

# Learning to Live With Public-Speaking Anxiety

## Paul Martin Lester

Friday, May 4, 2001, *Chronicle of Higher Education*

My students and friends will be surprised by this confession. As a full professor with tenure, I have given workshops to colleagues and professionals throughout the world and have lectured to classes as large as 250 students. I can usually be counted on to mouth off during a faculty meeting or as an audience member during a conference presentation. And at a party, I'm the first one on the dance floor and usually voted the "Most Likely to Have a Good Time." But about 15 years ago when I was a student working on my Ph.D., I was anything but outgoing during graduate seminars.

I was so struck by a form of public-speaking anxiety that I could hardly get a word out. Luckily, my graduate work focused on visual communication. As a former newspaper photojournalist-turned-graduate student, I wasn't expected to say much. My salvation was that I was able to come up with interesting angles on standard topics for the many assigned research papers. Plus, I wrote well. But it frustrated me that I seemed unable to verbally explain or defend my written positions to the others in the class, including my professors.

If I even thought about asking a question or contributing to the debate in any way, my heart would start pounding from a normal, sitting rate of 60 beats a minute to an alarming rate of about 150.

When the heart beats that quickly, it is pumping too fast to deliver blood throughout the body. Consequently, I felt a bit light-headed and dizzy, almost to the point of worrying whether I was going to faint. In addition, I started to sweat and felt nauseated and hot.

Most disturbingly, while I was experiencing these symptoms, I would convince myself that my question or comment was already answered, not important enough, or too trivial to bother the group. But if I overcame what I felt and tried to speak, I was embarrassed by the quivering quality of my voice and frustrated by the lack of encouragement from my professors. And that discouraged me from wanting to speak out again.

Of course, I am not the only academic to suffer such anxiety. Loret Gnivecki Steinberg, an associate professor of applied photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology, says: "I used to be so afraid of speaking up in class that my voice would shake and I'd pinch the top of my hands to distract me from being afraid. On a really bad night, my hands would be bright red as I left the room." Shay Sayre, a professor of communications at the California State University at Fullerton, admits to another reason why she rarely spoke in class. "When I was in grad school," Ms. Sayre says, "I rarely spoke up for the simple reason of not wanting to look stupid among my peers." Being the only woman among a group of male students and professors added to her anxiety.

The frustration that students with public-speaking anxiety feel is shared by many of their instructors, who are uncertain how to help them. Marguerite J. Moritz, associate dean of the journalism school at the University of Colorado at Boulder, says: "I have a student who cannot respond. If I wait 20 or 30 seconds, it doesn't matter. I hesitate to prompt her because I don't want her answer to be influenced by me. She is absolutely unable to say anything. She kind of laughs a little, and seems to try to form words, but nothing comes out. Sometimes she can say one or two words like 'yes,' or 'it was good,' but that's it."

From my experience, there are too many people in academe who suffer from this condition and don't get help, and too few professors who know how to help someone overcome it. So I've assembled some advice for both here. Incidentally, I used many of the suggestions below to help myself through graduate school and beyond.

## Tips for students and speakers

- Take care of your body. Regular exercise reduces your heart rate. Caffeine and junk food increases it. Excessive smoking restricts blood flow. Try to eat something healthy before a class or a presentation so that your blood-sugar level is normal.
- Let your instructor know. Through a face-to-face meeting, on a sheet of paper, or in an e-mail message, discuss with your professor your anxiety and suggest ways to work with the instructor.
- Come to class prepared. Make sure you have completed the readings and assignments for that day's session. Have potential questions and comments written out ahead of time. Don't be hesitant to read from a paper or notebook.
- Jump ahead of the pack. Be the first to ask a question or make a comment. Don't give yourself time to change your mind about speaking out. But if you can't speak, write out your questions and comments and give them to your instructor right after class and arrange for a meeting. Hopefully, with positive feedback, you will gain the confidence you need to speak up in class.
- Get help. Talk to a speech-communication or theater professor for suggestions. Some books that might help include *Coping With Speech Anxiety* (Ablex, 1996) and *In the SpotLight: Overcome Your Fear of Public Speaking and Performing* (Strong Books, 2000). Check out the Web for additional information; you can even find [dissertations online about the topic](#). Finally, try yoga and other meditation techniques.
- Appreciate the feeling. Like anything else, public speaking can be practiced. The more you try, the easier it gets. But if nothing seems to work, realize that the blushing, pounding heart, and quivering voice make you unique. Learn to like that "buzzed," adrenaline-inspired feeling. And to heck with what others may think.

## Tips for instructors

- Take a student's confession seriously. If much of a grade is based on class participation, ask your students during the first meeting to contact you if they have a concern about class participation. If someone comes to you and admits to having a problem, come up with an agreed upon assessment plan for the student and be consistent the entire semester. Amy Fortner, 24, a master's candidate at the University of Missouri at Columbia, admits that if she thinks of a question it's like "someone packaged adrenaline and put it right into my heart." She turns bright red and her voice gets shaky. Ms. Fortner suggests that instructors not grade participation relative to everyone else in the class, but consider the extra effort required to speak up by someone with this condition.
- Have students come prepared. MC Santana, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Central Florida, uses this technique in class: "For my grad and undergraduate classes I ask my students to prepare one or two questions based on the readings. They love it. They are ready to participate in class, and they don't have the pressure of coming up with some brilliant observation."
- Seek professional guidance. Don't hesitate to admit that you don't know how to help a student with this problem. Get information and teaching techniques from your university and other sources. Most instructors have never taken a class on how to teach a class. Contact someone from your education department for tips.
- Use alternative discussion methods. Consider having students communicate through small groups, on paper, e-mail, electronic mailing lists, discussion boards, and virtual classrooms. Many instructors have found that students who are hesitant to speak up in class for whatever reason often blossom through e-mail communication. And the confidence they learn by expressing themselves through a discussion group or a virtual classroom can carry over into the brick-and-mortar classroom.
- Encourage students to admit their anxiety. Gerald Grow, a professor of journalism at Florida A&M University, suggests teaching students how to acknowledge their embarrassment ("I feel nervous saying this, but ..." or "I hope not everybody has as much trouble speaking before a group as I do, but ..."). "The energy behind stage fright can be transformed into the energy of action, or it can stay unknown and silently subvert," he says. "So, bring it out. Admit being shy. Acknowledge

- awkwardness. And train members of the class to compassionately assist one another in moving past this shyness."
- Admit your own anxieties. What's wrong with telling your students that you sometimes feel a little stage fright, and get anxious before delivering a presentation at some professional or academic conference? Students need to know that you're not just a person with all the facts or an arbiter of grades. You've been in their position, and you've learned to live with your own limitations.

So after 15 years, do I have any lingering symptoms of speaking anxiety? Sure. It doesn't happen very often anymore, but when it does, I keep a little notebook handy so I can write down questions I want to ask, I rehearse them in my mind a few times, and I visualize asking the question. I've learned to enjoy the adrenaline rush. And of course, I pretend I have no problem and overcompensate by being outgoing.

Right now there's a dean I need to talk to about a class I want to teach next year. But I keep putting off the call. Sometimes it's like I'm still in eighth grade calling a girl I like and leaving my finger in the hole of the last digit of her phone number in the dial ring (remember, this was many, many years ago) until courage or fatigue causes me to lift up my finger. Weird. Maybe I'll just send him an e-mail.