



14 Impromptu speaking

'Chance favours the prepared mind.'
– Louis Pasteur

Impromptu speaking can help improve your speaking skills in a number of ways. Apart from the obvious situations where you have to speak off the cuff, competency at impromptu speaking can also assist your prepared speaking by:

- allowing you to structure your presentations more quickly into an effective opening, body and conclusion
- making you feel more able to cope if your mind should go blank – thereby lessening the chance of it happening in the first place
- helping you feel more confident in front of an audience – because you are prepared for the unexpected

Be prepared

There is a common misconception that you cannot be prepared for speaking impromptu. While you obviously cannot predict what you might be asked to speak about, there are ways of being able to speak off the cuff with confidence on any occasion.

One of the greatest fears in impromptu speaking is that of going blank. If, however, you work to a pre-defined plan, this fear is minimised. You will discover that you have something to say on almost any subject – if you can find some way of getting past the panic that naturally occurs when we are asked to speak unexpectedly. Everyone has had the experience of thinking of the perfect response – twenty minutes later! Experienced speakers have found that using impromptu plans helps them to come up with the right response at the right time.

The PRES plan

One of the most versatile plans is called PRES. This stands for:

PPOINT
REAISON
EXAMPLE
SUMMARY

Some people find that having 'lead-in' phrases helps them to use the plan.

1. Make a **point** with a confident opening line such as *I believe that ...* or *I think we should ...*
2. State the **reason** with a line such as *This is because ...* or *The reason I say this is ...*
3. Give an **example** in the form of a story. A good lead in phrase might be *Only the other day...* or *Let me tell you a story that illustrates this ...* or *A good example of this was reported in the paper only recently.*
4. Include a **summary** of your point. This reinforces your opening and gives a very clear and confident conclusion. You could start with *And so you'll see, that's why I said ...* or *And so, to sum up, I think you'll have to agree that ...*

By following this plan the speaker automatically has a 'prompt' for what to say next. It gives the overall 'mini speech' an opening, body and conclusion as well as an air of confidence. It encourages the speaker to tell a story, and linking a point to a story has proved to be one of the most effective ways of making the point more memorable. It also has the advantage of being very popular with audiences.

Best of all, PRES works every time, in any situation.

Using PRES for prepared speeches

PRES is also excellent as a plan for when you do have time to prepare in advance.

It can be adapted for longer, more complex presentations by simply extending the 'middle' so that, in effect it becomes PRERES. There may be two or three reasons to back up the main point. Each reason is accompanied by an example.

The Past, Present, Future plan

Another plan that is not quite as versatile as PRES, but can still be very useful, is known as Past, Present, Future. This three-step plan has the speaker talking about what the subject was like years ago, the situation now and some

speculation as to what it might be like in the future. This approach can also be made easier by the use of prompt phrases.

The speaker could open with *In the past ...*

Then follow this with *Today the situation is very different ...*

And conclude with *In the future, I believe we will see...*

The YANA plan

YANA stands for Yes, Argument, No, Argument. It is a good plan for controversial subjects – particularly those where it is difficult to take a stand one way or the other – because it is based on pointing out the arguments on both sides. You could use phrases like:

On the one hand, I think that this is a good decision. This is because ...

On the other hand, I believe there are good reasons why this should not happen. For example ...

And you would probably conclude with:

So, because I can see good arguments on both sides, I believe it is too difficult to make a decision one way or the other.

You can increase your confidence in impromptu speaking situations by using quiet moments constructively. Whenever you have a few minutes to spare, think of a subject that you might speak about in the future and try to construct a mini-speech using one of the formulas. You will be surprised how often these imaginary scenarios become a reality – and you will be able to impress your friends and colleagues with how confidently you were able to speak 'off the cuff'

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