

Confident Communication: A Stand-Up's Philosophy



JON TORRENS

Hello.

Here is some of my infinite wisdom, boiled down into 9 simple steps.

Although they are presented in chronological order, some of the steps (the first and third ones in particular) are massive, ongoing processes, to be developed along your journey towards true speaking confidence. Others (such as 'Say thank you') are easy, practical things which I believe you should do every time* you deliver any talk.

I learnt these techniques from performing stand up comedy (part-time for about ten years, and full-time for about two years). I gave it up a long time ago, but these techniques are the foundation of my training and speaking.

*** Well, if you want to give yourself the best chance of success, that is.**

So: read, digest, and put it all into action!



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1

Write and rehearse.

As with most things, the best way to improve your writing is simply to practise the act of writing. Note down ideas whenever you can, whether that's in a physical notebook, or in a memo on your phone. By keeping a record of ideas as they come to you (such as something from an overheard conversation, or something that inspired you from the news), you can build up a resource of ideas which are then really useful when you come to write a presentation. Combats the 'blank page' very nicely, I find.

I believe that rehearsal is the key to improving your speaking skills. When I speak to somebody who has had a bad presentation experience, it usually turns out that they didn't rehearse properly, if at all. Before any presentation or talk, I recommend that you run through the material at full pace, and at full volume, without stopping for mistakes. This will give a solid foundation that will keep you on track when you get nervous on the day itself, especially the experience of carrying on past a stumble. Too many speakers make the silly mistake of 'running through it in their head' and then only saying the words out loud for the first time on the day itself. Please don't do that.

Stories can be a fantastic way to engage your audience, while also being something that is much easier to deliver than just a mass of information. Stories humanise data and make your talk much more relatable and interesting. Consider the human aspect of the talk that you're giving and consider your experience of it. This is the best way to breathe life into a subject which you may think the audience doesn't find interesting.

Stories also provide a very satisfying and familiar structure. I recommend using a 'call-back'; when you get to the end of your talk, mention something from the very beginning. Dead simple and audiences love it.

Take every opportunity you can to speak in front of people. Speaking confidence is a muscle which needs to be exercised and developed.



2

Scope out the venue.

When speaking to a group of people in person, it is vital that you understand the physical environment. The first thing I do is stand in the place where I will be speaking, and familiarise myself with the layout of the room; where will people be sitting? What is the technical setup? I've made things a lot easier for myself by getting into the venue and setting up well in advance, encountering and solving any problems way before the first audience member even enters the room.

I want to make sure that when the first audience member arrives, I am in a positive, relaxed frame of mind and am able to welcome them warmly and authentically.

If it's a conference, work out exactly how you will get from where you're sitting to the space on the stage where you will be speaking. I've seen speakers walk on stage to silence, because by the time they got there the audience's applause had simply finished. Rookie mistake.

When speaking online, make sure that you are comfortable with your setup. I recommend investing in a decent camera and light(s), and positioning your camera so that you have a fairly interesting background with some talking points (or at least a background with nothing in it that you wouldn't want the audience to see). A quick win can be to position your laptop with the window behind it; this can give really good lighting that also darkens your background, which can be a nice way to highlight you.



Minimise risk; check out where you'll be speaking. If it's online, get comfortable with your tech set-up (and invest in a decent webcam and microphone).

3

Get your head straight.

Easier said than done, eh?

The biggest opponent when speaking in front of a group is probably you, telling yourself negative stories and reminding yourself of weaknesses and flaws. The successful speaker shows that they trust themselves.

While writing and practise are essential for your speaking confidence, just as important is your own self-acceptance. Consider all your flaws and see how unimportant they are. Own your weaknesses. Eleanor Roosevelt said: “No-one can make you feel inferior without your permission.”



While your instinctive reaction to having to speak in front of a group may be panic, you must remind yourself of the facts: you know your subject (otherwise you wouldn't have been asked to speak about it) and the audience wants you to do well.

What I believe is far more useful and realistic is to remind yourself of your strengths, and the fact that this is a subject that you know inside out and that (possibly) you really like. Remind yourself that you've put in the work (if you haven't, then sorry, I can't help you. You're on your own!).

Make sure you're ready well in advance.

Take a moment.

Then begin.

Deep breaths. Accept yourself. Remember that the audience is on your side. Aim to be calm, with an ego-less sense of humour. You're just going to talk about your specialist subject.

4

Start big.

Grab their attention! Start with *performance*: smile, make eye contact and state who you are, why you're there and what's going to happen.

Mention something immediate and trivial such as the weather, surroundings, or the type of tea you're drinking. Let them settle and then get into the good stuff: the *material*. Hit them with your strongest bit: a killer statistic or interesting story. You may have a great image to show.

Ask them a rhetorical question about the subject – a rhetorical question is safer, but if you're comfortable with your audience, ask them a direct one (just be prepared for no-one responding).

The main thing is: go large. The first minute or so forms the audience's opinion about whether you're worth listening to, so if you don't look happy and don't hit them with something juicy/funny/intriguing, then they may well start checking Twitter or Instagram before you've even got going.



I believe that you should show that you're interested in *them*; you're (relatively) excited to share your idea and message with them, and you want to provide some value, not just 'give a talk.'

When speaking in person, keep everyone 'topped up' with eye contact.

When speaking online, look at the camera as much as you can.

Make eye contact, smile, and declare your intention. Start with your strongest material. If speaking in person, try turning your energy and volume up by about 20%.

5

Define yourself.

Show your style; how do you like to do things and what will this talk be like?

What do they need to know about you? Does your job title really describe your day-to-day role? How should they pronounce your name and where does it originate? Where do you come from?

Tell 'em what makes you tick. If you can convey a value or motivation that resonates with your audience, you're much more likely to get buy-in (see Simon Sinek's 'Start with Why'). Mention your love of a particular film genre, cooking style, author, or obsession with an obscure type of music.



What's your thing? Why did you decide to give this talk? Share your genuine feelings about this subject. Open up, and your audience might really appreciate your authenticity. Does this subject actually annoy you? Or are you obsessed with it? Or both?

Give yourself permission to have fun.

Who are you? What motivates you? What do they need to know? Why should they listen to you? Just tell 'em the truth.

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6

Keep it concise.

No-one ever said: "Oh, I wish that presentation had gone on for a bit longer."

Bloated meetings frustrate people.

Long emails get ignored.

Do everyone a favour and *get to the point*. As quickly as possible, please.

See? Simple.

Get to the good stuff. No filler. Your audience will appreciate your brevity.



7

Be conversational.

Don't think 'presentation'. Think 'conversation'.

The best speakers I've seen (check out TED.com for some good ones) made the whole thing feel natural and unrehearsed (and they rehearse a hell of a lot to make sure it runs smoothly).

Start your talk with the thought: 'I'm going to chat about the thing I know and like.'

Being conversational achieves two rather wonderful things:

1. **It makes your talk easier to take in – a big plus for your audience.**
2. **It makes your talk easier to deliver – a big plus for you.**



Don't try to impress your audience with elegant verbosity, or worse, a large volume of material. *Speak* to them. Think of it as a rehearsal, without pressure, where it doesn't matter if you trip over a word or forget something. Don't have a perfect script; rehearse, use keywords and re-word it a little each time to keep it interesting *for you*. Throw in a few spontaneous bits. Have fun. Have a conversation.

Speakers who don't know their subject particularly well will attempt to cover the gaps with grand-sounding language. Experts, on the other hand, just chat about their subject, because they're entirely comfortable with their level of knowledge. They're not worried about being asked a question they don't know the answer to, because their response will be to smile and simply say: "I have no idea", and then possibly discuss it. A massive bonus to this technique is the humour that can come from informality.

No jargon, TLAs* or flowery eloquence in an attempt to impress. Be authentic, honest, and polite. The best talks I've seen felt natural and easy to listen to.

* Three Letter Acronyms. FYI, I find them really annoying.

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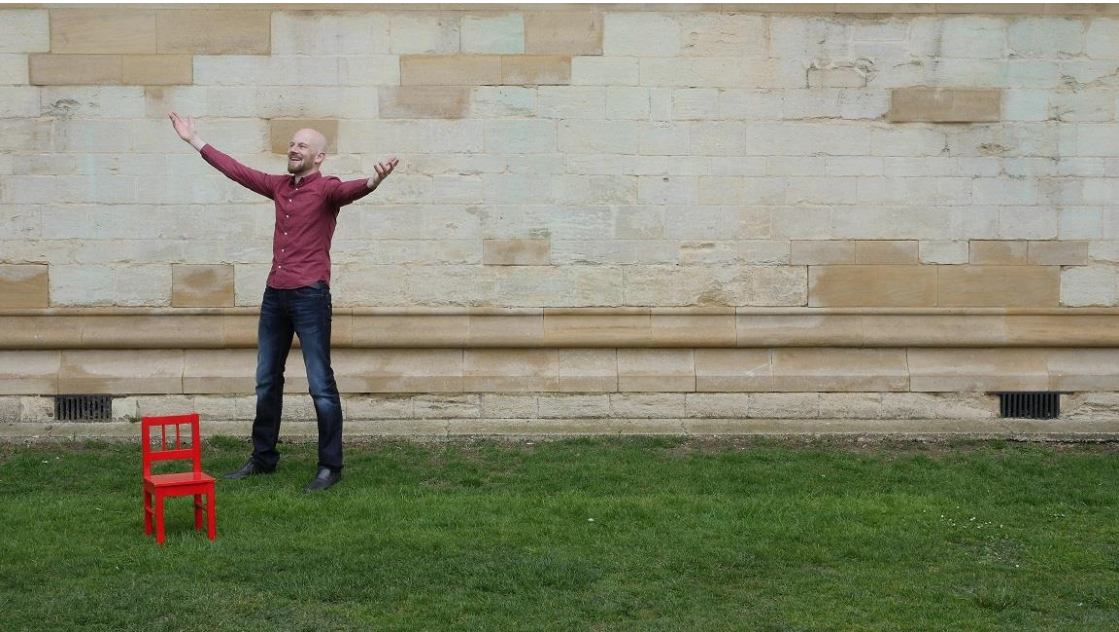
End big.

Please don't just tail off. You grabbed them with your start and held their interest throughout, now finish with something memorable and useful, perhaps a call-to-action for those who were really inspired by your talk.

Please don't use the generic 'Questions?' slide; questions can be good, but you don't need a slide for them. Also, forcing questions at the end of talks I've attended is often met with an awkward silence. Not exactly a big finish, is it?

Sum up the important information; they may have loved your talk but forgotten a few things. Remind them of those bits and of any funny or interesting things that happened during the talk – intentional or otherwise.

Sum up your main points, finish with what you want them to remember and tell them what they could do next, possibly with a slide that also shows your contact details.



9

Say 'thank you'.

Please. Just say thank you.

It reinforces the idea that you care about your audience and their experience.

Perhaps it seems obvious, but thanking your audience is a natural way to finish that also shows empathy and humility.



Thank you.

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Oh, and one last thing: develop these techniques by putting them into practise whenever you can.

If you'd like help with any of this, visit:

<https://jontorrens.co.uk/>



Good luck!

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