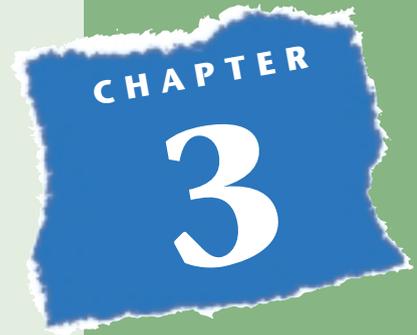


Practice helps  
relieve anxiety  
about speaking.



# Managing Speech Anxiety



## OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter and reviewing the learning resources on your CD-ROM and at the Online Learning Center, you should be able to:

- Explain the relationship between arousal and anxiety.
- Distinguish speech anxiety from communication apprehension.
- Define anxiety and distinguish it from speech anxiety.
- Identify common sources of speech anxiety.
- Understand and use skills that have proved effective in controlling arousal and speech anxiety.



## KEY CONCEPTS

communication  
apprehension

copied skills

self-talk

negative self-talk

speech anxiety

constructive self-talk

physiological arousal

visual imagery

*If your stomach disputes  
you—lie down and pacify  
it with cool thoughts.*

—SACHEL PAIGE

It often begins with butterflies in the pit of your stomach. Then your heart begins to palpitate. Your head starts to swim, making it difficult for you to concentrate, and a veil of perspiration begins to form on the palms of your hands. It may result from being asked to pinch-hit during a game of summer softball, from anticipating an important test you need to pass for your major, or from thinking about an interview for a needed internship. As pointed out in an episode of ABC Television's *20/20*, however, for more than 40 percent of the adult population, these feelings are the result of people's anxiety about public speaking.<sup>1</sup>

**speech anxiety** Feelings of discomfort that people experience before, during, and after speaking in public.

Emotional and physical discomfort with public speaking has been called everything from stage fright and speech anxiety to shyness and communication apprehension. For our purpose, we'll call it speech anxiety. We define **speech anxiety** as the unpleasant thoughts and feelings aroused by the anticipation of a real or imagined speech in public.<sup>2</sup> It is different from stage fright because it concerns public speaking rather than acting. It is different from shyness because it is not the result of general discomfort with social situations. Further, it is different from communication apprehension because it affects at least twice as many people, and because highly communication apprehensive people are fearful about communicating interpersonally and in groups, not just in public.<sup>3</sup>

**communication apprehension** Fear about communicating interpersonally and in groups, not just in public.

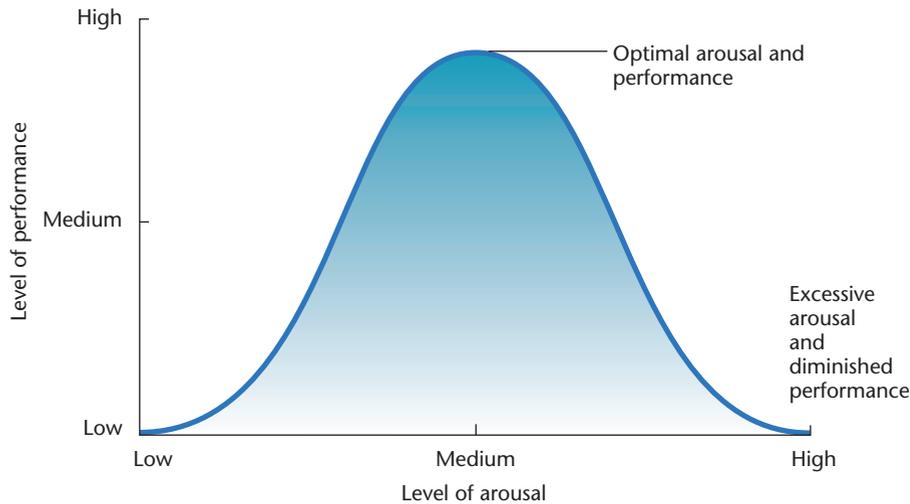
There is another important distinction between speech anxiety and communication apprehension. **Communication apprehension**, which is the fear of real or anticipated communication with others regardless of the situation, is difficult to change with skills training. In contrast, research shows that speech anxiety can be managed with mental and behavioral skills you can learn both inside and outside of your class.<sup>4</sup>

Seventy-five years of solid research have taught us much about the nature, effects, and constructive management of speech anxiety. In this chapter, we pass some of the most relevant research along to you, as well as the aforementioned skills. Topics discussed include (1) the physiological and psychological origins of speech anxiety, (2) how speech anxiety most commonly expresses itself in the speech process, and (3) the specific skills you can begin using to make your emotions work for you rather than against you before, during, and after your speeches. To assess your own level of communication apprehension and speech anxiety, fill out the scales in the box "How Anxious Are You About Public Speaking?" and follow the scoring guide when you are finished.

## PHYSIOLOGICAL AROUSAL AND SPEECH ANXIETY

**physiological arousal** The physical changes that occur when a person is aroused, such as increased pulse, greater alertness, and more energy.

The relationship between physiological arousal and speech anxiety is paradoxical. When we speak of **physiological arousal**, we mean the physical changes that occur when a person is aroused, such as an increased pulse rate, greater alertness, and more energy. On the one hand, moderate arousal is necessary for everything from spiking volleyballs and kicking field goals to writing a good essay and delivering a powerful speech. The adrenaline charge from moderate arousal makes you more motivated and alert, energized, and ready to perform the activity at hand. While a little arousal helps you to perform physical behav-



**FIGURE 3.1** Arousal and Performance

iors especially, too much arousal can produce undesirable side effects (see Figure 3.1).<sup>5</sup> Too much arousal causes excessive adrenaline in the body, which can cause constricted muscles and vocal cords, rapid and shallow breathing, and light-headedness. For the speaker who feels constricted, short of breath, and on the verge of passing out, delivering a speech becomes an ordeal. The trick then is not to make feelings of arousal disappear, but to keep these feelings in check so that they do not unnecessarily interfere with the ability to speak effectively.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AROUSAL AND PERFORMANCE

The body does what the brain tells it to do. The body, moreover, does not distinguish what the brain communicates as real or imagined, exciting or terrifying. People sometimes cry out during a bad dream or jump in their seat during a scary movie because their imagination produces a physical response, even though they are not really in harm's way.

Physical reactions to stimuli help us when we are actually threatened. They can hinder us, however, when the threat is more psychological than real. For many people, the anticipation and act of speaking are perceived quite negatively. Even though their physical well-being isn't truly threatened by the task of speaking, their highly negative view of the task causes their bodies to react as if it were. As a result, they may tremble, blush, and perspire. Such a reaction would be justified if they were running away from a knife-wielding attacker. But that is not the case. They are standing in front of a group of people who actually want them to succeed.

The key to overcoming this undesirable and illogical reaction is to find a way for people to alter their interpretation of the situation and their physical response to it. While that may not be easy, it can be done. In fact, thousands of people each year are able to go out in a crowd or give a speech because they have learned **coping skills** that help them to control their fear of large groups or fear of speaking.

**coping skills** Mental and physical techniques used to control arousal and anxiety in the course of speaking in public.

## How Anxious Are You About Public Speaking?

The following scale measures communication anxiety in general, as well as anxiety resulting from communication in four specific contexts: (1) dyads, (2) small groups, (3) meetings, and (4) public settings. You may find upon completion of the measure that although your overall score is indicative of mild levels of communication anxiety, you are moderately to highly anxious about communicating in one or more specific contexts. Some research, for example, indicates that communicating in groups, meetings, and public settings is most anxiety arousing for students much like you. In any case, the techniques introduced in this chapter will help you cope with your communication anxieties, regardless of their contextual source.

### PERSONAL REPORT OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION (PRCA-24)

*Directions:* This instrument is composed of 24 statements concerning your feelings about communication with other people. Please indicate in the space provided the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Are Undecided, (4) Disagree, or (5) Strongly Disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Many of the statements are similar to other statements. Do not be concerned about this. Work quickly; just record your first impression.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in a group discussion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 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 calm and relaxed while participating in meetings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 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.

### Roots: Why Some People Are More Anxious Than Others

Not all people have the same reason for being anxious about speaking in public. The underlying sources of speech anxiety are varied. Still, research over the past three decades has given a good picture of the most common sources of anxieties about speaking in public. Further, recent studies reveal that the picture laypeople give for speech anxiety roughly corresponds to that uncovered in scholarly research.<sup>6</sup> College students much like you, for example, report that lack of preparation, the fear of making mistakes, appearance concerns, projections about audience interest, and lack of previous experience can feed speech anxiety. In a sense, these

- \_\_\_\_\_ 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 speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. While giving a speech I get so nervous, I forget facts I really know.

### SCORING

To determine your anxiety level, compute the following formulas. The higher your score, the more significant your level of anxiety. (The numbers in parentheses in the formulas refer to the numbered questions above.)

$$\text{Group} = 18 - (1) + (2) - (3) + (4) - (5) + (6)$$

$$\text{Meeting} = 18 - (7) + (8) + (9) - (10) - (11) + (12)$$

$$\text{Dyadic} = 18 - (13) + (14) - (15) + (16) + (17) - (18)$$

$$\text{Public} = 18 + (19) - (20) + (21) - (22) + (23) - (24)$$

$$\text{Overall CA} = \text{Group} + \text{Meeting} + \text{Dyadic} + \text{Public}$$

### MAKING SENSE OF YOUR SCORE

Your combined score for all 24 items should fall somewhere between 24 and 120. If your score is lower than 24 or higher than 120, you need to recalculate it. A score above 83 indicates high communication apprehension; a score between 55 and 83 indicates moderate apprehension, which is the norm for most people. Low apprehension is anything less than 55. Your subscores indicate the degree to which you are anxious when speaking in public, talking in a group, or engaged in conversation with another person. These scores can range between 6 and 30. The higher your score is, the more anxiety you feel. A score above 18 on the public speaking subset suggests you feel a manageable level of speech anxiety. Regardless of your score on this subset, you can significantly benefit from the skills and techniques presented in this chapter. A score of 18 or above on the other two subsets also suggests you feel some anxiety about interpersonal and group communication.

*Source:* James C. McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 7th ed. (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1997).

“reasons” reflect three stages in the process of becoming anxious. Stage one reflects concerns before speaking. Stage two reflects concerns that come up immediately before and during a speech. And stage three concerns what happens after speaking.

## STAGE ONE: MANAGING ANXIETY BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Many factors can preoccupy your mind and influence your behavior before you speak. Major ones include a pessimistic attitude, inadequate preparation and practice, negative or insufficient experience, unrealistic goals, negative self-talk,

and misdirected concerns about what a speaker should focus on in preparing to speak. First we will discuss each of these sources of anxiety in turn. Then we will discuss two useful skills, visual imagery and relaxation techniques, that can help you manage your level of arousal.

### **Pessimistic Attitude**

Though actual physiological arousal is neither positive nor negative in itself, your perception of it can be either positive or negative. If you perceive and react to a situation positively, the arousal you feel will be perceived as a pleasant rather than an aversive sensation. What's more, it is not likely to exceed its optimal level. Conversely, if you perceive a situation negatively, you will perceive the arousal you feel as an unpleasant, even worrisome sensation. This increases the chances of arousal exceeding the optimal level for performance.

Research shows that the difference between being positively excited or negatively threatened by a situation such as public speaking is not a matter of arousal per se. It is a matter of how the arousal is initially interpreted. Consider riding a roller coaster. Some people love it; others hate it. If you were to measure arousal while people actually rode a roller coaster, however, you would find, in the beginning, very little difference in their level of physiological arousal. But as the ride progressed and their positive or negative interpretation of the experience began to kick in, differences in arousal would begin to appear. So it is with public speaking. If you perceive it as an opportunity to become a more skilled communicator, chances are you will be able to maintain an optimal level of arousal before, during, and following your speeches. Of course, the reverse is also true. If you perceive public speaking as a task you prefer to avoid, you may begin to experience mental and physical signs of anxiety well in advance of speaking.

### **Inadequate Preparation and Practice**

One reason for developing a pessimistic attitude about speaking is inadequate preparation and practice. Whereas most students would never dream of entering an athletic competition or taking a test crucial to their success in their major without preparation and practice, many seem to think that public speaking is different in this regard. So they put off preparing and practicing their speech until the last moment. Then they wonder why the act of speaking itself makes them nervous, prone to making mistakes, and negative about the overall experience.

Minimizing the importance of preparation and practice to the speaking experience only increases the amount of uncertainty surrounding the upcoming speech. Further, this uncertainty is a chief cause of the excessive arousal and anxiety that students begin to feel in the course of preparing to speak. Frequently, then, the real source of their discomfort when they actually do speak is a result of their own shortsightedness.

Sometimes students recognize the importance of preparation and practice but simply cannot confront the public speaking assignment. Much like writer's block, this aversion to preparing and practicing a speech occurs because students are afraid of what they'll feel when getting started. Perhaps they fear failure, or they just don't know where to begin. Whatever the reason, procrastination only postpones genuine speech anxiety. Procrastination also gives you less time to



The difference between a “thrill ride” and a “chill ride” is a matter of perception.

prepare. To avoid this vicious circle, we make the following two suggestions. First, choose the right topic. You should already know something about it, and you should be excited about it. This will help motivate you and keep you in a positive frame of mind. Second, overprepare. Always give yourself plenty of time to work on your speech. Make a commitment to become an expert on your topic. Then carry out the commitment with research that informs you. Don't be satisfied with knowing only enough about your topic to “just get by.”

### Negative or Insufficient Experience

Your prior experiences with any task influence how you approach and complete your present task. If your past experiences with public speaking proved both successful and personally rewarding, chances are you look forward to your speaking assignments in this class. But if your prior experiences with public speaking were unpleasant, you may harbor some doubt about your ability to succeed in this class. Finally, if you have had little or no opportunity to speak in public, you may be mildly or even considerably anxious about speaking before your teacher and peers.

The fact that your past efforts as a speaker were unrewarding, or even unpleasant, need not mean that your efforts in this class will prove likewise.

Practicing your speech is essential to building confidence.



The past need not dictate your future, assuming you are serious about becoming an effective speaker. Be realistic about your previous experience. You didn't learn to read and write overnight. Chances are you received a few psychological bumps and bruises in the process. You cannot expect to be an overnight speaking sensation, either. It takes commitment and effort. Thus, the fact that your previous experience with speaking was unpleasant does not mean that you cannot become an effective speaker by the end of this class.

By the same token, the fact that you think you have had little experience with the skills necessary for effective public speaking shouldn't make you overly anxious. Just as running is an extension of walking, public speaking is an extension and refinement of the communication skills you put to use daily. Through your class and this book, you can learn to successfully extend your everyday communication skills to the task of speaking in public.

Practice delivering your speech well in advance of presenting it. Athletes practice much more than they formally compete. They realize there is a crucial connection between practice and performance on game day.

### Unrealistic Goals

Another common source of anxiety for beginning speakers involves the goals they set for themselves. Though it is important to set high goals, they should also be realistic. Unrealistic goals can lead to irrational fears about the speaking

situation. Research shows that people who set realistic goals for themselves are less anxious and more successful than their counterparts with unrealistic goals.<sup>7</sup> This finding has also been reported in studies of elite athletes, businesspeople, and students enrolled in public speaking courses.

Speech-anxious students often hurt themselves by establishing goals that are not only unrealistic but also well beyond their reach or commitment. They tell themselves that despite their inexperience and unwillingness to make their speech class a priority, they must be the best in their class or get As exclusively. Such illogical and unrealistic goals, the research shows, harm much more than help students in coping with their speech anxiety.

## Negative Self-Talk

Closely aligned with the problem of unrealistic personal goals is the more widespread problem of self-defeating patterns of self-talk before the speech transaction. **Self-talk**, or communicating silently to yourself, is natural before you speak, while you speak, and even after you speak. However, it is neither natural nor helpful to beat up on yourself verbally in this process. **Negative self-talk**, a self-defeating pattern of intrapersonal communication, is common among people who report that they experience speech anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Negative self-talk can result from several causes, including the following:

- Worrying about factors beyond your control, including how other students are preparing for their speeches.
- Dwelling excessively on negative past experiences with public speaking.
- Spending too much time thinking about the alternative approaches you might take in preparing your speech.
- Becoming preoccupied with feelings of mental and physical anxiety, such as the inability to concentrate as you try to prepare for your speech.
- Thinking about the worst and usually most unlikely consequences of your speech—people laughing at you or ridiculing your speech.
- Having thoughts about or feelings of inadequacy as a public speaker.

Such negative thinking usually leads to three specific types of negative self-talk: self-criticizing, self-pressuring, and catastrophizing. Let's look at each.

**Self-Criticizing** Though realistic self-evaluation is important in self-improvement, it is well documented that many of us verbally question our self-worth or communication skills without sufficient cause. Without much evidence at all, we say negative things about ourselves, including that we're stupid and hopeless when it comes to speaking.

Not only students but people in all walks of life tell themselves they are poor speakers. Many of them do so despite the fact that they have never received any training in public speaking and have had few if any opportunities to speak in public. Their lack of skill doesn't justify their self-criticism.

**Self-Pressuring** We also bring undue and added pressure on ourselves through our self-talk, never once thinking about whether such added pressure will help us to perform better. We tell ourselves, for example, that we must be "the best speaker in the class" without first considering why. As it is, you invariably will

**self-talk** (sometimes referred to as intrapersonal communication) Communicating silently with oneself.

**negative self-talk** A self-defeating pattern of intrapersonal communication, including self-criticizing, self-pressuring, and catastrophizing statements.

experience moderate pressure and arousal when speaking publicly. Moderate pressure can help you reach the optimal level of arousal needed to deliver your speeches effectively. If you feel no pressure at all, you will lack the motivation to properly prepare and practice. However, telling yourself that you must be the best speaker in class, or that your speech has to be perfect, can add unnecessary and harmful pressure with which you will be unable to cope. Such added pressure, in fact, is like throwing fuel on a raging fire!

**Catastrophizing** People often blow things out of proportion when talking to themselves. They project that the consequences of their actions are likely to be far more drastic than is realistic. Anxious public speakers can be guilty of the same thing. For example, they may tell themselves that an upcoming speech is the worst assignment they have ever had. Or they may convince themselves that the low grade they are bound to receive will keep them out of graduate school.

As is the case with unrealistic goals, this kind of self-talk increases arousal and speech anxiety. The more negative your self-talk about the ultimate outcome of your speech, the more probable it is that you will exceed your optimal level of arousal.

### Misdirected Concerns

Finally, some research suggests that students who are highly anxious about speaking express very different concerns about an upcoming speech than do those who are only moderately anxious. For example, researchers found that highly anxious students were most concerned with how they would be evaluated, how long they should speak, what specific topic they should choose, whether they could use notes, and how much time they had to prepare.<sup>9</sup> In short, these students were concerned primarily with immediate factors that affect how they will be evaluated in the classroom situation. These concerns are classic signs of mental anxiety. Moreover, they suggest that truly anxious students may be so preoccupied with their misdirected concerns, they may neglect the preparation of their actual speech.

These researchers also found that students who reported little anxiety about speaking were most concerned with factors that would enable them to successfully attain their goals as speakers. In fact, these are the kinds of issues that even professional and highly paid speakers want to know about—for instance, the arrangement of the room, the availability of a microphone, and whether the audience would ask questions. To get a clearer idea of the concerns that make you most anxious, see the box “What Are the Sources of Your Speech Anxiety?”

### Before Speaking

If you are overly anxious before you speak, it's likely you will be even more so when you are actually called on to speak. Fortunately, there are some helpful tips you can follow to moderate your before-speaking anxiety.

- Be realistic about your goals and write them down. Becoming an effective speaker is a process. The goals for your first speech should be different from



#### **SPEECH COACH**

To hear more about these Tips and Tactics, go to Audio Tips and Tactics on your CD.

## What Are the Sources of Your Speech Anxiety?

Listed below are common sources of speech anxiety. As you read each item, consider how much it contributes to the anxiety you experience about public speaking. Rate each item on a scale of 1 to 10, from least important to most important.

Sources of Speech Anxiety	Least Important/Most Important									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Your attitude toward speaking	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lack of preparation and practice	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Previous experiences with speaking —lack of or bad experiences	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Unrealistic goals	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Perception of your audience as hostile or unsympathetic	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Negative self-talk	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Misdirected concerns with how you will be evaluated	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Rearrange the items in order of importance. Use this hierarchy to better understand the sources of your speech anxiety. What steps can you take to address and change your patterns of thought and behavior?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

those you write down before your second and third speeches. Regardless of which speech you are making, your goals must be grounded in your potential to improve as a speaker, as well as how much effort you are willing to make to realize your potential.

- Inventory your routine self-talk as you prepare to speak. Note what kinds of things you routinely say to yourself and ask yourself: Do these statements make me more or less anxious about my speech? Substitute negative statements you routinely make with **constructive self-talk** modeled after the examples in Table 3.1.
- Consult with your instructor about your concerns and the degree to which they are valid. Don't assume your instructor shares your beliefs about what is and isn't essential to your success. Finally, do not fall victim to the misguided idea that you will appear stupid if you seek your instructor's counsel.

**constructive self-talk** The use of positive coping statements instead of negative self-talk.

There are at least two other skills you can use in advance of speaking: (1) visual imagery and (2) relaxation techniques. These skills are excellent complements to the preceding tips and deserve additional comment.

**TABLE 3.1** Constructive Self-Talk Before You Speak

<i>Prior to Practice</i>	<i>Actual Practice</i>	<i>During Behavioral Rehearsal</i>
Get off to a good start: Prepare early . . . don't put it off.	Time for some imagery.	Use my coping statements.
This will be good for me.	Let's run through this in my mind's eye.	Speak slowly and clearly.
I like this topic.	Visualize the opening and hear myself sharing the thesis statement.	First work on knowing content.
Rough outline first . . . there's time to polish later.	Visualize the connect and preview.	Okay, now I know it.
I have plenty of information.	Okay, hear and see myself make each point.	Make eye contact with people.
I bet my information will be pretty new to my classmates.	Try to see myself from the audience's point of view.	Speak conversationally.
I've uncovered a lot of interesting facts.	Visualize the summary and close.	Have fun with it.
Lay it out logically.	Try it again, but this time use relaxation imagery too.	Be myself but under control.
Time to rewrite.		

**visual imagery** The process of mentally seeing (imagining) oneself confidently and successfully performing an action or a series of actions.

## Visual Imagery

**Visual imagery** is another way to rehearse your speech. It is the process of mentally seeing (imagining) yourself performing an action or a series of actions. Instead of practicing your speech out loud, you visually imagine yourself confidently and successfully giving the speech. At the 1998 Winter Olympiad, TV viewers were treated to pictures of Tara Lipinski and Michele Kwan, the gold and silver medalists in figure skating, both rehearsing through visual imagery before their performances. You may have caught a glimpse of them as they moved their heads from side to side and up and down with eyes closed, while seated backstage. Ice skating is the tip of the iceberg in terms of sports in which elite athletes include visual imagery as a part of their everyday practice. Visual imagery is widely practiced in archery, baseball, basketball, football, golf, gymnastics, hockey, kayaking, skiing, and snow boarding. Athletes who use visual imagery include golfer Tiger Woods, quarterback Payton Manning, and professional ice skater Kristi Yamaguchi (see the box “An Athlete’s Approach to Anxiety”).

More to the point of this book, however, is the case of Dr. Loretta Malandro. The founder of a successful communication consulting firm, Dr. Malandro travels worldwide as a professional speaker. One of the things she tries to do before each speaking engagement is to visually imagine herself giving the speech. Even if it means getting up before dawn, for example, she tries to run five miles and visualize her upcoming presentation as she runs. Because Dr. Malandro does this routinely, she sees not only herself as she shares her message but also the positive feedback she is receiving from her audience.

Because it is yet another way to reduce your uncertainty about an upcoming speech, visual imagery can also assist you in controlling your level of anxiety and arousal. This technique works best when you are in a relaxed state and familiar

## An Athlete's Approach to Anxiety: *Kristi Yamaguchi*

Champion figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi not only practices physically for a performance, she practices mentally in order to cope with anxiety. Here, she describes her techniques:

I usually get by myself before I go out for a routine. I walk through the program, visualizing myself completing all the moves. Right before a performance, I start talking to myself: "Okay, get out there, skate like it's an everyday practice."

The techniques Kristi Yamaguchi uses illustrate the importance of practice and mental imaging in dealing with anxiety. Notice that she mentally rehearses her moves right before a performance. She also engages in constructive self-talk when she tells herself that a competition is like an everyday practice. How do you think Yamaguchi's techniques could be successfully used by a public speaker? What can we learn as public speakers from the ways that elite athletes deal with the enormous pressure under which they must perform?

Source: American Health © 1992 by Steve McKee.



with the content of your speech. It involves controlled visualization of your actual speaking situation, which will require practice on your part. The idea is to see yourself during all phases of your speech. For example, you might first visualize yourself seated at your desk, relaxed but appropriately aroused as you wait your turn to speak. Next, you might visualize yourself leaving your desk, moving to the front of the room, confidently facing your audience, and introducing your speech. From here on, you would visualize yourself speaking—moving, gesturing, and making eye contact with individual members of your audience right up to your conclusion. Finally, you would see your audience and teacher enthusiastically responding to your presentation. Once you become adept at visualizing, you can even add sound to the picture in your mind's eye. Hearing yourself take command of an audience as you turn a phrase or smoothly make a transition from one point to another will enhance the impact of visual imagining.

Visual imagery works best as a complement to actual practice. Study after study shows that visual imagery actually enhances behavioral rehearsal.<sup>10</sup> As a result, you will want to include it as part of your preparation and practice routine.

### Making Effective Use of Relaxation Techniques

As discussed earlier, butterflies, a racing heart, trembling hands, and weak knees are the result of the excessive adrenaline that is pumped into your system when you are overly aroused. One of the best ways to prevent these symptoms is to condition your body to relax in situations that are, characteristically, overly arousing. You can accomplish this in one of several ways.



Exercise is a great way to manage the stress and anxiety you feel in anticipation of speaking.

**Exercise** The first way to help your body relax is to engage in some form of intense exercise one to two hours before you speak. The effects of physical exercise on physical and mental well-being are well known. Intense exercise assists us in decreasing signs of stress and has been linked to improved thinking and performance, regardless of the task.

**Relaxation Imagery** If exercise is either inconvenient or impractical, another way to induce relaxation before you speak is to use relaxation imagery. Imagery is not the same as merely thinking. Imagery involves pictures, whereas thinking is a verbal process. Relaxation imagery involves visualizing pleasant and calming situations. Lying in a hammock or on the beach during a warm summer day are two examples of such pleasant and calming situations. If you were to visually linger on such situations, you would find your body becoming increasingly relaxed. As a result, you would significantly lower the level of arousal customarily felt as a result of the day's activities.

This latter point is important. As a busy college student, you may find your upcoming speech to be the most significant but not the sole source of arousal you experience during the day. By practicing relaxation imagery before you speak, you can reduce the arousal that began to climb with the start of your day.

**Muscular Relaxation** This technique involves systematically tensing and relaxing the various muscle groups, as is visually demonstrated on your CD. It usually begins with the muscles in your face and neck, then gradually moves to your middle and lower torso. The idea behind this technique is to teach your body the difference between tension and relaxation. By first tensing and then relaxing your muscles systematically, you can also condition your muscles to relax even under the most stressful circumstances.

There's a good reason for practicing muscular relaxation. When we tense up, the range of movement in our muscles is restricted. They don't work as they are intended. In a game of basketball, this is seen when a free-throw shooter hits the front of the rim, loses "touch," or puts up an air ball. With a speaker, this is evident either in the absence of movement or gesturing or in movement and gesturing that are awkward and unnecessary.

### Combining Techniques

By combining relaxation with visual imagery, you can enhance the effectiveness of both techniques. You will come to associate the speaking situation with relaxing images rather than anxiety-producing ones.

These techniques also work best when they become a habitual routine that you practice as you prepare to speak. Elite athletes don't use them only before they are about to compete; speakers shouldn't put off using them until the night before they speak. The research is clear. These techniques will serve you well only if you commit to their systematic use.

## STAGE TWO: MANAGING ANXIETY DURING YOUR SPEECH

Some of the same factors that give rise to pessimism before a speech also undermine the speech transaction itself. Negative self-talk frequently plagues speakers as they speak. But there are other factors we haven't discussed, for example, inaccurate perceptions of the audience and unjustified concerns about appearance.

### The Audience

A recent study confirms that many beginning speakers view their audience as hostile toward them.<sup>11</sup> They convince themselves that the members of their audience are just waiting for them to trip over their feet, lose their train of thought, blow a quotation, or mumble through a sentence. Along the same lines, it is not uncommon for beginning speakers to read into the nonverbal feedback they receive from their audience such false conclusions as "they're bored to tears" or "they think I'm terrible." This is anything but the case, of course. Audiences, with rare exception, want speakers to succeed and are silently rooting for them to do so.

In recognition of this fact, consider the case of the late Mary Martin, a well-known and highly praised stage actress who first popularized the Broadway productions of *Peter Pan* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. She used to do something before a performance that you may wish to try. Just before going on stage, she would close her eyes, take a deep breath, and say 100 times to herself, "I love



### SPEECH COACH

For an example of relaxation techniques, see segment 3.1 on your CD.

Appropriate dress can greatly enhance your feelings of confidence.



my audience.” Next she would repeat the process, but this time tell herself, “My audience loves me.”

Beginning speakers also may convince themselves that their audience expects more from them than they can deliver. Such expectations about an audience can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The students you face are in the same boat with you and want you to succeed as much as you do. If you still need convincing, consider how you feel when you are a member of an audience gathered to watch a public performance. Do you silently root for the performer to fail miserably? Do you take perverse joy in seeing the performer make an obvious mistake? Do you expect more from the person than he or she could ever deliver? We didn’t think so!

### Appearance

This is an appearance-obsessed culture. We are not so naïve as to recommend that you try to convince yourself that appearance is unimportant. However, we do recommend that you try to be reasonable in this regard. Although you cannot transform your body type or radically alter your appearance for your speech class, you can dress appropriately for the occasion. All too often we see students

**TABLE 3.2** Constructive Self-Talk During Your Speech

Get comfortable.  
 Speak slowly.  
 I know my speech.  
 I was nervous to start, but I've calmed down.  
 It's okay if I'm not perfect.  
 The audience is interested in what I have to say.  
 This is easier than I thought.  
 Make eye contact.  
 Just like I practiced.  
 So far so good.  
 Don't rush it.  
 Time to summarize.  
 Take your time.  
 Not bad . . . not bad at all.

in our own classes whose inappropriate dress detracts unnecessarily from what they hope to say. They become self-conscious in the process, increasing their chances of becoming overly anxious.

Appropriate dress enhances your credibility. It also can help you feel more confident. Both are positive outcomes, ones that should reduce rather than increase feelings of speech anxiety. Thus, the easiest way to overcome concerns about your physical appearance is to dress for the occasion.

### Self-Talk

Just as you use self-talk before a speech, you may also talk to yourself as you actually deliver a speech. Again, you want to avoid negative self-talk in this regard. It's important to note that your audience will not be nearly as critical of you as you will be of yourself. Your audience is also less likely to pick up on mistakes than you are, because they don't know your speech like you know it. When you make mistakes, which even the most polished speakers do, avoid criticizing yourself. Refrain from saying such things as, "Way to go, stupid," or, "Why am I screwing up?"

Instead, as you speak, try to use statements such as those suggested in Table 3.2. These *process statements* will help to keep you in the moment and on track. They will also help to keep your mind from wandering or dwelling on minor mistakes your audience probably did not catch.

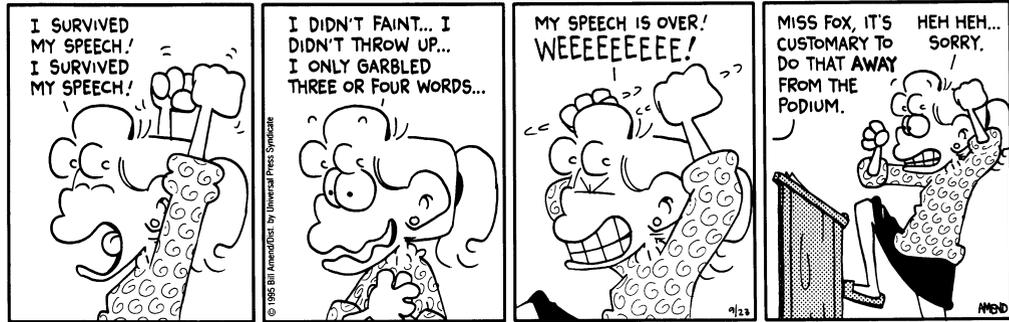
### While You Speak

- Take time to get comfortable before you start to speak. Take a couple of deep breaths, make eye contact with a friendly face, and smile. Also take a shoulders-width stance and try to stand tall.
- Don't obsess on your audience. Important as the audience is to your success, you need to keep their importance in perspective. Remember that your



### SPEECH COACH

To hear more about these Tips and Tactics, go to Audio Tips and Tactics on your CD.



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audience wants you to succeed and that the audience is uncomfortable when you are uncomfortable.

- Dress appropriately for the occasion. Not only will it help make you feel more confident, but it will also increase your credibility with your audience.
- If you engage in self-talk, follow the advice in Table 3.2. Talk to yourself about what's going well. Tell yourself that you are okay and that your audience is with you.

## STAGE THREE: MANAGING ANXIETY AFTER YOUR SPEECH

Even experienced speakers can find themselves in a mental fog following their speech. They may find it hard to concentrate or stay focused on the comments directed toward them.

What takes place after a speech will affect the way you approach and deliver your next speech. Comments directed to you by peers and your instructor can help you prepare your next speech, including: (1) the goals you set, (2) preparation and practice, and (3) your level of confidence as you take on these tasks. Constructive comments cannot help you, however, if you fail to hear and process them in the first place.

Anxiety interferes with the ability to listen and accurately process what you hear. To get the most out of immediate feedback following a speech, we offer the following tips.

### *After Speaking*



#### **SPEECH COACH**

To hear more about these Tips and Tactics, go to Audio Tips and Tactics on your CD.

- Take several deep breaths when you go back to your seat. This will help to bring down your heart rate.
- Minimize self-talk. You can mentally review your presentation later.
- Look for your instructor's eye contact and tell yourself to relax as you listen to your instructor and classmates.
- Write down what is said. You can check with your instructor later to determine the accuracy of the feedback you recorded.

**TABLE 3.3** Constructive Self-Talk After You Speak

That wasn't half-bad.  
 Find your seat.  
 Smile, take some deep breaths.  
 Don't forget to take notes from the feedback I get.  
 Talk with my instructor.  
 Don't forget the "did well" and "room to improve" list.  
 Go back over the speech tonight in my mind's eye.  
 Write down goals for next time.

- Within 24 hours review the entire process, and make a list with two columns: (1) things I did well and (2) areas where I realistically can improve. Refer to this list as you prepare for your next assignment.
- Practice self-talk patterned after the statements you see in Table 3.3.

## SUMMARY

Speech anxiety is a result of our subjective interpretation of the arousal we experience when called on to speak publicly. Although some degree of arousal is necessary to prepare and deliver an effective speech, too much of it can lead to psychological side effects, such as excessive worry, and physical side effects, such as trembling hands. Too much arousal can lead to a debilitating level of speech anxiety. Managing speech anxiety involves:

- developing a positive attitude toward speaking
- committing to practice and preparation and avoiding procrastination
- replacing negative self-talk before, during, and following a speech with constructive self-talk
- establishing realistic goals given your commitment to your class
- recognizing and accepting the fact that your audience wants you to succeed
- focusing on what you and your instructor agree are important considerations in the development and delivery of your speech
- combining visual imagery with behavioral rehearsal
- combining imagery with relaxation techniques
- making the preceding skills and techniques part of your routine before, during, and after a speech

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING: EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES

1. In a short paper, describe the relationship between physiological arousal and speech anxiety and give examples of both physical and mental symptoms of anxiety. Be sure to define anxiety and distinguish it from speech anxiety.



### SPEECH COACH

To evaluate your understanding of this chapter, see the Quizzes on your CD.



### SPEECH COACH

For a review of key terms in this chapter, see the Key Terms Flashcards on your CD.

2. The chapter lists six common sources of speech anxiety and steps for controlling them. For your next speaking assignment, identify at least one such source of anxiety that concerns you and make an effort to remedy it. For example, if you have a tendency to procrastinate, make sure you start your speech sooner than usual. After the speech, assess how the remedy worked in alleviating at least one source of public speaking anxiety.
3. Before your next speech, make a list of the negative self-talk you have engaged in regarding speech assignments. Then come up with a series of constructive self-talk statements you will use in preparing for and while giving your next speech. Your instructor may ask you to turn in your list before you speak.
4. Two of the most convenient relaxation techniques you can use are relaxation imagery and muscular relaxation. Both initially require a quiet place and time where you will not be interrupted. This exercise allows you to practice relaxation on your own or with a friend. It is sometimes useful to have someone read the steps to you so that you can completely relax.
  - a. Find a reclining chair or couch where you can make yourself comfortable.
  - b. Lower or turn off bright lights.
  - c. With your eyes closed, tense and then relax your muscles in this order: face, neck and shoulders, biceps and triceps, forearms, wrists and hands, chest, solar plexus, buttocks/hamstrings, quadriceps, calves, ankles and feet.
  - d. Once you are completely relaxed, imagine a peaceful setting in which you feel calm. Learn to hold this image for as long as you can. After a minute or two, move on to the next step.
  - e. Imagine your speech class. If you feel any sign of anxiety, return to the preceding image.
  - f. Continue to imagine your speech class and add yourself to the picture. See yourself calmly seated, enjoying others as they speak.
  - g. See yourself writing down the requirements of an assigned speech. See yourself involved with the various stages of preparation, including seeing yourself practice.
  - h. See yourself waiting to be called on, aroused but not anxious.
  - i. See yourself walking to the front of the room, turning to face your audience, smiling, and opening your presentation with impact.
  - j. See yourself speaking energetically, gesturing, and using your eyes, face, and voice.
  - k. See students and your instructor listening attentively.
  - l. See yourself concluding and your audience responding with genuine applause.

*Practice this series of steps at least twice a week for 15–25 minutes each time. Remember, any time you begin to feel anxious during this exercise, replace whatever image you're holding with a pleasant and relaxing one.*

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