

CHAPTER 2

So What's Stopping You?

by John A. Daly

Objectives

After studying Chapter 2, you should be able to do the following:

- Distinguish between dispositional and situational anxiety.
- Know the major consequences of communication apprehension.
- Explain why people experience communication apprehension.
- List the major reasons why people experience stage fright.
- Use a variety of techniques to reduce your communication anxiety.

Key Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
<u>cognitive restructuring</u>	A therapeutic technique that helps people who are anxious reduce their fears by changing unrealistic beliefs to more realistic ones.
<u>cognitive therapy</u>	A type of therapy that helps alleviate people's fears through directed conversation.
<u>communication apprehension</u>	The general predisposition to avoid situations that require communication.
<u>conspicuousness</u>	Feeling that you are an unwelcome focus of attention.
<u>dispositional communication anxiety</u>	The anxiety you feel about communicating in most situations. Often called "trait-like anxiety."
<u>labeling</u>	The act of interpreting a situation and treating the interpretation as real.
<u>learned helplessness</u>	"Learning" through experience that you can't change a situation.
<u>positive reinforcement</u>	Reward for engaging in some activity. When an audience applauds you during a presentation, you're receiving positive reinforcement.
<u>reframing</u>	Recasting your interpretation of an event from a different perspective.
<u>reticence</u>	Shyness or communication apprehension.
<u>rigid rules</u>	Standards for behavior that people don't alter even when the situation warrants.
<u>situational anxiety</u>	The normal anxiety people experience when they find themselves in a stressful situation.
<u>shyness</u>	The tendency of a person to avoid social interaction.
<u>stage fright</u>	The anxiety a person experiences when speaking in public.
<u>systematic desensitization</u>	A therapeutic technique to help anxious people reduce their fears by associating communication with relaxation.
<u>talkaholic</u>	A person who is a compulsive communicator. He or she seemingly cannot "shut-up."
<u>visualization</u>	A therapeutic technique that helps anxious people reduce their fears by visualizing positive outcomes of future experiences.
<u>writer's block</u>	A sense of "stuckness" when trying to write.

Introduction

You know the feeling: You're about to give a presentation and you're feeling nervous. Your palms sweat; your hands shake; your mouth is dry. Your mind races frantically, thinking "Why am I here?" You start to speak and your mind goes blank. . . . Or how about this: You're about to interview for your dream job. Your prospective employer welcomes you, and your heart kicks out of control. You introduce yourself and stumble over your own name. And now you're blushing! Several eons later, when the interview is over, you can't remember the names of any of the people you just met. . . . Or this: It's the beginning of the semester and your stomach's killing you. You've got five new classrooms you've got to walk into, five new groups of strangers to avoid, five new professors to evade, five new opportunities for humiliation. . . .

Welcome to the worlds of stage fright and communication apprehension.

If you feel this way, you're not alone. In any number of surveys that ask people about their fears, speaking in public comes out near the top of the heap. A recent Gallup poll listed stage fright as Americans' second biggest fear—after snakes.¹ In the late 1970s, a famous (but unscientific) survey gained notoriety by claiming that people fear public speaking more than they fear death.² Experts in communication estimate that 10 to 15 percent of people are anxious even about talking in meetings and conversations.³ Why the anxiety? And what can you do to control, if not eliminate, your fears about making a presentation, attending a meeting, or participating in an interview?

Almost everyone has butterflies when engaging in important communication activities. For instance, some degree of fear and anxiety is a normal reaction when preparing and delivering a presentation. It's also very normal to feel nervous before important interviews, meetings, or even some crucial conversations. Anxiety occurs when we feel we are being evaluated by others, and when we worry that we might not come across well. The issue to remember as you read this chapter is not *whether* you're apprehensive—we'll take that as given—but rather how you can control the degree to which you're apprehensive.

In this chapter, we'll begin by talking about how people differ in their general levels of communication anxiety. Then we'll move to the situation that makes most people particularly nervous—public speaking and the stage fright that often accompanies making a presentation. (The ideas that we offer about how to overcome stage fright in presentations apply equally to the anxiety you might experience in meetings or conversations.) Finally, we'll discuss strategies for dealing with extreme amounts of apprehension.

Understanding Communication Apprehension

The past 30 years have seen a plethora of academic research that studies how people systematically differ in their enjoyment, or avoidance, of communicating.⁴ Under the rubric of *communication apprehension*, and sometimes *shyness* and *reticence*, scholars have found that some people love to talk; others are far more hesitant. Some find great personal rewards in speaking in conversations, at meetings, or in presentations. Others find those activities emotionally punishing. Some look forward to speaking in public; others will do almost anything to avoid it.

Figure 2.1 provides a typical instrument that measures general levels of anxiety.⁵ The questionnaire is divided into four separate components—*anxiety about group discussions*, *anxiety about speaking in meetings*, *anxiety about interpersonal interactions*, and *anxiety about making presentations*. Take some time right now to fill out the questionnaire and total your score.

Figure 2.1. Measuring your apprehension.

This instrument contains 24 statements that describe feelings about communicating with others.

Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you: Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Feel Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Disagree = 5

- ___ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- ___ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
- ___ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
- ___ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
- ___ 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
- ___ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.
- ___ 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
- ___ 8. Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.
- ___ 9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
- ___ 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
- ___ 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
- ___ 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
- ___ 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
- ___ 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
- ___ 15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
- ___ 16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
- ___ 17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
- ___ 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
- ___ 19. I have no fear of giving a presentation.
- ___ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I'm giving a presentation.
- ___ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a presentation.
- ___ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a presentation.
- ___ 23. I face the prospect of giving a presentation with confidence.
- ___ 24. While giving a presentation, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

SCORING:

Group discussion apprehension:

$$18 + (\text{scores for items 2, 4, \& 6}) - (\text{scores for items 1, 3, \& 5}) = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

Meetings apprehension:

$$18 + (\text{scores for items 8, 9, \& 12}) - (\text{scores for items 7, 10, \& 11}) = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

Interpersonal apprehension:

$$18 + (\text{scores for items 14, 16, \& 17}) - (\text{scores for items 13, 15, \& 18}) = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

Figure 2.1. Continued.

Public speaking apprehension:

$$18 + (\text{scores for items 19, 21, \& 23}) - (\text{scores for items 20, 22, \& 24}) = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

$$\text{TOTAL} = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

From J.C. McCrosky

Done? What was your total? If you scored above 80 you are probably generally nervous and uncomfortable when communicating. If you scored less than 51, you are likely the opposite—you enjoy, even seek out, opportunities to talk with others.

Scholars have identified two sorts of communication apprehension: situational anxiety and dispositional (also called “trait-like”) anxiety. Everyone experiences situational anxiety, which occurs when we encounter specific high-stress situations. When we get embarrassed in a significant conversation, for example, many of us blush and get a tad tongue-tied. And when we have to make a very important speech, we all get a little nervous. In contrast, people who experience dispositional anxiety find that it affects them in *most* parts of their lives. People who are dispositionally shy, for example, experience shyness pervasively. It affects them everyday. The survey you just took measures dispositional apprehension, which is what we’ll be talking about for the next few pages. (Later in the chapter we’ll focus on stage fright, a common type of situational anxiety.)

Dispositional communication apprehension has consequences.

People who have dispositional anxiety about communication are profoundly affected by it. Anxiety permeates most parts of their lives—what they do, how they experience their relationships, and how others perceive them.⁶ For example, highly anxious people don’t do as well in classrooms as people who are less anxious. Why? Because in school you’re often judged not only on what you know but also on how well you express it. Think about the number of classes you’ve taken that require—and grade on—“classroom participation.” Teachers essentially punish students who are unwilling to verbally participate in their classes.

The problem starts early. Remember the reading groups in elementary school? How were you and your peers assigned to “high” or “low” groups? You probably were assigned a group based on your oral reading skills. As apprehensive people go through school, they miss many opportunities because of their fear of communicating. They don’t get as much personal attention from teachers because asking for extra help—and even accepting help that’s offered—requires communication. They don’t volunteer to answer questions in classes, losing, as a consequence, numerous opportunities to impress teachers with their knowledge. They avoid highly interactive extracurricular activities that offer opportunities for leadership.

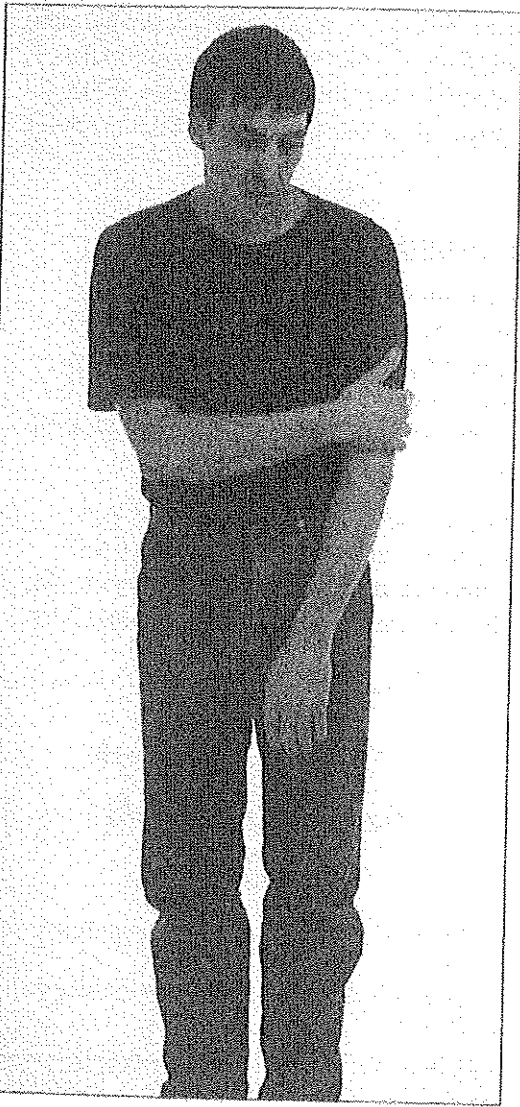
It’s not surprising that in college, students with a good deal of communication apprehension do just as well as other students in large lecture classes, but they often receive lower grades in smaller courses. Why? It’s because in small seminars, verbal participation is often a “must” for a good grade. To avoid this situation, many highly apprehensive students choose majors that they perceive won’t require much social interaction. Once they graduate from college, communication apprehension continues to play a big role in their lives. Think about it: Most people get jobs through networking and oral interviews, both highly communicative activities. Further, but not surprisingly, researchers have discovered that people who are apprehensive receive job offers with lower starting salaries than other people who are less apprehensive about communication. Because apprehensive individuals choose occupations that require relatively little communication, they limit their own upward mobility. How? The higher people go in most occupations, the more important communication is to their success. (You’ll seldom encounter a shy top executive.) And, in both school and work, shy people are evaluated less positively than their more outgoing colleagues.

**“People who are
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Is the news completely bad for quiet people? No it isn’t, for three reasons. First, it’s just as possible for people to be too outgoing. Recent research on what scholars call “compulsive communicators” or talkaholics paints an equally negative portrait of people who never shut up.⁷ Second, when apprehensive people are among people they know very well, many of the negative attributes associated with anxiety disappear. For example, shy people aren’t very shy with their loved ones. Finally, reserved individuals can find perfect places for themselves in this world. Shy people do well, for example, as teachers of young children because kids are not evaluative.

Why are some people apprehensive about communicating?

Why do people differ, dispositionally, in their anxiety about communicating? While some evidence suggests a genetic component,⁸ quite a bit of dispositional communication anxiety can be attributed to three environmental factors: inadequate positive reinforcement for communication, poor skill development, and a lack of good models of communicating.⁹ If you experience dispositional communication apprehension, you may find in one or more of



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these explanations some understanding of *why*. And when you know why you experience what you do, you're well on your way to learning how to control it.

Inadequate positive reinforcement

Take the case of Tom. As a youngster he constantly heard his grandmother utter phrases like "Children should be seen, not heard." His aunt, whose apartment he often visited, had cross-stitched a motto for her wall that read "A quiet child is God's child." At home, Tom's parents discouraged "yakking." When he would get home from school and try to engage his mother in conversation, she often responded with an exasperated comment such as, "Be quiet, Tom; I'm busy." At dinner, when he asked "too many" questions, his father would tell Tom to "shut up and eat." Tom learned, from an early age, that communicating was not a skill to be encouraged. In fact, he was rewarded for *not* talking. A bright student, he learned the lesson. Now that he's an adult, Tom simply avoids talking when he can. He stays silent in meetings, is reserved in conversations, and avoids making oral presentations.

Does this scenario sound familiar? Many people are raised to believe that speaking isn't good, and that staying quiet is the best approach. For them, quietness is reinforced; talking is discouraged. Take a moment to reflect on your own upbringing. What behavior received positive reinforcement in your family when it came to communication? Talking? Or staying quiet?

For some people, reinforcement-oriented apprehension about communication arises not from being punished for talking, but from receiving no response when they did try to communicate. Imagine that every time you said something, people ignored you. When you called to your siblings in the back yard, they "didn't hear" you. When you tried to talk at dinner, others talked right over you. When you suggested an activity, no one responded. Given enough experiences

like these, what would you do? You might just give up using communication to accomplish your goals. People often withdraw when they constantly feel that their attempts to say something are futile. Over time, this sense of communicative impotence generates anxiety.

There's a third reinforcement explanation for communication apprehension, a state of being referred to as learned helplessness. People want and need consistency in their lives. We like to believe that particular actions lead to particular reactions. You turn the faucet on, you expect to get water. You flip the light switch on, you fully anticipate that light will appear. But what happens if sometimes you get the reaction you anticipate and other times you don't? What happens if one time when you flip the light switch the light comes on, another time nothing happens at all, and a third time you get a shock? And it keeps happening? At first, you'd try to figure it out. But if you continually receive random responses, you'd eventually just stop trying because it seems like nothing you would do could influence the outcome. The same can be applied to human communication. What if, as a child, one day you came home and your parents ignored what you had to say about school; another day, they were

all ears? If on another day, you got yelled at for saying anything at all, and the next day, your parents accused you of "clamming up?" Soon, this kind of unpredictability would make you give up even trying to communicate. You'd withdraw, thinking "What's the use?" or "It's hopeless." At that point, you would have learned, through experience, to perceive yourself as helpless when it comes to communication.

Poor skill development

The idea behind the "poor skills" explanation for communication apprehension is that people who are currently anxious about communication either acquired fewer communication skills when they were young or gained those skills later than their peers. When you're not as skillful a communicator as others, you tend to avoid doing it. Over time, you get fearful and anxious about even attempting to communicate. And that nervousness is probably justified. It's like swimming: If you don't know how to do it, you'll be anxious about getting into water over your head. And if someone comes along and pushes you in, the fear you feel while trying to right yourself will confirm all the anxieties you had about drowning in the first place.

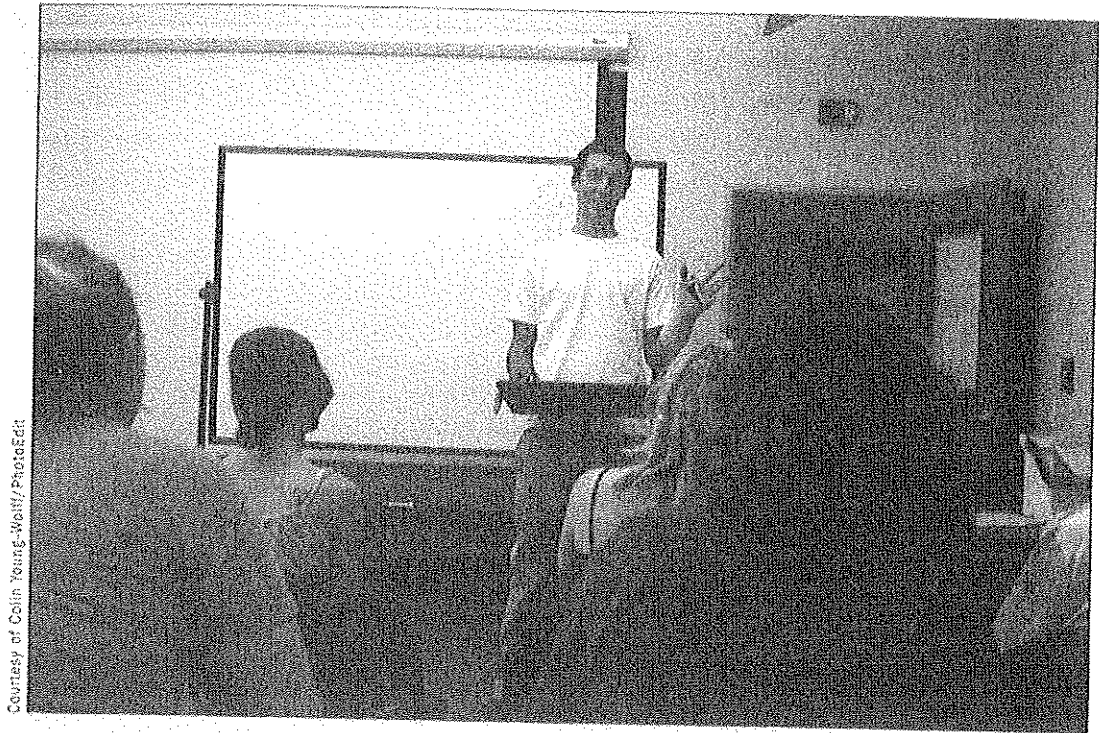
Consider the cases of Jose and Charlie. As Jose grew up, he was constantly given opportunities to develop his speaking skills. After attending a preschool that encouraged expression, Jose went to grade school, where he often volunteered for roles that required communication: He was the class weather boy in first grade, played the lead in the third-grade Thanksgiving skit, and won the job of captain of the safety patrol in fifth grade. By the time he got to high school, Jose was well-prepared for its debate team, and he was active on the team for all four years. Charlie, on the other hand, stayed home until he reached school age. In grade school he seldom got involved in social activities, preferring to read or watch TV. By the time he got to high school, Charlie had mastered the art of keeping a low profile. Now that they're both in college, which of these two people do you think might be more anxious about communicating? You're right if you say Charlie, who was exposed less often than Jose to vital communication opportunities while growing up.

When people first learn about the skills explanation for communication apprehension, they often respond, "Well then, why not just get up and get some experience now?" "Take a public speaking course," they say, "and you'll get over it." Unfortunately, that's much easier said than done. In fact, some researchers have found that when very apprehensive people enroll in a presentation skills class, they actually can become more anxious.¹⁰ Why? Because logically, given their limited skills, they know that they're *likely* to do more poorly than others.

Take the case of Mary. For most of her life, she's felt uncomfortable making presentations. In fact, she finds every excuse to avoid making them and has consistently avoided opportunities to learn how to get better. The thought of making presentations scares her because she knows she's not a good public speaker. Now, upon the urging of her advisor, she's decided, with a great deal of trepidation, to enroll in a presentation skills class. During the first week of class, the teacher asks each student to stand up and make a brief introduction. One student—who turns out to have been an "all-star" debater in high school—volunteers to go first. She stands up and gives a great presentation. The instructor heaps praise on her. Then another—a theater major and gifted at delivery—leaps to his feet and offers a stunning speech laced with humor, insight, and iambic pentameter. The teacher says to the class, "Keep an eye on this guy; he's going to be great."

Now it's Mary's turn. How do you think she feels? She's thinking, "I don't want to do this. I'm not as good as those people." And she's right. Having never before given an impromptu speech, she walks to the front of the class, sees all the people staring at her, and feels faint. When she starts talking, she stumbles over words and loses track of what she wanted to say. When she finishes, she rushes to her seat and hides her face, burning with shame. What's the teacher to say? Given any level of sensitivity, it'll be something kind. But Mary—and everyone in the class—*knows* she did not do well. Mary is now even more convinced that public speaking is not for her. After her humiliating experience, she goes straight to the registrar to drop the class. Now, having "given it a fair try," she's more nervous than ever about speaking in public. Anxiety begets avoidance; avoidance limits skill development; poor skills lead to failure that, in turn, leads to greater anxiety.

Do you recognize yourself in Mary? If so, be proud of yourself that you've signed up for 306M and taken the first step. It's a hard one for you—much harder than for most people. But be aware that you can gain immensely from taking this class. It might even change your life! Just concentrate on doing what you can, and



Courtesy of Colin Young-Wells/PhotoEdit

remember to compare your new knowledge and skills only to your former abilities—not to the abilities of people who are already accomplished speakers.

Inadequate or poor models

People learn behaviors by watching others, and then imitating them. Most of us learned to dance by watching other people move; we learned how to socialize by mimicking others we thought socially talented. Luckily, most of us have managed to find good models for most of things we do—Stephen F. Austin, Mary Lou Retton, Mr. Rogers, the kid next door who helped you with math. But what happens if we have models that are barely adequate or even actively poor? We'll learn habits that will, in the end, hurt us.

**“... evaluation makes you
experience anxiety.”**

If, as we grow up, we consistently see people comfortably and competently communicate, we borrow many of their techniques, model their positive attitudes, and become comfortable and competent communicators ourselves. If, on the other hand, we have poor models, we won't be able to develop our skills as well. Consequently, when we do try to communicate, we may

behave in ways that are less than effective. The negative response we get makes us want to avoid future speaking opportunities.

Take the case of Amy and Janine. Amy grew up in a household where both of her parents were adept communicators, and particularly adept public speakers. Her father is a trial attorney who has argued cases in front of the United States Supreme Court. Her mother is an English literature professor at a liberal arts college, teaching Shakespeare and Milton. Amy chose a small university and Communication Studies as a college major because she felt so comfortable and competent as a communicator. Janine, on the other hand, grew up in a household with parents who were not terribly social and who had absolutely no experience speaking in public—in fact, it scared them to death. Because of this, Janine always carried with her a fear of speaking in groups, in class and in social situations. She chose a large university where she could “disappear” and selected electrical engineering as a major, hoping she would not have to give presentations.

Understanding Stage Fright

Not everyone is disposed toward communication apprehension, and those who are vary in the degree to which they experience anxiety. Yet even people low in dispositional apprehension experience situational anxiety. One common form of situational anxiety is stage fright, which stops people from *desiring* to communicate in public. How come? Why does public speaking scare us so much? Learning why you fear speaking in public is the first step to coping with speech anxiety during presentations, meetings, and interviews, and other types of professional speaking.

So why *do* you experience stage fright?

You experience stage fright because you fear evaluation.

Few people enjoy being evaluated by others. But the bottom line is inescapable: When you give a presentation, you invite judgment. There you are, standing in front of an audience as its members think about what you're saying, how you're saying it, the way you dress, and even whether they like you. That's an awful lot of evaluation. And if you're like many people, fear of evaluation makes you experience anxiety.

How do you get over this fear? Winston Churchill is reported to have coped with his anxiety by imagining his audience naked. No doubt it worked: Imagining a bunch of overweight senior government officials in their birthday suits would reduce almost anyone's perception of them as powerful evaluators. To increase his confidence, Churchill redefined his audience from evaluative judges to globs of flesh. While you may not want to go that far—it's important that you retain respect for your audience—academic studies do support the value of reframing. People who ordinarily feel quite a bit of stage fright often don't feel scared at all when talking to young children or very old people. Why? It's probably because people don't perceive kids and our most senior of citizens as threats. Similarly, employees of all ranks are often more comfortable addressing subordinates than those they feel to be equals or superiors.

So, if you feel nervous when you speak because you feel as though you're being evaluated by people who have power over you, try to switch that feeling around and imagine yourself as confident. After all, you certainly know more than your audience about what you are talking about, you're obviously better looking than some of them—and you're the one who has the floor.

Another way of overcoming the fear of being evaluated is to understand that most audience members really want you to do well. Don't believe it? Next time *you're* in an audience, consider what you're thinking as the speakers are introduced. Are you hoping they'll fail? Or are you hoping that they'll be interesting and entertaining and worth listening to? If they falter, do you feel contempt or do you pull for them to pull it out? Bets are that you're as positive and supportive and empathic as you can be. And in that, you're no different from most audience members. Remember, your audience wants you to do well.

You increase your stage fright when you're unprepared.

When you're poorly prepared for a presentation, meeting, or interview, you know it. And that knowledge worries you—quite correctly. Confidence comes from preparation. If you want to reduce your evaluation-based stage fright in speaking, you'll need to be *very* prepared. (Luckily, the benefits of learning to engage in this level of preparation spill over into all other facets of your life, so it's well worth the effort.) Never underestimate how effective good preparation can be in reducing your anxiety. When you know what you want to accomplish, why you want to accomplish it, and what you are going to say, you'll be much less anxious. Most excellent speakers understand this fact. Indeed, a good friend of Winston Churchill once claimed that Churchill had spent the best years of his life writing "impromptu" speeches. Like Churchill, you too can be prepared.

“When you're poorly
prepared . . . you know it . . .
Confidence comes from
preparation.”

Familiarity is your friend when it comes to speaking. New situations and new audiences often make us uncomfortable. An example: You agree to meet a friend at a party. You've never been to the apartment where the party's being held. As you walk in, looking for your friend, you find that you don't know anyone there. No one talks to you as you circulate . . . and your friend is nowhere to be found. How do you feel? Do you feel a little nervous, a little out of place? Contrast that feeling to another time when you arrived at a party held at one of your favorite places and attended by some of your favorite people. Didn't you feel more comfortable?

The same thing happens in communication. When you make a presentation to an audience you don't know, in an unfamiliar setting, you feel more anxiety than when you speak in a familiar situation to listeners you know well. Novelty begets anxiety.

So how do you cope with novelty? The answer is *not* to restrict yourself to making presentations only to people you know, in familiar settings. Instead, you should work hard, in advance, to acquaint yourself with both the unfamiliar audience and the unfamiliar setting. Discover everything you can about your audience before you make your presentation. Find out who they are. Talk to a few people who'll be there. Ask them who else will be attending and what sorts of things interest them. Look for ways that this audience is similar to other audiences you've known.

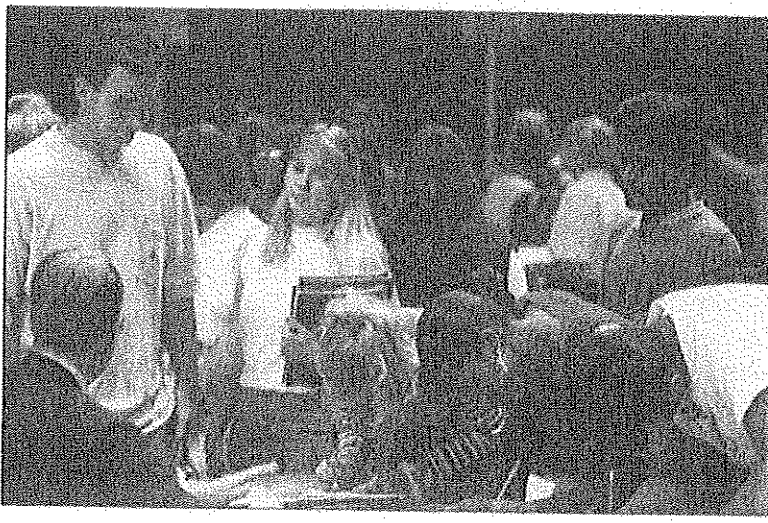
Just as important, get a feel for the setting. Get to the room early. Find out where you'll be standing to speak, talk out loud to gauge the acoustics, sit in a chair or two to see the room from the perspective of an audience member. Trial attorneys often use this strategy to help their witnesses focus. They walk the witnesses into the courtroom, sit them in the witness and jury boxes, have them speak into the microphone, and walk around the courtroom. Why do they do this? Because they know that people perform better when they're familiar with their surroundings. The less novel the setting, then the more comfortable the speaker will be.

The same techniques work for interviews and meetings. Suppose you really want a job with the Acme Company. The interviewer for Acme is coming to the College of Communication's Career Services office next month to recruit prospective employees. You know you'll be nervous because this is such an important interview. What should you do? First, use CCS resources to discover as much as you can about Acme. If you can, find out the interviewer who will be doing the interviewing. (Quite often the same interviewer comes each time.) Then, put yourself through practice interviews, signing up to interview with a few firms in advance so you can get accustomed to the questions that interviewers ask and become proficient in answering them. Preview the interview room if you can. Learn everything you can, so that the only novelty you face is your actual interaction with the interviewer.

In addition to making yourself familiar with your audience and setting, being prepared involves producing high-quality content to communicate. The more compelling your material, the more you *and your audience* focus on it, not you. Much of the remainder of this book discusses this subject, so we'll mention just a few key ideas

here. First, choose a topic you know something about already, that you consider interesting and important, and that you're willing to explore in depth. Be an expert. If you know nothing about the weather, don't give a speech about the weather. Not only can audiences sense when you're bluffing, you'll put yourself through hell trying to "wing" it: What if you get questions you can't answer? What if you don't have enough to say? What if you're confused or wrong about something you say? What if you have to blather on and repeat yourself to fill time?

Second, prepare more material than you could ever use. Most of us are lousy at estimating how long it takes to talk about



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something. So, if you're planning a 5-minute presentation, prepare enough material for 15 minutes, and then cut what you don't need as you practice. (Even if it turns out that you cut out a lot of information, just think how knowledgeable you'll sound during your Q&A.)

Third, do take the time to imagine the questions people might have about your topic. Come up with answers before you give your speech. Then incorporate the answers in your speech or hold them in readiness if that question is asked. Many well-known corporate leaders and public officials use this technique when planning to meet the press. A day or two before the press conference, staff members brief the leader on likely questions. The group hammers out appropriate answers. Then, when the speaker starts her speech, she feels comfortable knowing she already has answers to the bulk of questions likely to be raised.

You increase your stage fright when you feel conspicuous.

Even if you don't especially fear evaluation, and even if you're prepared to speak, you can experience the anxiety that brings stage fright just by thinking about being the focus of attention. Most of us don't like to feel conspicuous, and talking to a group of, say, 25 people means that you've got around 50 eyeballs staring at you. When you begin to think about all this attention, you can lose focus on your message and your audience and turn inward toward yourself. As you become more self-focused, the quality of your performance suffers and your anxiety increases.

Try this exercise. Say the phrase: "Four score and seven years ago," and think about what it means. Repeat it a few times, get used to the way it feels in your mouth. Now say it again, but this time, think about what your lips and tongue and jaws are doing. Finally, say it one last time, but this time place your hand gently on your throat and feel the vibrations as you speak. Did you notice that the more you thought about what you were *doing*, instead of what you were *meaning*, the more your speech slowed down?

That's because the more you focus on yourself, the more you get distracted from your message. Being distracted hurts the quality of your delivery. That's why radio talk show hosts caution callers to turn down their radios before they get on the air; if they don't, they can become mesmerized by the sound of their own voices coming from their radios. And that's why TV broadcasters avoid looking at monitors while they're on camera. They know that if they start watching themselves they'll start thinking about the way they look and sound instead of the content of their communication.

"As you become more self-focused, the quality of your performance suffers and your anxiety increases."

Some public speaking books suggest you should practice speeches in front of mirrors. What lousy advice! You're your own *worst* audience. Try it and you'll see why. As you talk to yourself, you'll start noticing your face, your hair, and your eyes. You'll notice your mouth moving and your tongue darting out from between your lips. Look at how pink it is! And your hands! What are you going to do with your hands? Just a few minutes of this and you'll be thinking very little about your message. Worse, because people become harsher in their self-judgments as they watch themselves, you'll be raising your anxiety level and increasing your stage fright. The tendency of people with a great deal of stage fright to become self-focused when speaking explains why research finds that they have difficulty remembering, after presentations, much at all about their audience, the room they were in, and what they said. They recall very well, however—and in exquisite detail—the many negative thoughts they had about themselves. People with less stage fright are far better at recalling audience members and their environment because they were focused on communicating their message, not themselves.¹¹

So what should you do if you begin to feel self-conscious during a presentation? Years ago, speech coaches advised nervous people to find a point on the back wall of the room and talk to that point. The theory was that you could help yourself feel less overwhelmed by avoiding "live" interaction. Now we know that advice was wrong. Instead, focus every bit of your attention back onto your audience and the content of what you're saying. Talk to audience members as individuals. Pick out a friendly looking person and talk directly to him. Focus your

attention on him. Decide that you're going to speak directly to him until he begins to smile. Then smile yourself (at an appropriate point) and you'll find that he smiles back. Then, move on to another audience member, in a different part of the room, and think, "I'm going to talk right at her until she nods her head." As you talk, nod your head (at an appropriate moment) and watch as she starts to reciprocate by nodding her head. What are you doing when you do this? You are redirecting your attention away from yourself and onto the audience, which allows your message to flow without anxiety.

Entertainers know this trick. If you've ever been to a comedy club, you know that there's one sacred rule: Don't sit in the front row unless you want to get picked on by the entertainer. When do entertainers start ribbing their audience? They do it when they want to take attention away from themselves. Any good comedian will tell you that sometimes nothing works: The audience is cold, even hostile. When that happens, the worst thing comedians can do is think about how they're bombing. Instead, they shift the audience's attention away from themselves. They get some breathing room by suddenly pointing out someone in the front row and making a "canned" joke about that person. The audience laughs and strains to see the person being mocked, while the comedian gets a little time to relax and recoup. Teachers do the same thing. When they forget what they want to say or get flustered, they'll often quickly ask for an informal classroom poll. "So how many of you have ever heard of. . . ."

The issue of conspicuousness is one reason you should never tell your audience that you're nervous. Sharing that information can only make your audience more aware of your nervousness—maybe they didn't even know you were nervous until you said it—and make you feel even more uncomfortable.

You increase your stage fright by holding yourself to rigid rules.

Years ago, a psychologist at UCLA, Mike Rose, started studying why people experience writer's block. What he discovered was fascinating.¹² After studying many writers, he found that those with writer's block had rigid rules about writing. These blocked writers believed, for example, that you need to have a perfect first sentence before you go on. So they slaved over that first sentence for hours, feeling that they would "never get it right," and quitting in despair. Writers who didn't suffer from writer's block knew that an opening sentence was important but decided not to worry about it if nothing immediately came to mind. They quickly moved into writing the body of their essay, knowing they could always go back to the introduction. The difference between "blocked" writers and those who comfortably wrote was that the former group let the rules run them while the latter group ran the rules.

The same is true with people suffering from stage fright. They often have very rigid rules about what, for example, a good presentation should look like. One mid-level executive at a computer company who often experienced stage fright said that he believed that "every good speech should start with a joke." Another very anxious scientist felt that "speeches should always have three main points." An engineer related that "every presentation must have visual aids with color graphics." All of these people dearly loved their rules about speaking. And all were haunted by them. If they didn't have a good joke, three (and only three points, or color graphics, they got nervous. But, in reality, none of these are actually necessary rules for good speaking. Is it possible to give an excellent presentation without any jokes? Sure! Do all excellent presentations have three major points? Of course not! And many outstanding briefings have no graphics at all—color or otherwise. Please understand: There are no "must" rules of speaking (except, perhaps, the rule against talking while chewing gum). This book is, of course, filled with advice. But every piece of advice needs to be adapted to its situation. Is it sometimes all right to put your hands in your pocket while speaking? Yep! Is it acceptable, in some situations, to sit down rather than stand when speaking? Sure!

But some people don't know how flexible they can be when speaking. At some point in their lives they learned certain rules about speaking and now they believe they must follow those rules to the letter. The problem with rigidly following rules is twofold. First, sometimes the rules aren't appropriate. For instance, if you are talking to two of your best friends, it would be weird to stand behind a lectern. Second, when the rules you rigidly hold are not met or are violated, you'll get very uncomfortable. Imagine believing that only a presentation that begins with a barn-burner of a joke can be good. Further, imagine you dutifully start your presentation with a joke but no one gets it. Instead of the laughter you expected, there is absolute quiet. Now how do you feel? Awful, we suspect. Throughout the presentation, you'll be haunted by the fact that you failed to get it "right."

Here's something to think about: Most people are far more comfortable answering questions than they are giving formal presentations. At first glance, you'd think it would be the opposite because you can prepare for a presentation, but it's hard to prepare for every possible question that could be asked in the question-and-answer session that follows. You have to think "on your feet" when you answer questions, while you can do most of your thinking about a presentation beforehand. So it sounds like presentations should be far more nerve wracking. But that's not the case for most speakers. Why? Because both speakers and audiences have far fewer rigid rules about how a good QA session ought to go. Drop the rules for your presentation style and you'll feel much better speaking!

Related to rigid rules about speaking is the discovery that people often experience stage fright because they have unrealistic expectations about what's going to happen when they speak. They believe, for instance, that people in the audience will always pay rapt attention. Or they believe things will always go perfectly when they talk. As might be expected, most of these fond dreams are shattered very quickly. And when they are shattered, speakers get nervous.

Take the case of Vish, a 23-year-old college senior who was asked to give a speech at new student orientation. After carefully thinking about the occasion, Vish decides a serious talk on the perils of drinking will be both appropriate and useful, and he crafts a presentation about alcohol abuse that he knows will get the sober attention of listeners. As soon as he mentions the word "drinking," though, he loses the entire room as hundreds of 18-year-olds start giggling and whispering jokes to each other. Reflecting on the fact that the freshmen aren't where he is on the topic, Vish gets them back with wry humor and slowly brings them along to his serious topic. But what if Vish had clung rigidly to his early expectations that people would immediately take his message seriously?

This advice about easing your rigid expectations applies just as much to interviewing and meetings as it does to public presentations. Interviews have as many structures as people who give them. Some meetings follow an agenda; others are far more free-flowing. Life happens so relax those rules!

"Most people are far more comfortable answering questions than they are giving formal presentations."

You increase your stage fright with negative self-talk.

Imagine that you're giving a presentation to an audience. At the end of the presentation, a communication researcher asks you how well you think you did and how nervous you appeared to your audience. The researcher also asks your audience members to rate you on the same questions. The point of the research is to see how closely your perceptions match those of your audience and how accurately you judged how your listeners saw you. When the ratings are collected and the researcher compares your judgments with the audience's ratings, what do you think you'll see?

In studies just like this, investigators find that people who suffer from high levels of speech anxiety think audience members see them as far more nervous and far less competent than the audience members actually report. The same is true for interviews.¹³ These investigations confirm the existence of a common error speakers make: While you're the only credible judge of how you *feel* when you speak, you may not be a very good judge of how your performance comes across. Say that you make a presentation that didn't, in your mind, go very well; you couldn't help but feel nervous, uncomfortable, and uptight. But afterwards, as you brood, people come up and compliment you on it. You graciously thank your listeners for their kind words, but you say to yourself, "They're just being nice. What they really think is that I was lousy. They could see I was shaking and sweating all the way through that speech." But perhaps you're incorrect. Perhaps the audience really did see you as relaxed and comfortable. Maybe you really did give a fine presentation. Maybe you're not so good at gauging how nervous you actually appear.

And, for that matter, maybe you're not so good at gauging how you actually feel. Giving a presentation, conducting an important interview, or participating in a crucial meeting are physiologically arousing experiences. Your body gets "up" when you have to communicate in these sorts of settings: Your heart beats faster, your palms get sweaty, and your reflexes fire with scant provocation. When some people experience these feelings, they think, "I'm scared." When others experience *the same feelings*, they say "I'm excited." Physiologically, there's little

difference between fear and excitement. What matters about a feeling is how you label it. Think of something adventurous you do by choice—riding a roller coaster, going scuba diving, eating five-alarm chili. What do you feel just before you start? Perhaps you feel a twinge of butterflies in the stomach, slightly sweaty palms, tight breathing? These physiological reactions are no different than the ones you have when you stand up to speak. The difference is that you call *some* of those activities fun—same physiology, different labels. The next time you are about to give a presentation, stop any negative self-talk and work to relabel the experience as positive. Rather than saying “I’m terrified,” say “I’m psyched.”

We can take the notion of labeling one step further. Communicatively anxious people often actually talk themselves into being more scared than they really are. Before they begin an interview or presentation they run an endless loop of negative conversation through their brains, saying things like: “This is going to be awful. . . . How did I get myself into this . . . ? I’m going to make a fool of myself. . . . People are going to laugh. . . . They’ll hate me. . . . I’m going to look like an idiot. . . .” This kind of negative self-talk is particularly troublesome, because you can use it to talk yourself into believing the worst, *regardless of whether it’s true*. Worse, you can use your negativity to make what you fear happen in fact. Why do this to yourself? Do what experienced speakers do: Set up a different kind of loop of self-talk: “I’m going to be great. . . . This is exciting. . . . What an opportunity. . . . This is going to work out fine. . . . I really know my stuff. . . . I’m so glad I’m here. . . . I’m really going to convince this audience.”

One more thing about the arousal: Make use of the energy it offers. Before you give your presentation, walk around if you can, take some deep breaths, stretch. When you do start the presentation, move around the room and use gestures. Radiate the energy to your audience and relax!

Mark Leary, a psychologist who studies social anxieties, believes that stage fright is a function of two variables: How well you think you’ll perform and how significant you believe the consequences of your performance will be.¹⁴ Notice that both are perceptions. You can tell yourself that there’s no way you’ll perform well or you can persuade yourself that you’ll be fine. Similarly, you can make yourself believe that an interview or presentation will be the single most consequential act you’ve ever done or you can understand that many, many things are more important in life than any one speech act. It’s your choice. As Dr. Phil says, “There are no victims here, only volunteers.”

Managing Your Fear of Communicating

When you understand stage fright and dispositional communication apprehension, you can begin to manage your fear of communicating. You can take a few simple steps to manage common stage fright. If you experience severe communication apprehension, you can achieve excellent results with professional help.

A few simple techniques to manage your stage fright.

People who suffer from stage fright can discover some very simple ways to better manage their anxiety. For lack of a better word these techniques fall under the rubric of “THINK!” Think before you make a presentation so you can control or avoid whatever makes you nervous:

- Suppose you discover that as you speak your hands shake. What to do? THINK! If there’s a lectern, why not put your hands on it?
- Suppose your shaking hands make the notes you hold rattle? What to do? THINK! Why not put your note card on a clipboard? Clipboards don’t shake very much. If you’re so nervous that the clipboard shakes, lay it down on a table.
- Suppose you blush when nervous and that the blushing starts at chest level and slowly crawls up your neck. What to do? THINK! Why not wear a scarf or turtleneck instead of a shirt that reveals your nervousness?
- Or, suppose that you have a nervous habit of playing with change or the keys in your pocket when talking. What to do? You’ve got it: THINK! Why not get rid of the change or keys?

In meetings, we forget how helpful it is to project the agenda on a wall so that we can quickly glance to see our place in the schedule. In interviews, we forget to bring an extra copy of the resume, assuming that the

interviewer has one. If you think in advance of the things that might make you nervous, you can do something about them.

How to treat severe communication apprehension.

If none of these ideas help you overcome your apprehension, you may want to try some more formal methods to reduce your anxiety, which include procedures used by professional clinicians and some highly trained teachers.¹⁵ These therapies take work but with effort and good help, you can reduce your anxiety.

Systematic desensitization

Think about walking into a very attractive room and sitting down in a very comfortable chair. Peaceful music plays in the background. Greeting you at the door is Bill, a teacher trained in systematic desensitization. He briefly, but effectively, teaches you the basics of muscle relaxation. The setting and music add to your deep relaxation. As the music continues you find yourself getting more and more comfortable. At some point, Bill tells you he's going to ask you to think about situations that may or may not make you nervous. All have to do with communicating with others. Before he starts, Bill tells you that any time you feel even a little anxiety you should raise one finger. When you raise that finger, Bill will ask you to relax and then he'll start over describing the situations.

At this point, Bill starts by asking you to think of talking to a good friend about the weather. Next, he asks you to imagine chatting with a friendly store clerk about where to find a product. Then, he asks you to think of discussing a recent vacation at a family dinner. The process continues as he raises more situations that, based on pre-testing, are gradually more likely to make you nervous. What Bill is doing is going through a hierarchy of anxiety-producing situations. At the beginning, the situations he guides you to think about are mostly quite comfortable ones. As the process progresses, however, some are likely to make you nervous. For example, at one point, Bill asks you to think about making a brief presentation to some strangers. You feel a twinge of nervousness so you raise your finger. Bill then asks you to relax, the music plays on for a few minutes, and once you are relaxed Bill starts over again asking you to imagine again talking to a good friend about the weather. Over the two hours this therapy typically takes, you find yourself slowly beginning to associate communication events with relaxation rather than nervousness. The therapy is working.

This therapy is called systematic desensitization and it works amazingly well. The underlying notion is that stage fright arises when you mentally associate speaking with nervousness. After the treatment, you associate making a presentation with a sense of relaxation. Any number of studies confirms that the technique works. It is, by the way, a very common technique used to help people overcome their phobias such as fear of snakes, elevators, or open spaces. It's also a technique used by nearly every professional sports team to aid players in coping with "clutch" moments, like when there's a tie game, a foul, and a single free throw standing between the team and victory. The player making the shot may "choke"—misjudge the shot and entirely miss the hoop. If she does, no win. Watch carefully how the player acts as she prepares to take the shot. Note how relaxed she is. Every muscle seems almost limp. What you are seeing is systematic desensitization at work. The player has learned that the more nerve-racking the situation, the more relaxed she has to be.

Even if you don't seek professional help, understanding how systematic desensitization works can help you overcome your stage fright. You can teach yourself to relax, and if you do, you'll have less stage fright. Certainly this is easier said than done. But try deep breathing, peaceful meditation, stretches, and such when you feel yourself tense up. It will help.

Cognitive therapy

Systematic desensitization posits that if you are relaxed, stage fright won't be a problem. Cognitive therapies go a step further. When applied to stage fright, they're premised on the idea that you're afraid because you hold

unrealistic beliefs about making presentations. You can challenge those beliefs, and make them fade in favor of beliefs that are more reasonable and useful to you. Consider the following transcript of a cognitive therapy session:

Teacher: So you have stage fright.

Student: Oh, yeah.

Teacher: Why are you so scared to make a speech?

Student: I don't know . . .

Teacher: Really?

Student: I guess because I'll look stupid.

Teacher: What makes you think you'll look stupid?

Student: I don't know

Teacher: [silence].

Student: OK, maybe because people will laugh at me if I make a mistake.

Teacher: Now, let's think about that for a minute. Why do you think you'll make a mistake so bad that people will laugh at you?

Student: I could.

Teacher: Sure you could, and the Tower could fall over. Have you ever made a mistake while giving a speech that made people laugh at you?

Student: No. . . . But it could happen.

Teacher: OK, let's assume it does happen, as rare as that is. What's so bad about making a mistake and having people laugh?

Student: It would be embarrassing.

Teacher: Yes, it would. So what? You'll live.

Student: Yeah, but it would feel bad.

Teacher: True, but you'd get over it, wouldn't you?

Student: I guess so.

Teacher: What do you mean you guess so? Do you think you wouldn't?

Student: Well, sure I'd get over it, but still . . .

Teacher: Still, what?

As you can see, this conversational process challenges and tries to change a person's unrealistic beliefs, in this case about the dangers of giving a speech. Most of the time, this student won't make a bad mistake. Most of the time people won't laugh, and even if they do laugh, it isn't the end of the world. Prior to the session all those unrealistic beliefs were making the student very nervous about speaking in public; during the session the student got the chance to examine the beliefs and decide if they're true. This therapy is called cognitive restructuring because it helps clients restructure their beliefs.

The take-home message with cognitive restructuring is that if you experience stage fright, you should try to challenge some of your fears. Get more realistic about what will happen when you give a speech. Really, it won't be *that* bad. Certainly, it won't be the end of the world. Challenge those negative beliefs that get in the way of speaking.

Another cognitive therapy is called visualization. Imagine, for a moment, that you're a professional golfer. You arrive at an important tournament two days early to get some practice on the course. To your chagrin, rain is pounding down in sheets, so heavy that going onto the greens would be foolhardy. So what to do? How do you get in the

necessary practice? Many experienced golfers would tell you to find a good model of the golf course and study it carefully, in minute detail. Visualize each hole and how you would play it: Look at each green, imagine teeing off, feel the swing in your mind, watch the ball fly, feel the grass as you walk towards the hole. This sort of visualizing is as effective, some suggest, as physically practicing the round. As a speaker, you can do the same thing trying to overcome your stage fright. Before your presentation, sit back and imagine making the speech. Think about how many smiles you'll receive as you start to talk, think about the nodding heads of agreement, think about the looks of interest you'll see in your audience, and think about how smooth your delivery will sound.

Conclusion

It's natural to experience some anxiety when you have to make an important presentation, complete a crucial interview, or speak at a meeting. The challenge is to overcome your nervousness and do a good job communicating. In this chapter we've discussed trait-like communication apprehension and situation-specific stage fright. We've discussed the causes of each and given practical advice for overcoming your fears, whatever their cause. Speaking is a human faculty; when you clear your mind of unrealistic fears, you'll find that it's also a human pleasure.