

SPEAK EFFECTIVELY AT CONFERENCES

How to Plan, Practice, and Perform

SHEEN BRISALS

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Speak Effectively At Conferences: How to Plan, Practice, and Perform

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To every conference that allowed me to share my learnings and to the thousands of audience members who applauded me unconditionally, I am indebted to your generosity.

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Preface

My career as a software engineer began in Bangalore—now known as Bengaluru—the so-called Silicon Valley of India. Like many students and graduates, I participated in various discussions, meetings, and presentations, both as an audience member and a presenter.

In the mid-90s, I spent time in the UK assisting a team in developing a new product. As someone who had rarely encountered various English accents, I put extra effort into *listening* and *observing* how some communicated or presented effectively.

Upon my return, my team members asked me to explain my experience with this project in detail. I viewed this as an opportunity to experiment with some of the effectiveness measures I learned during the visit. Rather than immediately walking to a corner and discussing my experience, I *organized* my thoughts to *prepare* thoroughly and *present* in a way that would make an impact.

The applause from my colleagues and their appreciative words at the end of my presentation still resonate in my ears. In that moment, I realized how a well-planned and executed presentation can influence the listeners.

Fast forward many years into the new millennium. Technology advanced, topics multiplied, travel became affordable, and conferences reached most people's doorsteps. Many aspiring speakers now have a better chance to present at events. While this illustrates how people's aspirations can become a reality, I have felt disappointed on several occasions as an audience member.

Many aspiring speakers waste their golden opportunities by failing to make a lasting impression. They don't recognize how fortunate they are to share

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their knowledge with an audience on stage. They approach the stage with misplaced confidence and are underprepared. They fail to engage with the audience, boast about their achievements, and wrap up their session in half the time, leaving the audience feeling frustrated.

Sadly, there's another group: capable individuals who have never reached a stage in their career or life. They don't know how to find opportunities or make excuses to hide behind fear.

For several years, I have considered sharing my conference experience to help with the above. A few years ago, while organizing my thoughts, I became interested in a different opportunity to share my technical knowledge. This led me to co-author *Serverless Development on AWS* for O'Reilly. After its publication and promotional activities, I devoted most of my time to writing this book—The Speaker Book!

But how do I wish to assist aspiring speakers?

To me, conference speaking is not just about focusing on the time spent on stage. As a speaker, you don't come alive only while on stage and hibernate until the next appearance. Although your on-stage performance is the pinnacle that presents you to the world, you must also learn to manage your actions and activities before and after the event. For this reason, I emphasize the significance of the Speaker Lifecycle in the book.

Speaking effectively to resonate with the audience is a collaborative effort. I strive to integrate all these elements into a book, and **Speak Effectively at Conferences** is the outcome. It provides a structured approach to help you navigate Planning, Practicing, and Performing effectively on stage!

Welcome aboard!

Conventions Used in the Book



This picture represents an important note. Indeed, a notepad to scribble on!



This picture conveys a valuable tip. It is a lighthouse moment!



This picture tells a story! Yes, from my life as a speaker!

Resources

The references at the end of the book contain the URLs to all the resources referred to in each chapter.

Contact

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Acknowledgments

First of all, thank you for being a reader of this book. Many of you inspired me to take this work and supported me with your encouraging words and messages along the way. So, thank you!

If I have to thank one person throughout this journey, it would undoubtedly be Victoria Demina. From the moment I told her about this book, she seemed more excited than I was! She helped perfect the cover design, offered several ideas, and reviewed the content, providing valuable feedback. Thank you, Victoria, for your encouragement and for the role you played in helping get this book out to everyone.

Choosing the right title isn't as simple as it seems. It took multiple discussions and revisions before we finally agreed on one. Thanks to Andreea Merariu, Lee Priest, Luke Hedger, and Sarah Hamilton for your valuable time and great ideas! A special thanks to Eric Johnson for his curiosity about the process and his offer to help. Thanks to Pubudu Jayawardana for letting me share a picture of him speaking.

I sincerely thank all my early-release readers who patiently received chapter-by-chapter updates and provided valuable feedback that helped shape the content.

I thank everyone who has supported me directly and indirectly, and who has checked on my progress now and then. I have learned so much from all of you and will keep doing so.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their constant support. They stood by me through the difficult career decisions I made to achieve my goals.

Thank you all!

Introduction

You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great!

— Zig Ziglar

Welcome, my fellow speaker!

I congratulate you on taking the first step into public speaking. You are embarking on an exciting journey, and you are not alone. I will be with you every step of the way—from exploring your knowledge and opening your eyes to opportunities, to traveling to conferences, guiding you to the stages, and teaching you how to live as a speaker—before I let you go and conquer conferences!

Many aspiring speakers never experience the joy of speaking at conferences because they hesitate to take the first step and give it a try. They often procrastinate.

The reason? Fear of failing.

Everyone experiences fear in various ways. Even after speaking at many conferences, I still feel butterflies when stepping onto a stage. However, seasoned speakers know how to conquer fear and deliver an engaging performance. There's a simple truth behind this.

Familiarity!

Familiarity reduces and removes fear. The more familiar you are with something, the more comfortable and confident you become with it.

Imagine living in a house that often faces electrical power supply issues. Because of this, you never know when your home will be plunged into darkness. To manage this—or rather, to brighten the situation—you keep

candles in a drawer. At first, you panic in the darkness and struggle to find the drawer and light a candle. Gradually, you become accustomed to the problem. You *familiarise yourself* with your surroundings and develop an awareness of the things around you. You gain the *confidence* to reach for a candle anywhere in the house.

No one is born with a speaker tag. Great speakers develop their skills over time. They learn techniques and practice diligently to succeed. They overcome imposter syndrome and identify their unique style of sharing knowledge.

This book serves as your guide to mastering the art of speaking at conferences and performing effectively on stage. After you read it, you will be equipped to create your first talk, confidently submit it to suitable conferences, and deliver a well-rehearsed and compelling talk. The insider knowledge you gain by reading this book will transform you from an unknown speaker to a well-known speaker—from an ordinary speaker to an awesome speaker!

How This Book Is Organized

James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, talks about *goals* and *systems* in his hugely popular book. According to him, goals are the results you want to achieve, while systems refer to the processes that lead you to those results. If you consider speaking at a conference to be one of your goals, the content of *Speaking Effectively At Conferences* discusses the processes that help you achieve your goal.

As an aspiring speaker, the path to becoming a conference speaker may seem complex, daunting, and even intimidating. Breaking down complicated tasks into manageable parts is an effective way to address complexity. This approach will help you find the system comfortable to work with and the processes encouraging.

Conferences serve as platforms and hubs for sharing information. Speakers at these events are the main sources of this knowledge. They convey their expertise by telling stories on stage—they are the storytellers!

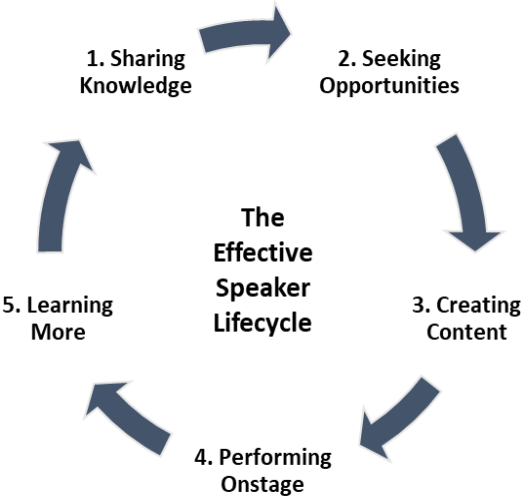


Figure 1. The effective speaker lifecycle.

As shown in Figure 1, your journey as a speaker begins long before you take the conference stage. It starts with evaluating the value of your knowledge. Unearthing the subject matter expert (SME) within you is a crucial first step. **Part 1** delves into your knowledge. While Chapter 1 informs you about the benefits of sharing knowledge, Chapter 2 demonstrates how to disseminate this knowledge—speaking at conferences is one such avenue.

Part 2 focuses on familiarizing yourself with the conference ecosystem. Chapter 3 outlines the types of conferences, followed by Chapter 4, which details the types of venues and their layouts. As a speaker, your expectations regarding a venue can differ from reality, and understanding this is crucial for a better performance on stage. Chapter 5 presents several scenarios to increase your awareness and prepare you effectively.

“How much does a speaker earn?”—a question everyone is eager to know. Chapter 6 provides all the insider facts!

Part 3 shifts your focus to content. Great talks require great ideas. Chapter 7 stimulates your mind and shows you ways to identify topics for sharing. However, bottled-up ideas don't benefit anyone. Therefore, you must seek opportunities to share your ideas. Chapter 8 guides you through the steps involved in submitting your ideas to conferences—the CFP process.

Chapter 9 outlines the characteristics of a talk and leads into Chapter 10, where you will learn about the best practices for creating impactful presentation content. Once you have crafted your visuals and narration, a crucial next phase follows—The Rehearsal! In Chapter 11, you will find all the tips to practice your talk, gain confidence, and be ready for the show.

Part 4 is dedicated to your showtime! It explains how to navigate your day at the conference. Chapter 12 focuses on familiarizing yourself with the venue, while Chapters 13 and 14 address preparing for the day and performing all your checks before conquering the stage.

Chapter 15 is Showtime! It is filled with practical tips for successfully performing on stage—the pinnacle of your day. Managing audience interaction is a delicate act. Chapter 16 explores different types of interactions and teaches you how to handle them eloquently.

Your *role* as a conference speaker may have ended once you left the stage, but your *journey* as a speaker continues—and **Part 5** serves as your guide. Chapter 17 encourages you to practice gratitude, while Chapter 18 highlights the importance of understanding the feedback process.

As you grow as a speaker, it is essential to become organized. Chapter 19 offers valuable tips for effectively managing multiple talks and conferences. The final chapter will bring you back to the beginning—your knowledge and methods for enhancing your skills with new learnings that you can share *successfully* at many more conferences!

Let's Plan, Practice, and Perform together!

Part 1: Your Knowledge

You are an ocean brimming with knowledge!

Whether you are a child, student, graduate, professional, scientist, or expert, you possess knowledge. However, the extent and scale of the information you hold vary. It depends on who you are and where you are in your life and career.

When a schoolchild enthusiastically explains to his mother the technique he learned at school for adding two numbers, he is sharing his knowledge with her. He doesn't care if his mother is an accountant or a scientist. He boldly displays—perhaps thinking his mother doesn't know how to add numbers—his knowledge without any fear.

When a graduate presents her views on solving a specific problem during an interview with a panel of professors, she does not focus on the vast knowledge the professors have acquired over the years; instead, she confidently stands up and shares the insights she has gained so far.

Conferences are events where individuals come together to share knowledge and learn. There are conferences for academia, community, politics, science, marketing, sales, technology, and more. While the type of information shared varies based on the conference theme, it is knowledge nonetheless.

As you embark on your conference speaking journey with me, keep these two essential steps in mind:

Step 1: Your knowledge holds greater value than you realize.

Step 2: Sharing your knowledge is easier than you think.

When you continue to fill a vessel with water, it will eventually overflow.

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As you acquire more knowledge, you don't want it to spill over and go to waste. The knowledge you have gathered is meaningless unless it is shared. The more you share with others, the more space you create to gain new knowledge! Speaking at conferences is just one of many ways to share your expertise. In Part 1, we will evaluate the value of your knowledge and explore ways to share it.

1. The Boundless Joy of Sharing Knowledge

If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it.

—Margaret Fuller.

Information and knowledge have been shared for millennia. Ancient kingdoms employed various methods to disseminate news from rulers to their subjects. Town criers, prominent during the 17th and 18th centuries, were special messengers hired by rulers to travel and position themselves at crossroads and villages to announce the news loudly. Thus, the term "crier."

Early philosophers shared their knowledge at community gatherings, while cultural reformers quietly influenced people with their ideologies in secret locations among their followers.

Innovators, researchers, and scientists presented their theories and demonstrated their discoveries to packed halls filled with the elite and intellectuals. Such lectures remain common in many parts of the world. In London, for instance, the *Royal Institution* is recognized for organizing lectures, especially their science talks during the Christmas festival holidays, which welcome the public and are broadcasted globally.

Although we have made significant progress, traditional information-sharing methods are still prevalent, aided by faster transportation and satellite communication networks. In warmer countries, it remains common for people to gather in open areas after sunset or under the shade of trees to listen to speakers on educational, political, cultural, and religious topics.



A *Speakers' Corner* is a designated area in public parks in many countries where individuals can speak, debate, and discuss common topics. Hyde Park in London is traditionally renowned for its Speakers' Corner.

Understanding the Gathering of People

It is as common today as it was in ancient times for people to gather to share information or to listen and learn. On many occasions, individuals come together voluntarily or by prior invitation, commonly known as RSVP (the French term for "répondez s'il vous plaît"), which translates to "respond if you please!" There are still instances where people are compelled to gather due to orders from the authorities.

Most conferences you attend as a speaker or participant are organized events. You register your interest in attending—often paying a fee—before traveling to the venue. At the venue, you present your registration to receive your identification badge.

During a conference with multiple talks occurring simultaneously, attendees divide into various sub-groups to participate in each session. Although individuals can choose which talk to attend, this approach can create issues at large conferences where rooms have limited seating. Consequently, organizers have implemented a seat reservation system that allows attendees to pre-book a place for a session. This is like organized gatherings within an organized gathering!

At the same time, some conferences also conduct open sessions where anyone can attend and leave at any time. These sessions are likely held in halls or designated areas of the conference venue. They are an example of an unorganized gathering within an organized event.

Now that you understand how and where the seeds of the modern conference may have been planted, let's explore how public speaking has evolved as both a role and a profession.

You, as an Orator!

An *orator*, also known as an *orapist*, is someone skilled in public speaking. The term “*orator*” is derived from the French word “*orateur*,” which has its origins in Latin.

Orators are individuals who are eloquent—i.e., skilled—at speaking in front of an audience to ensure that their message reaches the listeners. They are speakers capable of communicating *effectively*. By choosing this book, you express a desire to become an orator with strong speaking and presentation skills to *effectively* share your knowledge with your audience!

In prehistoric times, the suffix “*or*” was believed to refer to someone performing a ritual. As a presenter, you will engage in a speaking *ritual* on stage! Speaking at conferences is not merely about reciting words, but rather conducting it as an onstage ritual—the show. (In Part 4, you will learn how to become the greatest showperson on a conference stage.)

What a privilege it is to learn to perform one of the oldest traditions and most powerful rituals on stage!



The school I attended held several annual competitions as part of its end-of-year ceremonies. The elocution competition, as it was known then, was a speaking contest where students would go on stage and talk about a given topic. Although I participated as a school kid, it was a terrifying ordeal to stand on stage in front of hundreds of children and the scrutinizing eyes of teachers. There were moments when I completely blanked out, forgetting words and jumbling sentences. Even though I understood the context, I learned the true meaning of the word “*elocution*” only a few years later!

The Benefits of Sharing Your Knowledge

Knowledge is power, an old and well-known saying. However, many misinterpret it and associate it with authority. To me, though, it signifies *strength*.

The more knowledge you possess, the stronger your wisdom becomes. Your thoughts become clearer, your actions more decisive, and your desire to share it intensifies. That desire has inspired you to pick this book to learn how to distribute what you know to others. Conference stages are one avenue that can help you fulfill this desire.

Sharing your knowledge brings several benefits, as discussed in the following sections.

Sharing knowledge is gratifying

Sharing is gratifying, whether it involves food, wealth, or knowledge. It brings fulfillment and happiness that are beyond words. It injects positivity into your mind and inspires you to share even more.

In a 2021 survey conducted by Starmind among 1,000 office workers in the United States, Germany, and Switzerland, 87% indicated that knowledge sharing leads to happier employees, increasing to 93% in the US alone.

It serves as a significant motivational factor for many speakers. The joy of stepping onto a stage and sharing your knowledge with a room full of people is immensely satisfying.

The more you share, the more you learn

The possessiveness of your knowledge can become disadvantageous over time. Clinging to the limited knowledge you've acquired pales in comparison to all the learning still ahead of you. You need to create space in your mind to accommodate more knowledge. To achieve this, you must release some of the information stored in your mind by sharing it with

others. It's not about forgetting what you've learned but about becoming mentally free and open to new insights.

Peter Senge, the systems scientist and author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, once said that sharing knowledge happens when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capabilities for action; it is about creating learning processes.

You must not become complacent on your journey to becoming an effective speaker. As you will learn in Part 5, continuous knowledge enrichment is crucial for remaining a successful speaker.

Sharing your knowledge expands your thinking

The more you learn, the more thoughts you gain. However, learning new things alone is often insufficient for this. When you learn with a desire to share with others, you start to *think* beyond what you have learned, thereby expanding your knowledge. This allows you to express it better when speaking about it on stage.

Many remarkable contributions in writing, art, science, and film originated from simple thoughts and one-line ideas. The expansion of primitive ideas into complex works is what gives us the masterpieces we admire.

As discussed above, learning and sharing complement each other. It's like a flywheel: as you expand your thoughts and share them with others, your credibility improves, and you are recognized as a thought leader by many, enhancing your speaker profile.

Sharing knowledge fosters humility

A speaker's passion for sharing knowledge should not begin and end at conferences. As a speaker, you do not vanish after your presentation. You are part of your audience's community. Successful speakers continually share knowledge through writing, newsletters, emails, social media interactions, and more. When you remain visible to people in your field,

they grow closer to you as a contributor and are eager to hear from you as a speaker.

Your familiarity with people allows many audience members to engage in friendly conversations at conferences. This is a blessing for a speaker. As you listen to their stories, you become compassionate and share their sentiments, helping them solve their problems, answering their critical questions, guiding them on their career path, or showing them the right direction based on your knowledge and experience. For a speaker, this is a humbling experience. Your humility will make you an understanding, purposeful, and effective speaker.

One reason many aspiring speakers don't progress beyond their desires is their uncertainty about what to share. This isn't due to a lack of knowledge or expertise, but rather their difficulty in developing ideas to communicate. In the next section, you will find several industry examples of different personas to help you relate to your domain.



I spoke at a technology conference in Stockholm in early 2020. During the lunch hour, a participant stopped me in the hallway. With an uneasy smile and appearing uncomfortable, he asked me a question. It was a novice question, hence the uneasiness. I would've laughed at such questions if I were with my close friends or colleagues. Instead, at that moment, I put myself in his position. Someone who obtained permission from his employer for the day traveled to this place to find answers that could influence change at his workplace. I recognized the value and significance behind that innocent yet bold question. More importantly, he dared to ask me that question and trusted me to help him with my thoughts.

What Knowledge Can I Share?

When asked to share what they have learned with others, people often wonder, "What can I share?" This reflects an element of imposter syndrome because many of us underestimate our knowledge and how we can assist

others. We frequently compare ourselves to others and feel insignificant and undervalued. As Ali Abdaal, author of *Feel-Good Productivity*, once stated: You don't have to be a Guru; you can be a Guide!

Below, I have two questions for you. As you read the questions and the brief, expand on them to make them personal. Reflect deeply and discover the elements within you that you never realized were valuable.

1. **Do you possess knowledge that others don't?** It doesn't have to be anything groundbreaking. You might have learned something additional that others typically don't. Or, you discovered a better or different way to do something than most people.
2. **Are you able to convey an idea in a way that others can understand?** You have a knack for explaining topics at the recipient's level. In other words, you can articulate concepts in layman's terms. Alternatively, you can break down a complex subject into simple components for everyone to grasp.

You're ready to share if you answered "Yes" to at least one. Grab a pen and paper or your laptop to turn sharing content into reality.

If you are unsure about the questions, don't despair. Not every aspiring speaker begins their journey with a clear idea. For many, the passion for speaking starts by uncovering hidden thoughts and talents. When you read the following prompts, they will evoke relevant thoughts within you.

I am a university student. What can I share?

- Your journey from primary school to your chosen university to study your favorite subject can inspire high school students.
- Applying to universities and selecting the right course can benefit students and their parents.
- Your experience as a university student—managing a budget, exploring career opportunities, etc.

I am a senior software engineer. What can I share about technology?

- The lessons learned from applying a software pattern, architecting a system, incorporating AI to assist in programming, or implementing a feature of a critical application.
- Your distinctive approach to mentoring junior engineers.
- Effective collaboration between engineering and business teams to solve complex problems.

I am a product manager. Is there a demand for content on this subject?

- The significance of product management—what it is, where it is applied, and how it functions.
- How can you attain success while collaborating with engineering and design teams?
- The unique opportunities and challenges faced by a product manager, along with strategies to address them.

I am a sales and marketing executive. Do people listen to sales pitches?

- Instead of boring everyone with a sales pitch, you can share the origins of your product idea and its development process.
- Captivate the audience with your innovative marketing strategies that led to remarkable success.
- Inform the listeners about how to become successful marketing executives by developing unique skills that set them apart.

I am a school teacher. Aren't writing and speaking reserved for corporate employees?

- School teachers wear many hats. Explain how your responsibilities extend beyond teaching textbook lessons to encompass shaping the future of children.
- Inspire the audience to pursue teaching by sharing uplifting stories from your career.
- How can you identify unique talents in children and assist them in achieving success?

As you would agree, it is impossible to list all the professions here. My aim is to inspire you to think and explore the areas and ideas that matter to you. When you have something close to your heart, sharing becomes passionate and resonates more effectively with your listeners and readers. All you need now is the desire to share the knowledge you possess. There's boundless joy in doing so!

Summary

I recall an old saying from my youth: *To scoop successfully with a spoon, you need food in the pot.* To become an effective speaker, you must have knowledge to share. If you are empty inside, no matter how talented you are on stage, you can't make an impact, and your audience won't benefit either. Therefore, I want to start your journey with introspection—self-examination to appreciate, uncover, and value your knowledge that others can benefit from.

To recap:

- The origins of public speaking from various walks of life are older than we realize.

- Understanding the esteemed role of an orator and the reasons to aspire to become one.
- The joy and fulfillment you experience from sharing your knowledge with others.

To learn next:

- Establishing your credibility as a speaker through sharing knowledge.
 - In addition to speaking at conferences, you can explore other channels to share your knowledge.
 - The popular writing aids to help you develop content.
-

Chapter Challenge!

1. Make a list of topics you are passionate about and feel confident sharing your knowledge on.
2. Now, identify an area or topic that excites you the most for discussion with others.

About the Author

Sheen Brisals is a long-time technologist, keynote speaker, and author. Admired by many as a technology storyteller, Sheen uses stories and analogies to make complex topics understandable to everyone. He is passionate about sharing knowledge and mentors many aspiring conference speakers. Sheen is a regular speaker at several international conferences. He writes for leading publications and co-authored a technical book, *Serverless Development on AWS* (O'Reilly, 2024). Sheen lives with his family in the United Kingdom.