

How to Speak

Tips for people
who want to tell
their Story

Russ Miles

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1. Preface: A Letter from the Author



Me and Les Paul, more on that blessing and curse later in the book...

Prefaces are, for the most part in my experience, pretty dull affairs. Often skipped, and with good reason. This is not, however, a dull book and so I'm going to try to make the most of what is usually an utter waste of paper and the reader's attention by making more of this oft-skipped section.

This is a preface like no other, it will include some nuggets of gold that aren't in any other parts of the book. Nuggets that if you read will lead to even greater things, just for those who do actually read the preface... If you've got this far, I'm going to happily try and reward your perseverance, so without further ado...¹

¹P.S. I chose "A letter from the Author" as a subtitle for the preface just to weed out the casual readers who might get to the rewards here. Nothing turns off a crowd like starting with a self-congratulatory, egotistic carbuncle like such a "Letter", so all I have left are likely the reading die-hards. You're my kind of people, welcome!

Tips and Tidbits to start your own Journey

This book is packed with the tips and little reminders I use to plan and perform talks. I've jotted it all down, the good and bad things, the competitiveness (hopefully positive!), and all the confessions for how I got things deeply, sometimes tragically wrong.

I aim to provide a toolbox of ideas for you to pick from and apply at your leisure. Public speaking is more of a craft and practice than a science, and so what I offer here is the ingredients that work in my oratorical dishes. Take what you like and cook your own unique talks and style up!

I've mined my archives of notes from over the years with tidbits from great speakers, and authors, such as Damian Conway and Kathy Sierra. In each case I've done my best to attribute everything to original sources, but if there's anywhere I've missed something then please just get in touch with me at russ@russmiles.com or one of the other channels I mention a little later.

Applying the secret sauce to everything!

You might think the advice in this book is only for public speaking, and if it was only the part on "Performance" then I'd completely agree. But Part 1: Preparation is much, much more valuable than that.

In Part 2 I don't just tell you how I prepare talks, I use the exact same tips to write blog articles, to plan videos, even to plan multi-day classes! Anything can benefit from the tips in Part 1, whether you're looking to connect and communicate with your audience onstage, online or in print.

TL; DRs and No Dumb Questions

Every chapter of the book ends with two sections titled TL;DR and No Dumb Questions (NDQs). NDQs are there where I think there might still be some burning questions on your

mind and I want to answer those questions as directly and clearly as possible. It's like being onstage and asking for any questions at the end. I'll also sometimes be updating the book to incorporate more questions as readers give me feedback.

"TL; DR" stands for Too Long; Didn't Read. These sections are the distilled summary of the chapter, including any tips that have been shared and anything that I thought might be useful to highlight and reinforce again.

Something you think I've missed?

I am always learning new tips when it comes to public speaking and practicing the art of connecting to communicate effectively. If there's something you think I've missed here in this book, let me know on any of the following channels because I'd love to hear from you:

- Email: russ@russmiles.com
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/russmiles>
- LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/russmiles
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/howtospeaktips>

Good luck and Enjoy!

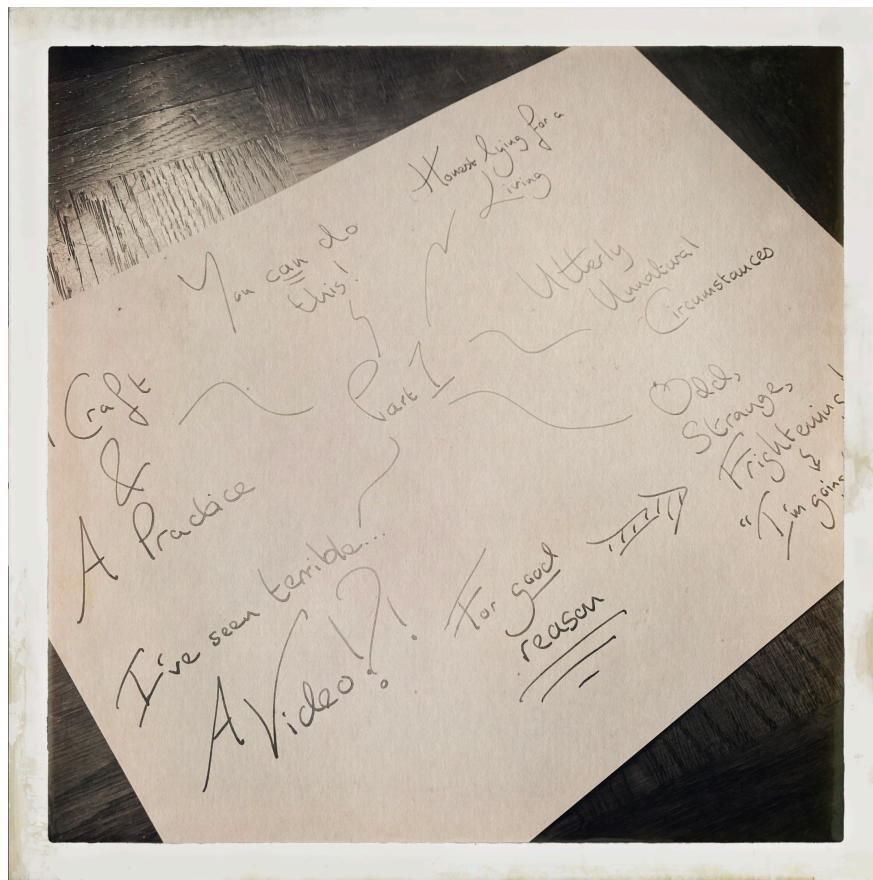
Lastly, I hope you have fun with this little book. I try to tell the stories as I would onstage, and I hope you cringe/laugh/flinch/cry (only occasionally) and occasionally gasp as much as I did when writing this on rainy Saturdays in "Sunny" England.



It doesn't matter how big the stage is; it's the story that counts, not the ego.

I Setting the Stage

“Stories are important, stories are critical.” - Neil Gaiman



We begin our journey by looking at what this book is all about. Then it's time to talk about what a talk should never, ever be. Before addressing the elephant in the room, which is...

Why you, and I, hate public speaking.

Let's do this.

2. Chapter 1: Honest Lying for a Living

“Stories may well be lies, but they are good lies that say true things, and which can sometimes pay the rent.” - Neil Gaiman

Let's be honest, when it comes to public speaking people are rarely honest. In my opinion, great public speakers are purveyors of stories and so are habitual “white liars” who never let a boring, but factually correct, anecdote get in the way of grabbing your attention and helping you leave with what they wanted you to remember.

Funnily enough, it turns out I am going to break that rule for this book. Here you will get the unvarnished truth, because it just so happens that the truth here is stranger and, for my money, funnier than fiction.

The Dirt on Public Speaking

You're here to get a window on what it is to be a public speaker, what it's like to do a talk in front of 3000+ people who would really rather be somewhere else. To handle situations where you've had your talk cut from 45 minutes to 20 at the last moment, and where Powerpoint has let you down for the VERY last time.

If you are that type of oddball that actually wants to do something so utterly unnatural as public speaking, if you want to maybe hear how I managed to hone this odd craft and, importantly, learned how not to suck in the eyes of the audience, my peers and even my family and friends then you're in the right place! Welcome, friend.

What you're going to learn in the coming pages is how to tell your story. That's it.

I'm going to share how I tell my stories on stage, online and in print. You're going to hear how I get people interested in the 5-7 things I want them to take away, and how I employ every tool at my disposal to make those points so hard not to retain that you'd think I had brainwashed the audience.

When I give a talk I'm trying to execute the equivalent of a Vulcan Mind-Meld¹ on a bunch of people I've likely never met, whose time I am utterly humble to have been given and who I may never meet again. I want my, and more importantly your audiences, to walk away with something, sometimes anything, that's valuable to them. That's what I call effective speaking, and it's the challenge that I love about this strange craft.

You are “The One and Only”

When you take on the challenge and duty of trying to connect and communicate with your audience, you enter into a different world. A world where you'll feel anxious, maybe even fearful, for very good reasons. It's a brave task to take on anything from writing to public speaking; to be great at it means you will learn an odd and strange craft that will make you feel vulnerable as you share your thoughts and ideas with a public you may never meet.

You've picked up this book, which is a great start. Here I'm going to try to take you on a journey where you see just how difficult, and rewarding, connecting to communicate effectively is. For me, it's the most powerful and exciting superpower I have and can impart. It's a challenging journey and I'll be sharing the good, the bad and the ugly of my experiences (so far).

To help you along your own journey let me give you one tip early. It's something I wish I'd realised more often in my career as then I think more of it would have been enjoyable, rather than terrifyingly difficult. The tip comes in two parts, the first part being a little mantra I have in my head whenever I am about to write, speak or share anything with the public, and it takes inspiration from one of the cheesiest songs of the 90s. My mantra is: I am the one and only!

¹My friend Jo is a Trekker (I'm brusquely informed that this is the correct nomenclature) so I did in fact check the spelling of “Vulcan Mind-Meld”. It pays to know your potential audience really, *really* well.

Kudos to those of you that now have Chesney Hawkes' biggest (only?) hit rattling around your head for the rest of your day. Regardless whether you remember this tune or not, there's helpful wisdom in the words.

"I am the one and only" is something I remind myself whenever I'm feeling anxious, or feeling my nerves begin to take over, or when I'm staring at a blank page. There's only one of me, and there's only one of you. Those people, whether they be my reader or an audience of 1000s, are there to listen to me because I have valuable stories to tell. I am the only one who has these stories, they are personally mine and so I'm *always* the expert on what I'm going to say.

I use this mantra at all times to silence my own inner critic², it reminds me that I am good enough to be imparting whatever knowledge I want to share, e.g. whenever I'm worried that I don't have the experience to be authoritative on a topic.

Part 1 is my mantra but part 2 is just as important. Part 2 is to remember to enjoy the *practice* of communicating, and actually it's a philosophy I apply to all of my life these days.

Don't worry, I'm not going to get too high faluting and philosophical here; I'll save that for another book. All I'll say is that I used to be in love with, almost addicted to, the *results* of communicating. I used to dread and fear preparing talks and writing articles and books, but loved it when they were done.

This was a sad way to live. The vast majority of my time was spent in the build-up to talks and releasing publications, and eventually it was all a miserable experience. I lived for the short period of time after a book was released, or a talk was done; everything else became a chore, at best, and insurmountable, anxiety-ridden work at worst.

This all changed when I realised that the results were not the point. Speaking onstage, online or in print is a craft and a practice, much like lots of life, and the results are few and far between. These days I focus on enjoying the *process* of preparing for giving talks, or planning and writing books. Now I've gotten to the point where I enjoy every aspect of speaking, no matter the medium, and that all started with the realisation that it is the *process* that's the most rewarding part, the results will then take care of themselves.

²Denise Jacobs has written a whole book on banishing your inner critic, literally titled "Banish Your Inner Critic", and she is also a wonderful speaker if you get a chance to see her in person.

An “Odd” and “Strange” Craft and Practice

I keep saying that public speaking is an “odd” and “strange” craft, and I stand by that! It really is. Public speaking is about as unnatural a situation as you can get into outside of piloting a space capsule, and dealing with this thoughts-of-death-invoking situation that you place yourself in is not easy.

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” -
Aristotle

The goal is to be able to connect to communicate with your audience, and that takes practice. It’s a practice that you can get really great at, and you will! Eventually public speaking will even feel fun, in its own stomach-curdling-fear and exhausting way. You may never entirely enjoy it, but whether you’re a full-on extrovert or, like me, at times a somewhat painful introvert, you can do public speaking insanely well, and without going insane yourself.

From “Why am I doing this?” to “Keeping Sane” and even “Enjoying it”

This book takes you on a journey through tips for preparing your talk, performing it, and finally staying healthy and maybe even enjoying it. Each part and chapter can be read in relative isolation if you’d prefer to dip in, although it should read equally well from start to finish.

It’s how / Practice

As a practice and a craft, public speaking is something you do to figure out what works for you. Here I only cover what I do. Think of my tips as starting points that you can choose from to bring into your own practice when, or if, you feel ready for them.

You are unique and so what you do will eventually be very different from what I do. That's the beauty of the craft, and I can't wait to hear about your own tips and experiences as you navigate your own path to public speaking super stardom.

"Engage..."

So that's it, introductions over. It's time to dive into the exciting, and terrifying, experience of becoming a public speaker.

You're going to be great, but you'll suck at first so before you hit the next chapter I want to remind you of something important. In the world of "public life", which you enter almost immediately when you start to do any talks, there will be all sorts of unwanted attention that you will get and that will likely only grow if you start getting good at this. Two things I want you to know now, and to hold close to your heart like a shield as you get battered around by the world and your own inner critic:

"You are more than good enough."

And...

"People want *your* story."

When an audience gives up a chunk of their life to listen to you it is an honour, a duty, and also a special hell all of its own. If the thought of it terrifies you that's normal. You are not alone and I aim to give you something in these pages that helps you with that. The first rule is "Be Kind to Yourself", and then "Be Kind to the Audience" and then, frankly, "Ignore everyone else".

Ready to take to the stage? Let's go...

TL; DRs

- Speaking, whether that be onstage, online or in print, is a *craft* and a *practice*.
- This book is full of tips that *I* use to practice the craft.

- You will build your own toolbox, picking and choosing which of these tips work for you and adding in new techniques and practices as you practice the craft for yourself.
- You are “The One and Only” you, and your audience wants *your* story. Whenever you’re feeling anxious, or doubting that you are the right person or have enough experience, take it from me that you *are* the right person to tell *your* story. You’ve the best, and the only, person who can tell it, and whatever your experience is will be interesting when you share your story with your audience.
- Be kind to yourself, and be kind to your audience, in that order.

(There are) No Dumb Questions

What if I feel I don’t have anything to talk about?

You do, everyone does. Whatever your experience is with the topic *is* what you have to talk about. You could be the inventor and expert on something, or you could be a relative newbie; either way, your experience is valuable and worth sharing. The craft comes in when you need to figure out how to tell that story as engagingly as possible.

How long do I need to practice until I master public speaking?

“Mastering” connecting to communicate effectively onstage or elsewhere is an interesting idea. I’m not sure there is such a state that could be called being a “Master”, I certainly don’t consider myself to be “master” because I’m still learning every time I prepare to write or perform. My advice is to let go of the idea of “mastering”, and instead enjoy the continual journey of practicing the art; that’s where the satisfaction and fun is.

Will all the tips here be applicable if I’m speaking online?

All the tips here should be helpful whether you’re speaking online or onstage. Sometimes there’s a tip that is great for one context more than the other, and in those cases I’ll indicate which one it is perfect for.

3. I've seen things you people wouldn't believe...

“The burned hand teaches best. After that, advice about fire goes to the heart.” - J. R. R. Tolkien

I've seen the worst talk. The Worst. In. The. World. There's no competition¹.

I don't mean those talks that you can suffer in silence, where perhaps the speaker is unprepared or, more painful for them and you, they decide to do a “live demo” and realise they are mortal and so make a typo every few commands and that the internet demons are not on their side... Those poor souls are utterly excusable, although if they'd read this book before taking to the stage they might have saved themselves the wrath of the Demo Gods.

No, I'm talking instead of the curse of the “DOA Keynote”. A talk so bad, and so trumped up, with such intense expectations, that it then falls flat on its face from a great height in a drunken stupor of wretchedness...

It's an experience that, once suffered, is never forgotten. Surely I'm over-reacting? It can't be THAT bad? Oh but it is... I've been very, VERY lucky as I've only had to suffer the fate of the “DOA Keynote” once. Unfortunately, for me, it was a perfect storm. This speaker was the ultimate case and, for obvious reasons, shall remain nameless here but if you recognise yourself in the following then please, PLEASE, change your ways.

Let me explain the audience pain and characteristics of the “DOA Keynote” by telling you my story but first, a survival tip.

¹Please, I really hope it is anyway...

Never sit at the front

I never sit at the front of a room. I've lost count of the number of times I've given a talk where the organisers tear their hair out as the auditorium fills according to some mathematicians laws of clustering with one large exclusion zone: The 2 rows in front of the speaker. I understand, I am the same when I attend most talks. I will usually hide towards the edges or the back of the room because I'm actually quite an introverted individual. I want to feel I can escape. It's rare I actually ever *do* want to escape, but having the option is apparently important to my introverted brain and so I tend to pick my seats, along with everyone else, as far away from everyone else as possible without appearing too rude with good line-of-sight to the door.

So usually I'm just like everyone else, except for when I lose all sense of rationality and completely forget the line-of-sight rule. This only happens on rare occasions. It tends to happen when there's a high profile speaker, maybe a True LegendTM, taking to the stage. Someone I've dreamed of seeing perform. At those moments I throw caution and introversion to the wind and find myself wide-eyed, readying to whoop and clap like a loon because I'm ready to be part of something special. It's an Event, with a capital E, and I'm ready to bear witness.

Like a fool I head to the front where I cannot escape. Worse, I'm often a fellow speaker and so people will notice if I leave. I'm trapped, of my own volition, but that's not how I see it. I'm here for the ride of my life, an experience I'll be talking about for generations to come, or maybe just on the train ride home. Either way Bring It On, I'm ready!

This is how this story begins. With me sat at the front of the audience in a huge auditorium, far from any hope of escape. Welcome to my nightmare...

You have to be able to speak, so Speak

Intonation, eye direction, body movement, smiles, smirks, pauses, crescendos, whispers; these are all tools of a verbal storytellers trade (I'll refer to us simply as storytellers from

now on in). Your job is to tell a story, tell it well, and leave the audience with memories that they want, and you employ all of your arsenal to do that job.

Somehow, this time none of this could have been mentioned to the speaker on the stage not more than 5 feet from my gradually shrinking shape in the front row.

Shuffling, verbal ticks, narrative garden paths, abandoned points, obvious and utterly unfunny jokes; the list of faux pas really did go on! If there was a canonical list of oratory crimes, this speaker could have been the author. And I'm stuck. At the front. With no escape.

Then things got worse...

The Worst Crime?

Do you know why people are there to listen to you speak? I mean instead of the free food, drinks and perhaps nothing better to do if you're the keynote speaker. There's only so much free pizza can do to attract an audience, there really are other reasons they are there. So here's the fact:

THEY ARE THERE FOR *YOU*.

They want to hear *YOUR* take. No one else's. They want *your* stories, *your* experiences, *your* emotions.

Every fact you talk about could, sometimes literally, be read online, but not with your perspective. Not your smiles or grimaces in the moment. Not your diversions and anecdotes. Your audience is there for this moment with you because they believe that it's going to give them *something special*. They want a moment of intimacy with you and your thoughts. They want to be entertained, and they want to leave knowing they got something important, unique even, to take away.

It's a total honour and a privilege if only one person turns up, because that's one person who thinks you're interesting enough to hear from. You get 100, consider that a huge win. You get 1000 people, like there was at this talk, you had better *deliver*. It's a duty and a privilege to have all that attention, and good speakers bring their "A Game".

This book exists because I want you to work up to those moments and then deliver informative and impactful talks when you get there. I want you to meet the challenge of that responsibility, and then blow your audiences away with your unique stories, with your authenticity, with your candour, in a nutshell ... with YOU.

This speaker had not read this book. That's fair, it hadn't been written. Turns out though that they'd clearly not read any book written on speaking from the Greeks onwards, because at the very moment when I was trying to figure out how to leave without being "the speaker who left" I was rooted to my seat by a spectacle I will take to the grave. I witnessed the cardinal sin. The worst crime you can ever do.

The speaker played a video.

And not just any video, a video you could find online. For free. A video of a TALK! A VIDEO OF THE SPEAKER GIVING A TALK!

I was sitting there, listening to a terrible speaker give a terrible talk. Who then decided to show a video of themselves. Themselves giving a terrible talk.

They were already at zero, then they leapt four levels of hell downwards!

An hour later and the talk grinds to a mumbled halt. The room is in shock and the muted applause clearly has the ring of people just glad to go get coffee. I do not feel sympathetic for the speaker. Not only are they smugly wandering off into the dark to go pick up their fat, keynote cheque, they have just been a thief. They've stolen an hour or so of *life* from everyone in that audience. For all that life no one got anything in return, and for that I make a vow.

I vow if I ever get any good at writing then I'd write a book on how not to be that speaker.

Welcome to that book.

The Good News

Still with me? Ok, so this was a slightly low starting point for the book. Hitting the ground running with "The Worst Talk Ever" was always a risk, but I wanted you to know what it

looked, and more importantly *felt*, like. It's like introducing the fact that you could die to a person just learning to ride a motorcycle for the first time. You do it because it will make you a *much* better rider later.

So here you learnt how you could suck onstage (well, a few ways anyway), so that you can bear that in mind as something you *never* want to do. Now let's first talk about why public speaking is scary even before you knew ways to suck at it.

TL; DRs

- A good talk is just that, a *talk*. It's a performance, and people are there for you.
- Your audience is there to see and hear you, to have those moments *with you*, don't disappoint them.
- Keep your own talks simple, and use the power of your stories to leave your audience happy and satisfied.

(There are) No Dumb Questions

Should I never show a video?

Any and all media and gimmicks are ok as long as they support your story. Be aware of the story you are telling and if you find something just fits, then by all means use it.

Can't I just hit the stage and present the facts?

You could, but I would *not* recommend it. Especially not if those facts are easily discoverable online. Facts are not compelling to our brains, unfortunately. You should always not conflict with the facts, that would be deceptive and we leave that sort of behaviour to politicians, but it's not good enough just to present the facts, you must make those facts compelling with your narrative.

4. “I’m going to die!”

“For it is not death or pain that is to be feared, but the fear of pain or death” -
Epictetus

Let me start with an assurance, you’re not going to die. Well, ok, you might, there’s always a chance, but it won’t be for the reasons that your ape-brain is trying to convince you that you should be worried about.

Public speaking is scary, and that’s normal. Let me say that again, it’s normal. In fact, I think it’s weirder where people aren’t scared. While it is true that many experienced speakers don’t feel nerves quite the same way as you will in your first forays onto the stage “killing ground”, everyone feels some sort of nerves. It can even be a positive thing...

Ok, so what I’ve just said probably helped not one iota, right. You’re still petrified of going onstage? Yep, I was too, until I met what can only be described as a sage of the public speaking world. This wonderful speaker and person is [Damian Conway](#)¹.

I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Damian *before* I had even got a chance to marvel at just how darn good he is at public speaking. He’s amazing, and as a student of the Crazy Craft, you should take every and any opportunity to experience one of his talks. Period. Just Do It.

What you’d *never* know from witnessing one of Damian’s masterpieces is that he is also an introvert, like me². Public speaking is *not* a calm and natural activity for Damian, just as it isn’t for anyone really, but he told me *why* you feel the way you do about going on stage.

Understanding why your stomach turns to liquid, you start sweating profusely, and you feel the utter desire to run out the door and never, *ever*, make the mistake of volunteering to speak again is the first step to being able to handle it. It all starts with you being a (somewhat) evolved ape...

¹<http://damian.conway.org/>

²In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that leaning towards being introverted is actually a plus when it comes to connecting with your audience.

Messing with a Chimp’s Mind

“I’ve had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened.” - Mark Twain

Current scientific evidence points to our ancestor, way back in the family and literal trees, was a common ancestor of the chimpanzee. Chimps are genetically super-close to us humans and so it makes sense that in many ways our own social relationships are very similar to your regular Chimp’s village antics. It’s just that we have developed a bit further, we have higher functions, more advanced communications, more complex verbal language patterns, and we had the Victorian age to convince us we are more rational than our longer-armed, “slightly” less hairy cousins.

All that cold, period drama logic though means squat when you’re about to go on stage. It doesn’t matter how irrational your fear is, your mind is utterly unconvinced and you feel, basically, like you are going to die... and *that makes sense*.

It’s perfectly rational for you to be irrational about going on stage. The conditions of public performance, particularly individual public performance like public speaking, are *perfect* to induce sudden and immediate existential dread in you, because a good chunk of that grey matter is inherited from apes, and if you want to mess with a chimp’s mind then putting it onstage would be one of the best ways to do it. Let’s look at why...

You’re separated from the group...

First you are separated from the group. It doesn’t matter how you were separated, you just are and that is enough to get your stress levels up. You’re alone and vulnerable, and then...

... the group collectively turns to face you...

It was bad enough that you were alone, but then your worst nightmare begins to unfold. The group you were part of, where you felt anonymous and safe, are instructed to sit and turn towards you. All those eyes are staring, and your chimp brain feels the end is nearing, but maybe you’ll be safe, until...

... finally they start smiling and clapping!

That’s it, game over! Grinning, bearing their teeth, banging hands together... These are all signs that yes, your fears were right, the group has rejected you and is coming to finish you off. You go into fight-or-flight³, which is where your bowels think it’s a good time to enact a “forced exit” and you prepare for either imminent violence or the speediest of get-aways. Your heart is racing, sweat is pouring down your back, and you’re shaking with every fibre of your being on high alert. You’re going to die, this is it, aaaargh!!!!

Then you put on a smile and walk out on stage...

Dealing with your Inner Chimp

Unfortunately with all the good intentions, mediation and neuroplasticity in the world, you can’t ever completely beat this deep-rooted fear. It’s in your deep, grey wetware and it’s actually there because it probably saved your great, great, great, great ad infinitum Grandmother’s life. Stress is a good thing for you, unless it gets out of control[^stress], but your reactions to it can be used to manage it.

Usually stress and anxiety are not the biggest problem when you are actually in the middle of your talk. Performance has a way of focussing the mind; you don’t get anywhere near as much time to worry and die a thousand deaths when you’re in the middle of your flow than you do in the months, weeks, days, hours and minutes beforehand.

It’s time look at what you can do to handle the natural stress before a talk, and that comes under one word, and one part, of this book. That word is “Preparation”.

TL; DRs

- It’s *normal* to find public speaking, or any other public knowledge sharing activity, utterly terrifying.
- Preparation is key to being ready to write that blog article, or step out onto that stage.

³More on stress, in particular Cortisol and its effect on you before and, often even more importantly, after a talk at the end of Part 3.

(There are) No Dumb Questions

What if I’m *not* scared at the thought of going onstage?

It’s not unheard of, and in some respects you should count yourself very lucky! For you the challenge will be different as you may find that you need to focus on making yourself a little more hyped up to go on stage and perform well. A little nerves is a good thing for honing the focus in a performance, and so for you there is still work to be done in rehearsal (coming up in the next part of the book) where you will be looking to make things as exciting as possible, rather than trying to overcome any fear.

What if I *can’t beat my chimp brain?

You can, and you will. Here’s why: I am a seriously introverted person. The very first time I stepped onto a “stage” was at school and it felt like the longest, most awful 7 minutes of my life. Don’t worry if the first time you have to publicly speak on a subject you feel that you suck, I did too! Preparation and following the tips in the next part of the book will help, but ultimately it is a craft that gets better with practice. The more you do it, the better you will become, as long as you stay healthy and learn to enjoy the process itself, more on that in the final part of this book.

II Preparing your Story

This content is not available in the sample book. The book can be purchased on Leanpub at <http://leanpub.com/howtospeak>.

5. It all lives or dies in preparation

“I’m looking for a connection...” - Tim Booth, Lead Singer of James, Isle of Wight Festival.

You have *no idea* what you’re going to say. None at all.

Maybe you’ve just been given your first speaking slot at a major conference, or maybe you’re lucky to have stumbled on a gap in a sequence of lightning talks. 45 minutes or 5, it’s all the same. What are you going to say? What are you going to do? Freaking out is *not* an option, unfortunately.

This is a real story, it happened to me, except I didn’t have to talk for 5 or even 45 minutes; I had to talk for 4 *days*. 4 days broken into chunks of 30 to 75 minutes and I’d only just that very moment seen the slides, let alone the topics.

I was *supposed* to be shadowing another trainer but somehow the wires got crossed and here I was, ready (or not) to teach a subject I’d only just seen to a room full of 20 strangers. Their expectant stares were *not* helping.

To cut the story short, I survived, just. I survived by remembering only one thing. Each slide that poked it’s ugly head up, I asked myself to answer one question, to do one thing to survive this new surprise. It was all I had time for.

That one thing was: “Give them something they care about”.

Whatever it took, whether it was a full story, a confession, a smile and a joke, *anything* to help that room full of wonderfully patient, and blissfully unaware, people *relate* to the topic.

I had to do all that within a couple of seconds of a slide being shown. Fortunately I was also pretty lucky as these slides were better than most. At least they were consistent and had a narrative that, if I could only figure it out, comprised about 90% of my battle.

It was one of the hardest 4 days of my life, but I was lucky as that question, “What do they care about?” was not just a key to handling a sudden, unscheduled improvisation session, it also turns out to be the key to all the preparation I wish I’d had time to do in the first place.

It’s the most important tip I can give, which is why I start with it. It’s the key to everything when it comes to preparing a great talk. You nail what they, your audience, care about and everything else will fall into place¹.

What do they care about?

Reset the clock now and pretend you are at least a few weeks away from an opportunity to speak. You’re going to need that sort of time, believe me, to put a great talk together. With this time to hand you get the opportunity to explore the topics you might talk about, build your narrative, rehearse, and eventually to walk into that speaking opportunity armed to the teeth with confidence.

Where do you start? What are your first steps? You might have tons to talk about on any given high-level topic, or your mind may be a complete blank. How do you down-select, how do you know where to begin?

For me, it always begins with that same “What do they care about?” question, only this time you enough time to answer it! Your job is just that, to give your audience something they want, something they care about, something that pays back their investment in their time, heck their *life*, in attending your talk.

The goal can be nailed in three words: *Connect to Communicate*.

You must connect with your audience in order to communicate with them effectively. To connect, as in all good relationships, you need to get to know your audience. You need to understand their perspective so you can package anything you want to say effectively for them. *Your talk is not about you*, it’s all about them; your audience; that collective of expectant strangers.

¹Please note, I did *not* say “easily”.

You don't start by asking yourself what topics you *could* talk about, but by asking who is going to be listening? What do they want? What do they believe? What is on their minds? What are their biases? What is their vocabulary? What is their perspective?

Ask whoever invited you to speak, if anyone did. Ask others who might have spoken before in this setting. Ask about talks that have rocked, and ask why. If this talk were recorded, go watch them to get a glimpse of how the audience received the talk. I watch other speakers all the time to pick up tips and, frankly, to steal their best ideas. I think of it as it being the ultimate compliment to steal something that works for another speaker...²

I build a fictional audience member in my head and use them to try ideas against. I listen to other people when they tell me about experiences they might have had with similar audiences in the past. Whatever happens, I make sure that *anything* I plan to say is something that has every chance of appealing to the right sensibilities of my audience, because I've forgotten this before. And it hurts.

How to kill an audience, with boredom

It was the third time I'd met investors, and by now I was becoming a little desperate. They were simply not listening; I could see their eyes glaze, their body language pleading with me to stop the torture that was my pitch so that they could finally finish the job I'd started and have a full-on snooze.

I was utterly bemused. Couldn't these people see how exciting my pitch was? Couldn't they feel their imagination lights up at all the incredible potential wrapped up in the technology me and my friends had been working on for the past 2 years? Me and my compatriots were doing to make a dent in the universe, and these jokers were reacting as if we couldn't even make a dent in their sleeping schedule.

I was losing, and I needed to figure out why quick!

Hindsight makes all things obvious³. I'd forgotten the golden rule; say it with me now:

²Unless it's a point they make. If they make the point, and they are the source, then *attribute* them in your talk. Call them out, refer to them, thank them!

³Hindsight is a *serious* weakness in human reasoning. For those interested, check out "The Field Guide to Understanding 'Human Error'" by Sidney Dekker, or frankly any of the wisdom that comes out of the mouth of the excellent John Allspaw.

“What does the audience care about?”

In this case, my audience cared about how much money they’d make for investing in my team, period. They would take a shallow, polite interest in what we do and why it’s important, yada yada... But only for as long as our prospect needs in order to come to decision that it was defensible and valuable enough to be a good bet. They cared about:

“How big is the market?”, and “What traction do you have?”, and the old but classic: “Will my bonus be bigger than last year’s?”

None of which I was speaking to! I was killing them, and my chances, by highlighting what *I* thought was important. I had the wrong detail, the wrong narrative, and the wrong damn perspective entirely! It really didn’t matter about the quality of my pitch deck, or how long I’d rehearsed, or how funny and charming I was, I’d lost from the moment I’d opened my mouth. I did *not* know my audience, and so it didn’t matter how right my points were, they were utterly ineffective in the brains of my audience because I had not started with “What do *they* care about?”.

Getting to know the audience before you meet them

I mentioned before how you could find things out about your audience, but that’s just collecting together raw data. You don’t know your audience once you’ve asked around, you have then got to process those perspectives into insights, delving deeper into what might actually motivate your audience.

I get into my audience’s heads using my single favourite noting and thinking tool: a mind map. I find a mind map a fast, visual and memorable tool for getting things out of my head in a way I can understand later. [Popularized by Tony Buzan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map)⁴, I heartily recommend taking some time to explore using them for all sorts of tasks, from making notes through to exploring and inventing new things⁵. Placing theory entirely aside, I love mind maps because I get to think

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map

⁵My personal favourite is to take a common sense concept and pull it apart rationally until you realise just how little common sense there is in it. Some would call that applying the Socratic Method as a philosopher, others would call it simply being a masochist... I’m easy either way.

and synthesise information as I use them, and when it comes to planning talks I find them perfect for generating ideas and “a-ha!” moments galore.

It’s time for a little exercise. Try and give this a go. Take a big bit of paper and write down the pivotal question we’ve been focussing on in the middle of the page.

Now start asking yourself what you know about your future audience. What is their perspective? Write anything that comes to mind around the core question in the middle of the paper. Keep going. You might create multiple maps, depending on how much you know, or don’t know, about your audience. With each iteration you’ll get closer and closer to their perspective. Closer and closer to understanding what makes them tick.

Adjust, refine and keep

Your mind map, or mind maps, of your audience will be one of your most valuable go-to resources throughout every other step as you build your talk. Your audience’s perspective, and the answers you find to the question of “What do they care about?”, are your key navigational aid as it will be a constant reference and steer towards ensuring that you are fulfilling the goal of any successful talk, i.e. to *Connect and Communicate Effectively*.

Your understanding of your audience’s perspective, and what they want, makes it possible to connect and communicate, and is essential if you’re ever going to manage to do it effectively. However, there is a lot more to do before your talk rocks in the hearts and minds of your audience. In fact, there is a villain standing right in your way. You might understand your audience’s perspective and motivation perfectly, but there’s still something standing right in the way of your path to success. It’s hidden, it’s sneaky, and it has thousands of years of evolution on its side. Now that you know what your audience cares about, it’s time to hit this enemy head on. You must overcome it. You must overcome the...

Brain’s Crap Filter!

I’m serious.

TL; DRs

- A good talk is just that, a *talk*. It's a performance, and people are there for you.
- Your audience is there to see and hear you, to have those moments *with you*, don't disappoint them.
- Keep your own talks simple, and use the power of your stories to leave your audience happy and satisfied.

(There are) No Dumb Questions

Should I never show a video?

Any and all media and gimmicks are ok as long as they support your story. Be aware of the story you are telling and if you find something just fits, then by all means use it.

Can't I just hit the stage and present the facts?

You could, but I would *not* recommend it. Especially not if those facts are easily discoverable online. Facts are not compelling to our brains, unfortunately. You should always not conflict with the facts, that would be deceptive and we leave that sort of behaviour to politicians, but it's not good enough just to present the facts, you must make those facts compelling with your narrative.

6. Introducing your Enemy: The Brain's Crap Filter

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A Crap Filter?

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“Am I going to procreate?”

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Worse... it's the Brain that learns

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Breaking into the audience's brain, legally

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7. Tell me a Story

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Your talk is a Journey

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You won't know your talk's story at the beginning

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A Talk's Story is its Framework

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8. Exercise: Practice being a Meta-Watcher

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9. Starting to cook up a talk

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But I don't think I have anything to say...

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How to start collecting ingredients

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Get it all down

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Mixing it up

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It's not about you...

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Say less, and kick the ego out

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Simmer and Reduce to Taste: Less really is more

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Create your TL;DRs first

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TL; DRs

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(There are) No Dumb Questions

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10. Exercise: Write your Future Review

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11. Dreaming up an Early & Winning Title & Synopsis

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One talk proposal, three audiences

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Tempting, Vague and... Controversial

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Tempt Me!

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You don't want to miss this!

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With a Title and Synopsis comes Feedback

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The Ossifying Effect of a Talk's Acceptance

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(There are) No Dumb Questions

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12. Building your first narrative

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“The first draft of anything is shit” - Ernest Hemingway

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Playing + Working = Plorking

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Why don't you... Go Out And Do Something Less Boring Instead?¹

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It's only for you

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¹Showing my age, but does anyone else have that line sung in their head? “Why Don't You?” was epic tv from my childhood, and I can honestly say that I clearly didn't listen to the full title's message as I was happily sitting inside watching the entirety of the show all summer.

How do I know I'm finished?

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(There are) No Dumb Questions

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13. Making it Powerful, Memorable... Effective

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The Stodge

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Key Stodge Ingredient: The Title

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Secondary, Tertiary and Miscellaneous Stodge: Titles with Pause

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Adding Seasoning

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The Special Case of the Spice of Humour

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Building your Spice Cupboard

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Read Wildly!

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It's not just about reading...

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TL; DRs

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(There are) No Dumb Questions

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14. Bouncing Narrative Arcs

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Don't let your talk be like tinnitus

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Arcs are not optional

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"Oh crap!" to "I rule!"

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"Oh crap!" is an opportunity

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Close your arc with “I rule!”

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Close with a hint of “crap”

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Rinse and *Reinforce* (not Repeat)

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The importance of (silence)

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TL; DRs

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(There are) No Dumb Questions

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The Power and Danger of Garden Paths

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You're Wrong! Oh crap, to OH CRAP!

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Use garden paths with care, or not at all

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Losing trust

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15. Applying the Meme Amplifier

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Engineering a meme

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Catchy enough?

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Short enough?

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Turning it up to '11'?

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16. Rehearsal to Refine, Reduce, and Dodge Boredom

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My Mechanics of Rehearsal to Refine

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Rehearsal as the Great Reducer

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There's a Right Amount of Rehearsal for You

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I need rehearsal

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The Parable of the Obviously Bored Speaker

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Rehearsal is a dance with your own Crap Filter

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Working with your own Boredom Curve

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Keep your Boredom to Yourself

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Find your own Boredom Curve

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17. Exercise: Build your own Rehearsal Chart

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18. We need to talk about Slides

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Bad slides can be the Crap Filter's Friend

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Slides must complement the talk

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When slides work

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Make your slides emphasise

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Minimise slides

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Watching Comedians

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But I need slides!

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19. Compete for your Audience

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Start attracting your audience immediately

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You market your talk

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Don't ask for my slides early, please

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20. Exercise: Build a Talk Promotion Plan

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21. Questions anyone?

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Avoid the Rhetorical

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Prepare for Questions!

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Keep your ear to the ground

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22. It's your Style

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You'd never know I am an introvert

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I consider my clothes. No, really, I do!

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Where's your guitar?

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Your Style, Your Audience's Expectations

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23. Exercise: Plan some Style Experiments

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III Performance: How was it for them?

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24. Nerves and the Night Before your Talk

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Evil Temptations

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Develop your routine for the “Night Before”

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Rehearse once and early

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I eat a regular meal

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Do some (any) exercise

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Lastly, meditate

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How I sleep the night before

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The morning after the night before

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Moments before you take the stage

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25. Exercise: Develop and Evolve your NBR and PPR

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Pre-Performance Routine (Sample)

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Night Before Routine (Sample)

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Adjust and Evolve

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