

OVERCOMING SPEECH ANXIETY

If you get nervous even thinking about speaking in front of other people, you're not alone. Public speaking is one of the top fears, and in Speech & Debate, you do it for fun. The nervousness you feel is often called speech anxiety or stage fright, and comes in many different forms. For some people, it's the stereotypical feeling of "butterflies in the stomach", as well as sweaty palms and a dry mouth. Others endure nausea, hyperventilation, and downright panic.

A little nervousness can actually be a good thing when you're giving a speech: it helps focus your attention. But in extreme forms, speech anxiety can prevent you from speaking clearly or derailing your train of thought during your speech. Though speech anxiety is quite common, and affects almost everyone to a certain extent, you can learn to manage it. As one public speaker put it, "You may not be able to get rid of the butterflies, but you can get them in flying formation." The following strategies can help you combat speech anxiety.

Select an Event and Topic You'll Enjoy

If you know your subject well, or you're passionate about it, you'll find research and planning relatively easy, which leaves more time for practice. With practice, you'll be better prepared and more relaxed when competing. And when you select a topic or presentation you know you enjoy, your interest adds enthusiasm to your speaking voice, which engages your audience even more.

Start Preparing Early

Resist any temptation to procrastinate in preparing your piece. Far too many debaters wait until the week of the tournament to start preparing and have a nervous breakdown because of the stress. Prep in advance so you're sure that you have enough time to run through and memorize your speech before you have to compete.

Take Care of Yourself

Make sure to get a good night's sleep before you have to present, and avoid excessive amounts of sugar and caffeine, which can make you jumpy or sick. If you don't feel like eating the day of the tournament thanks to nerves, try to at least have a light snack, like crackers or fruit. This will keep your energy up and will not be too heavy on your stomach.

Visualize Success

Researchers have found that visualizing success reduces public speaking anxiety for their students. With visualization, you imagine yourself succeeding and try to match that energy when you go to actually compete. Remember, success doesn't always mean a trophy at the end of the night, but rather things like knowing you did your personal best, speaking loud enough, not stumbling over certain words, etc..

Relax!

When you're nervous, your muscles tense up, and your mind swarms with negative thoughts. You know you should relax, but who can just chill on demand? Relaxation strategies can help. For many people, exercise is a powerful relaxation strategy. It helps you expend your energy before tackling your speech, and leaves you relaxed if you exercise the night before you present. It's also renowned for clearing your mind. But exercising doesn't always mean heading to your local gym and picking up the weights. All you have to do is practice tightening and releasing your muscles wherever you are at the moment. Breathe in as you tighten a group of muscles, and then exhale as you release the tension. You can even focus on counting your breaths - 3 counts breathing in, 3 counts holding your breath, and 3 counts out.

Volunteer to Speak First

When you walk into your round, some judges have a list of competitors in the order you're supposed to speak, but most will just let whoever volunteers go first. This will give you less time to build your anxiety right before you speak, and you won't be able to compare yourself to others before you present.