

Negative thinking is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you think you're going to fail, you probably will. But if you believe that you'll be great, you will be. It's as simple as that.

Fake it 'til you make it

The old saying "fake it 'til you make it" is actually pretty good advice. Even if you have zero confidence in yourself, try *acting* like you do. The longer you fake it, the more comfortable it will feel, until, voilà, you're a bona fide confidence machine.

Be yourself - It *is* about you

We're all human. We're all a little afraid of the podium, the microphone, or the boardroom. Despite what you may believe, people don't want you to fail. They ultimately want to see you succeed. Give them what they want by just being the best you can be.

People want to hear *you* speak, they want to know what *you* have to say. There is always the temptation to hide behind the tools of the trade – PowerPoint, flip charts, wipe boards but this can become so tiring for the audience. Accept they want to hear what you have to say and use tools to support this, not lead it.

Stay sober

If your speaking engagement is at a social function (e.g., wedding, reunion) or a business conference, it might seem like a good idea to take a bit of liquid courage before your speech. But listening to a sincere speech from someone who's nervous is much better than listening to incoherent babble from someone who's three sheets to the wind added to which is the fact that alcohol can enhance your introspection and awareness of the physiological effects of stress.

Looking smart gives confidence

If you're in a position where public speaking is required it's important you understand the importance of personal grooming. A lot of people are going to be looking at you so make sure you look your best. The better you look, the more ready and professional you'll feel.

You don't have to be a cat walk model, but you

should aim to be business like (or at least fit in with the audience). If you feel you look good you'll feel good.

Get comfortable with the room

If at all possible, check the layout of the room where you'll be speaking. Is it a huge room where the audience are sat some distance away or a small intimate setting where you will be speaking to a few people close up? Check out any technology like computers and projectors and if you'll be using a microphone, it's a good idea to test it out beforehand. The more familiar you are with your environment, the more comfortable you'll be.

Don't give it away

If it really, truly makes you feel better to announce to the room that you're nervous before you begin, go ahead. But your speech will have a lot more weight if you don't. Chances are good that you're the only one who knows you're shaking in your boots; why show the cracks in your armour? Let them believe you have it under control, even if you don't feel like you do.

To make mistakes is human

We're usually our own worst critics. If you forget to read a sentence off your notes, it's doubtful anyone will know. If you skip forward to the next image on the projector by mistake, no one's going to run you out of town.

Don't worry. It's not life or death, it's just a speech and we are all human.

Perhaps the worst thing you can do is to start drawing attention to your mistakes and apologising too fully. All you will do is distract your audience, draw attention to the fact you are nervous and most probably reinforce those negative thoughts you are working so hard to damp down.

Remember even the very best make mistakes (listen to the bloopers on the radio 4 Today programme web site) – the art is in not allowing them to throw you.

It's not the end of the world

So you tripped on the microphone cord. So what? So you said macro when you meant micro somewhere in your speech. So you accidentally said the name of your sister's ex-boyfriend during your toast instead of the name of her new husband - so what! Everyone makes mistakes. Acknowledge them and move on.

Go on, be funny!

Who doesn't like to laugh a little? You don't have to be a comedian, but a few lighthearted comments can help humanise you to your audience. Win them over with a smile and a well-timed clever remark, if you can. But be advised, too many jokes can weaken the validity of a presentation and your use of humour needs to be tempered by the subject matter you are presenting.

Planning your content

“Tell ‘em what your going to tell ‘em,

Tell ‘em,

Then tell ‘em what you’ve told ‘em “

One of the big issues for people new to public speaking, is how to structure what you want to say.

Help people understand what you are going to say by outlining what you are going to cover at the start, (tell ‘em what you are going to tell ‘em) then go on to deliver your presentation (tell ‘em), then summarise at the end to re-enforce what you have told them (tell ‘em what you have told ‘em).

It's a good simple approach to take – and remember you'll find you actually have less opportunity for detailed content in a presentation than you might have in a written document, and this format cuts down the content time even more. What it does do however is give the audience a clear narrative path that means they can more easily follow the presentation.

Keep it short

Know what's expected of you and deliver that and no more. We've all been tortured by a speaker who goes on and on, caring little for the audience's interest or comfort level. Don't be one of those speakers; always leave them wanting more. Remember - “Stand up, speak up and shut up!”.

Know Your audience

Who are you speaking to? If they're colleagues, they probably want to learn something from you. If they're friends, they're likely looking to be entertained. If it's a prospective client or customer, well, he or she wants to be convinced. Know who your audience is and tailor your speech and delivery to them. Give them what they want in language they can relate to!

Content – think “What’s in it for them?”

It’s always important to put yourself in your audience’s shoes and speak on the same frequency on which your audience listens? Many sales professionals have a rigid routine from which they never deviate – it’s like a script which never changes. The problem with using this strategy is that you will likely lose your audience long before your presentation gets to the things that actually matter to them.

From the very beginning of your presentation, you need to speak in terms of, “What’s in it for them?” – thinking through what the benefits are for the audience of what you have to say, then shaping what you say to meet their needs. You cannot wait until you have reached a special point in your presentation: even in a warm sales situation your prospects will quickly lose interest, they may continue to listen politely, it will be hard to bring them back.

The way to keep people engaged is to understand what they want to know and the way to influence their actions is to focus on the benefits to them.

Benefits sell ideas, not features

Features are the qualities or characteristics of your product or service.

Benefits however are the favourable results that your audience will obtain by using your product, service or the information you are presenting to them.

Whilst there will be times when the features of your product or services need to be outlined so your customers understand precisely what you are offering – it is rarely what influences whether they take up your offer or not.

What really influences decisions is describing the benefits to the user.

Whilst it may be interesting to know a hand held computer has fifteen thousand mega dongles and a parsec hyper drive memory card - what makes someone buy is knowing they can stay in touch with family and friends easily, quickly and reliably whilst on the move.

Benefits are based on the result of having used the product. For each feature of your product or service, ask yourself, “What does the customer really *get* from using this feature”?

Know your material and stick to the plan

Winging it is not a good idea when you’ve got a speech to make. While going with the flow and being flexible is smart, trusting yourself to be brilliant without any preparation is something even the pros don’t attempt.

Do your research, plan out what you want to say and go out and say it. Know your topic and what you’re going to say about it and how you’d like to say it. The more you know, the more confident you’ll be up there – fail to plan: plan to fail.

Practice, practice, practice

Once you’re prepared, go through the speech. Then read it again. Then again. And then once more. Practice in front of a mirror. Practice to your dog. Grab a friend or family member and practice in front of a real human being. Every time you go through your presentation, you’re adding another layer of “I know this stuff.”

Delivering your presentation

Handling Questions

Questions can be a really useful element in a presentation. They can confirm that what you have had to say has been taken on board, they can identify areas you haven’t covered that you can add, and they reinforce the bond between speaker and audience.

You can take questions as you progress through a presentation, or if you want a little more structure (good if you are a bit nervous). Whenever you take them it’s important that you listen and if necessary, take notes (it’s always worth keeping a sheet of paper or a notebook and pen to hand).

Always thank the questioner – remember, people can be nervous about speaking in public, and that includes asking a question (you may find you have to work hard to encourage questions). Whatever you do *never* belittle or make fun of a question – there is no such thing as a stupid question – only stupid answers.

If there is any ambiguity about the question make sure you check your understanding before you start answering. This not only helps to make sure you are answering the question that has been asked (rather

than the one you thought was asked, or worse still the one you would like to have been asked), but it also shows you value the question and the questioner. A good technique is to paraphrase the question back, this is also a good thing to do if the questioner hasn't been audible to the rest of the audience.

As you answer question, think first then keep it brief. If the question is complicated, or very specific (and perhaps not relevant to the rest of the audience) suggest "parking it" and promise to answer it in person after the presentation finishes. If you do this you *must* make sure you do follow it up.

Once you have given your answer check with the questioner that you have answered it. Be cautious though about getting in to an extended conversation about it. You can keep things moving by asking for the next question. And don't forget to thank them again.

PowerPoint

This is an incredibly powerful tool which can help bridge the gap between people in your audience who learn verbally and those who learn visually.

But it can be the death of a presentation.

NEVER NEVER NEVER just read off what's on the slides – this is the fabled death by PowerPoint which simply leaves the audience thinking "I could have read that myself".

Remember YOU are the star and focus, NOT the screen. The content of your slides and the design you use should be brief, clear and support what you are saying. A good approach is to set out what you want to say as bullet points – as you show a slide you can talk around the bullet points. This means there is a visual prompt (for those visual learners) and your voice (for those auditory learners).

PowerPoint (and other freeware versions) is an extremely powerful tool. Like so many Microsoft tools it is so full of options and gizmos that it's easy to go overboard on them. Too many different colour schemes, typefaces, transitions and animations creates a bewildering display for the audience which will have them focus on what they are seeing (and trying to keep up with) rather than on you and what you have to say.

The secret is KISS – Keep it simple stupid.

Establish a clear style for your presentation (indeed you might want to develop a corporate style you use for all presentations), with one typeface for headings and body text and a second for highlights, decide on a clear background for all slides (try to avoid patterned ones or using pictures, text over images can be extremely confusing on the eye), and establish a set of rules for transitions and animations.

The one thing to keep in mind is accessibility. Think about colour schemes and readability (text in yellow for instance does not work on white), some typefaces are difficult to read, all typefaces need to be sufficiently large for an audience to read easily (bullet points help here as they keep you from using large blocks of text which are not good on slides).

Body language

As we speak we also communicate with our bodies. Natural hand gestures are like sign language, they can emphasis and / or illustrate what you are saying clarifying your message and making it more memorable.

The start point is to connect with your audience by remembering to keep your feet pointed forward. Place your feet eight to ten inches apart, with knees slightly bent - not too rigid. Then be sure your movements are natural and relaxed.

Hand gestures can help describe sizes and shapes, as well as convey emotions and feelings, but be cautious of over doing it – you don't want your wind milling arms to be the focus of attention! Try to avoid repetitive movements or threatening gestures (avoid pointing or staring directly at people as these actions are particularly threatening).

You can add power to your gestures by pausing slightly after each one, and as you get more practised at speaking in public, you can learn the art of walking a little forward toward your audience to emphasise a key point.

Slow your delivery

One of the biggest indicators of nervousness is the lightning-fast talker. You might have the best speech ever written, but if no one can understand

what you're saying, it doesn't matter. Pace yourself and remember to speak at a normal (or even slightly slower) pace when you're speaking publicly.

The eyes have it

Establish eye contact with each member of your audience before starting your presentation. Keep eye contact with you audience during your speech and especially at the conclusion.

Some people say that an answer to nerves is to focus your gaze on one person in the room and speak to them. The problem here is that you potentially alienate everyone else in the room and possibly make that one individual feel very uncomfortable.

People trust people who look them in the eye, so try moving your gaze constantly over the audience – you're not focusing on any one individual, almost pretending to acknowledge the many people you are addressing. If you look at your audience when you're speaking to them in this way they will all feel more engaged.

Whatever you do, don't look at the floor; there's nothing down there.

If you are using notes try to avoid reading directly from them as the audience will think you haven't prepared (a benefit of PowerPoint is you hardly need notes as you can simply follow your bullet points). You appear more confident when your head is up, which puts your audience at ease and allows you to take command of the room.

Tone of voice

There is nothing more boring than a presentation or speech made in a slow monotone drawl.

Try to think about working towards more variety in your pitch, rate, and volume of your presentation. Use variations in pitch, tone and volume to highlight particular points and add vocal punctuation – we do it normally in our everyday conversation – so just be yourself.

If you find you are drying up, or develop a “frog” in your throat take sips of water rather than clearing your throat - as it will harm your larynx.

Watch the masters

Start looking for what makes successful public speakers so successful and think about adopting some of their techniques. Note the language they use and their styles and habits and keep them in mind as good examples. And remember they too probably feel a few nerves – but they have learned to understand and accept them, put them to one side and focus on what's important giving the audience the very best they can.

And one final point.....

Enjoy!

Smile and enjoy the opportunity of taking your message or sharing your ideas with others. Your enthusiasm and enjoyment will be infectious and if you are upbeat fighting the nerves will be far easier.



douglas brown

This guide to presentations and public speaking has been brought to you by Douglas Brown PR, PR and marketing consultancy and training

If you want advice or help with other aspects of your communications I'd love to hear from you.

douglasbrownpr@btinternet.com
www.douglasbrownpr.co.uk
Twitter @douglasbrownpr