

Public speaking's great big sin-bin



By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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If you *really* want to improve your presenting skills, volunteer to judge a public speaking contest. There's nothing quite like evaluating 10 consecutive speeches to hammer home the differences between a good speech and a *ruddy awful* one.

And the differences are basic fundamentals. We're not talking higher-level oratory technique here. The division between solidly good speeches and utter clunkers is usually just the presence, or absence, of some surprisingly basic mistakes.

And here they are... Relegate these six errors to the great sin-bin of public speaking and your own presentations will be significantly enhanced:

1. Looking like you don't want to be there:

If you hope to sell your thoughts and ideas from the platform, you *have* to begin by selling yourself. Think of it like a first date, in which your audience is your potential sweetheart. Would you *really* win her over if you looked uncomfortable, pressurised, like you didn't want to be there?

As a speaker, you are a sort of mood-device. You set the emotional tone in the room; hot or cold, thrilling or boring; it's up to you. Ever seen a speaker lose their train of thought and look embarrassed? Could you feel the effect on the audience? But portray confidence and enjoyment and your audience will at once feel at ease in your hands.

2. Speaking as if to five-year-olds:

Treat your audiences like adults. Inexperienced speakers tend to fall back on an odd habit of over-explaining subjects, over-justifying points, and generally addressing their audiences as though they were gibbering juveniles who'd never read a book.

Let's go back to the 'first-date' dynamic. Would she swoon if you introduced discussion topics as though she were new to planet earth? Of course not! You'd get your spaghetti delivered to your lap. Audience buy-in is the same. You must assume a certain level of knowledge and competence if you hope to win them over. You need to flatter their perceived level of intelligence.

Preaching is out, too. It's not the same as persuading. The ideal tone is: "I have exciting ideas to share today!" and not, "Do as I say or men in dark suits will come for you."

3. The inward-looking eye:

When speakers are uncertain of their content, they tend to develop facial paralysis. Their gaze turns inward as they search for the next point. The effect on the audience is complete disconnect.

You must project your energy outward. Remembering words is only half of your job. Selling them with enthusiasm is the balance, and it's done through vocal tone, eye contact and facial expressions.

4. Dinosaur body language:

Body language is important. Enthusiasm is visually appealing. But have you ever seen a speaker use clunky overacting to tell a story?

"I walked down the street," [imitates a speed-walker pumping his arms and bobbing], "Then I reached a taaaall building [leans backward and looks up, hand to brow].

If you used such exaggerated gestures when telling a story to a friend, he'd excuse himself politely and go call the nice men with butterfly nets. So don't do it on stage. By all means, move with energy. But your movements must look real - *authentic* - or your audiences' built-in authenticity-detectors will go haywire.

5. Exaggerated realisations:

Perhaps this happens more often in motivational speeches than in business keynotes. But I've seen it happen in the latter, too: the old, "And all of a sudden, it dawned on me...!" gambit.

It is very rare that people stop mid scenario and have big epiphanies, *a la* JD talking to himself in *Scrubs*. Try to eliminate 'All of a sudden I realised...' structures from your speaking vocabulary.

The worst example I ever saw was a speech in which three great adventures allegedly happened to one person, within one day, leaving him with a series of Chicken Soup platitudes. The audience just didn't buy it. Life's not like that.

6. A constant stop-start rhythm:

Writing coaches always tell students to vary the length of their sentences: some short, others longer. If every sentence is exactly the same length, the tone becomes annoyingly staccato. Don't do it.

Worse still is the series of lists, which typically follows a pattern like, "And then I... And then I... And then I..."

Effective speakers learn to pause after profound thoughts, but ineffective ones simply pause after every sentence, and it doesn't work. You need a certain roller-coaster of increasing and decreasing speed, short, power statements alongside runaway emotional outpourings. It helps with musicality and creating the perception of enthusiasm.

Effectively cull these quibbles from your speeches and you will be leagues ahead of most speakers. Master just the first point - looking like you *want* to be there - and the difference will be noticeable.

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

Douglas Kruger is the bestselling author of nine business books with Penguin, including the global release: *Virus-Proof Your Small Business*. Meet him at www.douglaskruger.com or email info@douglaskrugerspeaker.com
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For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>