The 25 Public Speaking Skills Every Speaker Must Have

Inspired by 25 Skills Every Man Should Know, I pondered a list of the 25 essential skills every public speaker should have. How did I do?

Every public speaker should be able to:

1. **Research a topic** – Good speakers stick to what they know. Great speakers research what they need to convey their message.
2. **Focus** – Help your audience grasp your message by focusing on your message. Stories, humour, or other “sidebars” should connect to the core idea. Anything that doesn’t need to be edited out.
3. **Organize ideas logically** – A well-organized presentation can be absorbed with minimal mental strain. Bridging is key.
4. **Employ quotations, facts, and statistics** – Don’t include these for the sake of including them, but do use them appropriately to complement your ideas.
5. **Master metaphors** – Metaphors enhance the understandability of the message in a way that direct language often can not.
6. **Tell a story** – Everyone loves a story. Points wrapped up in a story are more memorable, too!
7. **Start strong and close stronger** – The body of your presentation should be strong too, but your audience will remember your first and last words (if, indeed, they remember anything at all).
8. **Incorporate humour** – Knowing when to use humour is essential. So is developing the comedic timing to deliver it with greatest effect.
9. **Vary vocal pace, tone, and volume** – A monotone voice is like fingernails on the chalkboard.
10. **Punctuate words with gestures** – Gestures should complement your words in harmony. Tell them how big the fish was, and show them with your arms.
11. **Utilize 3-dimensional space** – Chaining yourself to the lectern limits the energy and passion you can exhibit. Lose the notes, and lose the chain.
12. **Complement words with visual aids** – Visual aids should aid the message; they should not be the message. Read slide:ology or the Presentation Zen book and adopt the techniques.
13. **Analyze the audience** – Deliver the message they want (or need) to hear.
14. **Connect with the audience** – Eye contact is only the first step. Aim to have the audience conclude “This speaker is just like me!” The sooner, the better.
15. **Interact with the audience** – Ask questions (and care about the answers). Solicit volunteers. Make your presentation a dialogue.
16. **Conduct a Q&A session** – Not every speaking opportunity affords a Q&A session, but understand how to lead one productively. Use the Q&A to solidify the impression that you are an expert, not (just) a speaker.
17. **Lead a discussion** – Again, not every speaking opportunity affords time for a discussion, but know how to engage the audience productively.
18. **Obey time constraints** – Maybe you have 2 minutes. Maybe you have 45. Either way, customize your presentation to fit the time allowed, and respect your audience by not going over time.
19. **Craft an introduction** – Set the context and make sure the audience is ready to go, whether the introduction is for you or for someone else.
20. **Exhibit confidence and poise** – These qualities are sometimes difficult for a speaker to attain, but easy for an audience to sense.
21. **Handle unexpected issues smoothly** – Maybe the lights will go out. Maybe the projector is dead. Have a plan to handle every situation.
22. **Be coherent when speaking off the cuff** – Impromptu speaking (before, after, or during a presentation) leaves a lasting impression too. Doing it well tells the audience that you are personable, and that you are an expert who knows their stuff beyond the slides and prepared speech.
23. **Seek and utilize feedback** – Understand that no presentation or presenter (yes, even you!) is perfect. Aim for continuous improvement, and understand that the best way to improve is to solicit candid feedback from as many people as you can.

24. **Listen critically and analyze other speakers** – Study the strengths and weaknesses of other speakers.

25. **Act and speak ethically** – Since public speaking fears are so common, realize the tremendous power of influence that you hold. Use this power responsibly.

**The Speech Opening**

Due to the **primacy effect**, words, body language, and visuals in the speech opening are all critical to speaking success.

- Was a hook used effectively to draw the audience into the speech? Or did the speaker open with a dry “It’s great to be here today.”
- Did the speech open with a **story**? A **joke**? A startling **statistic**? A **controversial statement**? A **powerful visual**?
- Did the speech opening clearly establish the intent of the presentation?
- **Was the opening memorable?**

**The Speech Body**

- Was the presentation **focused**? i.e. Did all arguments, stories, anecdotes relate back to the primary objective?
- Were examples or statistics provided to **support the arguments**?
- Were **metaphors and symbolism** used to improve understanding?
- Was the speech **organized logically**? Was it easy to follow?
- Did the speaker **bridge** smoothly from one part of the presentation to the next?

**The Speech Conclusion**

Like the opening, the words, body language, and visuals in the speech conclusion are all critical to speaking success. This is due to the **recency effect**.

- Was the conclusion **concise**?
- **Was the conclusion memorable?**
- If appropriate, was there a **call-to-action**?

**Delivery Skills and Techniques**

Delivery skills are like a gigantic toolbox — the best speakers know precisely when to use every tool and for what purpose.

**Enthusiasm and Connection to the Audience**

- Was the speaker **enthusiastic**? How can you tell?
- Was there **audience interaction**? Was it effective?
- Was the message **you- and we-focused**, or was it **I- and me-focused**?

**Humor**

- Was humor used?
- Was it **safe and appropriate** given the audience?
- Were **appropriate pauses** used before and after the punch lines, phrases, or words?
- Was it **relevant to the speech**?

**Visual Aids**

- Were they designed effectively?
- Did they **complement speech arguments**?
- Was the use of visual aids **timed well** with the speaker’s words?
- Did they **add energy** to the presentation or remove it?
- Were they **simple** and **easy to understand**?
• Were they easy to see? e.g. large enough
• Would an additional visual aid help to convey the message?

Use of Stage Area
• Did the speaker make appropriate use of the speaking area?

Physical – Gestures and Eye Contact
• Did the speaker’s posture display confidence and poise?
• Were gestures natural, timely, and complementary?
• Were gestures easy to see?
• Does the speaker have any distracting mannerisms?
• Was eye contact effective in connecting the speaker to the whole audience?

Vocal Variety
• Was the speaker easy to hear?
• Were loud and soft variations used appropriately?
• Was the pace varied? Was it slow enough overall to be understandable?
• Were pauses used to aid understandability, heighten excitement, or provide drama?

Language
• Was the language appropriate for the audience?
• Did the speaker articulate clearly?
• Were sentences short and easy to understand?
• Was technical jargon or unnecessarily complex language used?
• What rhetorical devices were used? e.g. repetition, alliteration, the rule of three, etc.

Intangibles
Sometimes, a technically sound speech can still miss the mark. Likewise, technical deficiencies can sometimes be overcome to produce a must-see presentation. The intangibles are impossible to list, but here are a few questions to consider:
• How did the speech make you feel?
• Were you convinced?
• Would you want to listen to this speaker again?
• Were there any original ideas or techniques?