

4. Video clip from *The Tonight Show*; [http://www.makezine.com/blog/archive/2005/05/video\\_morse\\_cod.html](http://www.makezine.com/blog/archive/2005/05/video_morse_cod.html).
5. “Morse Texter.” 2005. [http://laivakoira.typepad.com/blog/2005/05/morse\\_texter.html](http://laivakoira.typepad.com/blog/2005/05/morse_texter.html).

### See Also

- See the excellent Morse code page in the Wikipedia for information on niceties such as word and sentence spacing and timing, punctuation, special symbols, accented letters, abbreviations, and so on: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse\\_code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code).



### Harness Stage Fright

At some point, nearly everyone has to speak to a group about something, but most of us find ourselves overwhelmed with fear when the time comes. However, if you reduce the fear to a manageable level, you can channel its energy into making your presentations more powerful.

If someone walked up to you today and asked you to give a lunchtime talk about your favorite hobby tomorrow, how would you feel? If you're like most people, you'd probably think fast about an excuse to get out of it, and if you couldn't, you'd lose sleep tonight. Public speaking is terrifying to many people, even in such a low-pressure setting and with a topic that we find pleasant.

Because so many people fear public speaking, overcoming and harnessing that fear can give you a distinct advantage. It's a powerful skill, and it comes into play for almost everyone at some time in their lives. Most businesspeople will be called on to give a presentation about something in their careers, for example. Even if you don't have that kind of job and aren't an actor, stage fright can sneak up on you if you attend a meeting of your church or neighborhood association, take a class and need to ask questions, or decide to lead a Girl Scout troop.



Even writer's block can be a form of stage fright, proving that you don't need to face a roomful of people to use these techniques.

### In Action

The best basic strategy to handling stage fright is to first reduce it to a manageable level and then to use what's left to make your performance more powerful—to give you “stage presence.” You should perform some of the

following techniques well ahead of time, some soon before you speak, and some right before you start and during your performance.

**Make notes.** As far ahead of time as you can, make notes and know them. Take time to organize your thoughts ahead of time. You'll reap huge benefits from this in terms of reducing your fear when it's time to speak. You don't have to write the whole thing out (and sometimes you won't really have time), but even a few keywords or an outline will help you find your place if you start to panic. It will also help you be sure that you say everything you want to say without repeating yourself and that you present your ideas in a logical order.

Don't procrastinate about making your notes, because you'll want to give yourself some time to use them in preparation. After you make your notes, take some time to go over them so that you know what's there.

Pay special attention to the beginning and end of your talk and any transitions between sections. Knowing the beginning well will help get you over the obstacle of getting started without panicking; transitions will help you move on if you need to; and knowing the end will help you leave the audience with a good impression, no matter what happens in the middle of the presentation.

**Imagine pitfalls.** Think about things that could possibly go wrong and figure out an emergency plan. Some people avoid thinking about anything that could go wrong because they think it will make them panic. It can be a little scary to imagine potential problems, but there are two main reasons to do so. The first is to use it as a "dress rehearsal" so that you can figure out ahead of time what you might do in case of trouble. Then, you don't have to worry so much about the problems, because if one crops up, you already know how to react.

The second reason to imagine what could go wrong is to gain perspective. When it comes down to it, the worst that can happen is usually not that bad. Seldom is a life hanging in the balance on the effects of what you're getting ready to say. Most of the time, the worst that can happen is that you'll be slightly embarrassed if something goes wrong. Given how many times all of us are embarrassed in our life, that's hardly a dire threat. Some of the other hacks in this book can be tremendously helpful in disarming irrational fears, such as learning about the ABC model of emotion [Hack #57] and learning to avoid cognitive distortions [Hack #58].

**Remove sources of stress.** Anticipate trivial and tangential sources of stress and anxiety, and remove them in advance. In other words, don't make it any

harder than it has to be. Make sure you get enough sleep the night before you speak. Make sure you eat a little beforehand, but not too much. Make sure your clothes are clean and appropriate, and that your appearance is acceptable.

Take care of all the little details that can leach away your attention and energy, so you can focus on the task at hand. Many of these basic concerns, such as paying attention to sleep, nutrition, and exercise [Hack #69], will also improve your general brainpower.

**Consider your audience realistically.** Remember that the audience wants to be on your side—really! We imagine that when we speak, the audience is ready to criticize and humiliate us, waiting for us to make a mistake, poised to laugh at us. In fact, most of the time, people relate to you when they watch you and hope you'll do well.

To find evidence, you don't have to go any further than your own imagination. When you see someone speak or act, and they blunder or forget their lines, don't you find yourself holding your breath for them, and aren't you happy and relieved when they recover and go on to do well? Most people are like you: they are basically decent people who don't want to see anyone hurt or humiliated. They'll feel the same when you're the one in the spotlight.

**Keep perspective.** Take yourself seriously, but not too seriously. If you're going to speak, you have a reason to do so that matters, either to you or to someone else. Respect yourself or whoever asked you to speak, and approach your task with some appreciation that you'll make an impression. Don't be diffident and don't apologize for speaking at all, or for minor glitches such as coughing or stumbling on a word; doing so only takes up time and puts the focus on the mistake, not on what you're there to do.

On the other hand, again, most of the time your speech isn't a life-or-death matter, and it's certainly not going to change history if your tongue trips. Be ready to brush such things off and see the humor in your situation, and you'll keep the audience on your side.

**Mind your body.** Just before you go on, work out physical kinks a little. Don't go into your speech out of breath, but take a moment to stretch, breathe deeply, and even take a little walk before you start. You'll relax your body, improve your blood flow, increase oxygen to your brain, and make yourself more alert.

**Feel your fear.** With preparation, you've reduced your fear to a more manageable level. Now, go ahead and let yourself feel it a little. Let yourself get

excited and feel it physically. Try not to panic, but go ahead and let through some of the sensations.

**Reframe your fear.** Rethink your fear-induced physical sensations. This is possibly the trickiest part of the hack, and the heart of it.

Now that you can feel some arousal, try to turn it into excitement. Pull your thoughts away from your fears and fix your imagination on your positive goals. Do you want to change someone's mind with your arguments? Do you want to express something that's important to you? Do you want to teach people about something you love? Remember that you have an opportunity now, and isn't that great? Remember what's causing you to go through with this, even though you're scared; there must be something behind it that you care about quite a lot.

Slowly, as you realize and picture everything good that could happen as a result of your performance, you'll feel the fear changing. The feelings won't go away completely, but with luck and focus, they will turn into a happier sort of excitement, the kind you feel before you do something fun. Blend your passion for your subject matter and your hoped-for results with the excited feelings, and let that fill you and carry you forward. Again, the ABC model of emotion [Hack #57] can help you do this with more sophistication and control.

**Use good body language.** Be aware of what you're projecting with your physical self. Hold your head up, walk with confidence, smile if it kills you, and don't fidget. Looking the part helps you to project your energy as positive confidence and command of the stage, and that's what your audience will see, even if you're still scared inside.

**Fake it till you make it.** In other words, *act* like a confident speaker, no matter how you feel. Pretend you're anyone you admire, move as you imagine a confident person moves, speak like that person would speak, and so on.

Not only will you fool a lot of people into believing that you know exactly what you're doing, but also the effect will work on you, too. Stepping into that person's shoes actually makes you feel more confident and able as well.

**Keep breathing.** Force yourself to pause between sentences to take a good deep breath from time to time while you're speaking. You might think this takes a long time and looks silly, but the odds are that you're speaking too fast anyway.

Pausing for breath forces you to slow down and think about what you're doing, check your notes, and generally be present in the moment. Many times, your audience will read your breath as a dramatic pause anyway, which gives more power to what you're saying. At the very least, it gives them a moment to take in and understand your words. It can also help you reduce stuttering and bad speaking habits like filling every possible pause with “um” or some other sound.

**Move on.** If something goes wrong, pick up and go on. Dwelling on a mistake only magnifies it. You don't want to steal focus from what you're there to talk about, so correct the mistake if necessary, and move away from it as quickly as possible. Don't fumble, lose your concentration, apologize, or panic further; just move on.

**Finish well.** Finish as well as you possibly can. No matter what kind of disasters you believe have happened while you were onstage, make the best impression you can at the end. Plan to end your talk with a good story or a strong argument. Never end by saying, “I guess that's about it,” or something similarly mushy.

Finally, after you've said the last thing you have to say, stop talking, look into the audience, and smile. You can then take questions, walk confidently away, sit down, or do whatever you need to do. Just be sure you remain “in character” until you really are off the stage, in whatever form that takes.

### How It Works

Why does stage fright grip us so tightly and irrationally? Probably because we form our feelings about it in childhood. Young children speak to people freely and express their thoughts as well as they can, without reticence. However, most of us got our first experience speaking to a group at school. We probably had in the audience a teacher ready to grade our performance and classmates who would certainly make fun of it if we made a mistake or looked silly at all—partly because making fun of us would help quiet their own fears about speaking.

So, we learned to believe that if someone in authority watched us, we would be judged, and that the rest of the audience was hostile and waiting to pounce on any slip-up. Reminding ourselves that we're reacting to old information that's no longer relevant to the present situation can help quell those deep-seated fears.

## Harness Stage Fright

The technique of channeling stage fright into performance power stems from the idea that the body's state of arousal is interpreted by the mind within a framework of emotional reaction and knowledge about the current situation. Under stress, the body creates a surge of adrenaline, pounding heartbeat, heightened senses, faster breathing, and related reactions. Whether we feel those physical effects as fear, exhilaration, sexual arousal, rage, or something else depends on how we feel at the time and what we believe is going on. It's part of the reason that some people are turned on sexually by danger or pain, or have a good time at a scary movie or on a frightening roller coaster.

Psychologists Schachter and Singer showed that situational factors cause us to frame physiological effects.<sup>1</sup> They gave a mild stimulant to a group of subjects and then placed some of the subjects with a person who exhibited anger and others with someone exhibiting happiness. In both groups, more of the people who had been given the stimulant self-reported strong feelings mirroring the "emotional leader" than those who hadn't received the stimulant that produced the physiological effects of arousal.

A similar experiment by Dutton and Aron showed how the mind can shift the effects from one kind of arousal to another.<sup>2</sup> In this study, an attractive woman interviewed men, some on a swaying rope bridge 200 feet over a river and some on firm ground. During the course of the interview, she gave the men her phone number. More than 60% of the men who talked to her on the rope bridge phoned her afterward, compared to 30% of the men who talked to her on the ground. They had interpreted the heightened arousal level that was produced by the more dangerous situation as greater attraction.

With the techniques in this hack, you're replicating the effects of these studies intentionally. By consciously reframing physical sensations, we can often convert one emotional reaction to another, in this case transforming fear into excitement that we can transmit through our performance.

### In Real Life

I learned a great deal about acting and public speaking in high school and college. I performed in community and semi-professional theater, took acting classes, and competed in public speaking tournaments. I didn't grow up to be an actor or a professional speaker, but I've found the experiences I had and techniques I learned to be invaluable in later life. To name only a few situations where the skills have served me well, I've used them to:

- Teach informal classes
- Participate well in classes as a student

- Make a good impact in job interviews
- Conquer social anxiety in meeting new people
- Persuade groups about issues I found important

In fact, these techniques have become so much a part of me that it was difficult for me to dissect them to write the hack! I consider it some of the most important training I've ever had. If you're a parent, this is also a strong endorsement to encourage your kids to study some acting, debate, and speech techniques while they're young.

### End Notes

1. Schachter, S., and J. E. Singer. 1962. "Cognitive, social and physiological determinants of emotional states." *Psychological Review*, 69: 379–399.
2. Dutton, D. G., and A. P. Aron. 1974. "Some evidence for heightened sexual attraction under conditions of high anxiety." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30: 510–517.

—Marty Hale-Evans



### HACK #55 Ask Stupid Questions

At school or at work, we often feel as though we are “drinking from the firehose” when we have to learn a new extensive or complicated subject or task. In these situations, the least stupid thing we can do is ask stupid questions.

Human beings have acquired several different kinds of learning during the course of our evolution. Being able to acquire short-term disposable knowledge (such as where we left our spear) without cluttering up our brain with useless trivia might have been just as important to our survival as learning the long-term skills (such as building a fire or knowing when to plant crops) commonly associated with survival. As modern humans, if we learn something and then forget it before we want to, it might be because our brain never indexed it for long-term use.

Often, this occurs because information is coming at us so fast that our brain just can't keep up. Studies have shown that our short-term memory can in fact hold only between five and nine items [Hack #11], depending on the information.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if your short-term memory is full and you are given new items to learn, your brain will be forced to sacrifice. This hack provides some advice that will help you control the incoming flow of information so that your brain has a chance to index it in your long-term memory.