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Better Speaking


Better Thinking

General Edition

Improve your public speaking,  
off the cuff speaking, and thinking skills:  
Tips, techniques and 500 practice topics

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# About this book

## The purpose

The purpose of this book is threefold: to help improve your speaking skills, to build your confidence, and to help develop your thinking skills.

## How we learn

We learn best when three factors are present: when we want to learn, when there is repetition, and when there is variety. In addition if there is a fun aspect to learning, knowledge and skills can be consolidated.

The book allows for all of these aspects. For example, there is ample opportunity for you to repeat the exercises, there are a variety of ways to learn, there is variety both within the topics and how you use them, and the concept lends itself to having as much fun with the topics as you like.

## How to use this book

The book contains four main aspects:

Firstly there is a section on *Communication Skills*, which covers a range of practical ways to improve your skills. This section will provide a good grounding for developing skills which can be used in most communication situations: for example impromptu speaking, prepared presentations, conversations. It also looks at the four ways to build confidence in communication.

The *500 Practice Topics* section is a crucial part of the book.

Major improvements in skills and ability do not happen overnight, they happen in 'baby steps'. Using the topics in this book on a regular basis can bring about a significant improvement to your confidence, skills and ability.

The topics are split into sections and cover a wide range of approaches and issues. Some are serious, some fun, some controversial.

Dale Carnegie's suggestion - that by practicing our speaking skills for a minute a day we can make significant improvements - has been the basis for this book. However, there are many other ways the skills, techniques and practice topics can be used, and these are covered in the '*Strategies for Using the Topics*' section.

Interspersed throughout the book is the story of Marie, our *Case Study*. Marie is

an amalgamation of many people I have come into contact with over the years via running training courses, speaking at conferences, and belonging to Toastmasters International.

We share her journey from being nervous and feeling unsure of her speaking ability, to gaining increased feelings of confidence and competence.

Through 'speaking to' other members of the public speaking group she has joined, she learns tips and techniques for improving both her confidence and speaking ability.

The responses she receives are genuine comments from real people I interviewed during my research for this book.

In addition there are pages at the end of the book where you can log your *Notes and Ideas*.

The book has been designed for ease of use. It's one you can dip into it for short periods of time – even a minute a day – or wallow in it for lengthier periods.

### **What are the benefits?**

Having the ability to assemble knowledge and thoughts on any topic at a moment's notice will allow you to build your ability to think on your feet.

It will help with your off the cuff speaking and will increase both your ability and confidence when giving prepared talks. You can be confident that if you 'lose your place' when speaking, you can talk intelligently on an impromptu basis for a short while until you get back on track.

Learning the techniques can help with question and answer sessions during presentations and with the communication skills needed for meetings, for example when chairing a meeting or when you are called on to give your views. In addition it can give you the confidence to say what you want to, during the meeting.

It can help with interview skills, conversation skills and networking skills.

You will be better equipped to speak with impact and avoid waffling, you will have better content, and you will be able to get your message across more effectively. You will be able to speak more persuasively and with more credibility, and it will be better for others who communicate with you!

It can help with speech writing and preparation.

# Communication skills

Whether we are looking at impromptu or prepared speaking, there are a range of techniques we can use to help improve our speaking.

Simply having an understanding of a communication issue will help raise our game, as once we are aware of something we can then start to make improvements.

## **The one factor that separates a poor communicator from a great communicator**

Imagine that people could be placed on a continuum, where at one end are the poor communicators and at the other are the great communicators. There is only one difference that separates people at one end from those at the other, although this difference is made up of a number of factors.

These factors include such issues as appearing confident, knowing their topic thoroughly, connecting with the audience, being audible, well-presented and so on.

The one factor that separates a poor speaker from a great speaker is that 'A great communicator completely meets the needs of the audience.'

All audiences (and an audience can be anything from one person to a large group) are basically looking for the same thing from a speaker. No one is looking for the opposite of the characteristics mentioned. People do not want someone who, for example, comes across as non-confident, who doesn't know their topic and who doesn't connect with the audience.

A great communicator has worked out what other people want and has spent time developing these skills and characteristics. We will be covering some of these in this section.


## **STAY: Stop Thinking About Yourself**

Looking at the continuum, we notice that people at the 'poor communicator' end tend to focus on themselves.

For example they may worry that they will appear nervous, that they will blush, that they will say the wrong thing.

# Case study

## Marie: Beginning the journey



Marie is a woman in her mid-30's. She works as a first level manager in a government department. She feels uncomfortable when addressing both formal and informal groups, especially when she has to stand up to speak. She also feels uncomfortable about dealing with interjections and question and answer sessions, as she prefers not to have to think on her feet. She would generally describe herself as a non-confident speaker who would benefit from some skills training. However, the people who attend staff meetings with her or see her speak to groups wouldn't describe her as nervous or lacking in ability. She has reached the stage where she wants to overcome her feelings of nervousness and gain more skills and confidence. She has recently decided to join the Toastmasters International public speaking group.

Monday evening.

Marie had arranged to go along to her first Toastmaster's meeting. She had spoken to one of the members of the group, Peter, a few days before, and he had arranged to pick her up and take her along.

She was nervous.

"What do I wear?" she wondered. "Business clothes? Casual?"

She decided on smart casual, hoping she wouldn't look out of place.

"What if they are all good speakers and I'm the only useless one?" she thought.

The sick feeling in her stomach grew stronger. "I can't go."

Right at this moment there was a knock at the door and Peter stood there smiling.

"Ready?" he said cheerily.

Marie felt obliged to go.

When she arrived at the meeting, people were wearing a range of clothing from T-shirts and jeans to business suits. She relaxed just a little.

There was a pleasant level of activity going on. Some people were setting up

# Strategies for using the topics

There are many ways to use the topics. Below is a range of suggestions for you. There are no prescribed ways for using them, though remember that regular practice will bring about the most benefits.

## How many should I practice?

- You can simply practice one a day ...
- ... or try several at a time...
- ... or keep the book handy, in your bag or in the car for example, dip into it and speak to a topic or two when you have spare time
- Many of the topics are in 'pairs', that is two topics on a similar theme. You could speak to both of them at a time
- Alternatively write out a number of topics on slips of paper and put them in an envelope. Pull one out and speak to it
- You can try several a day in the beginning if you are new to it, then gradually change to one a day
- Get into one mode of thinking and do several topics from the same section
- Or speak to one from a variety of sections to get your brain 'changing direction' from one topic to another. For example choose the first topic from several sections

## How long should I speak for?

- One minute. Dale Carnegie said that if you practice your communication skills for one minute a day, it requires little effort, but over time can significantly increase your communication skills
- Speak to the same topic for different lengths of time, for example one minute, two minutes, five minutes, 10 minutes. This will mean you need to think through different ways to speak to the topic in order to fill the time
- If you are a Toastmaster, or in another public speaking group, you may want to practice for the same length of time as you are allocated for table topics / impromptu speaking
- Spend several minutes on each topic until you get a feel for how it works, and then reduce the time. This can help you practice giving concise responses
- For as long as you feel it is appropriate to address the topic

# Techniques for impromptu speaking

Being able to assemble knowledge and thoughts on any topic at a moment's notice is a valuable skill to have.

It will bring a variety of benefits such as being able to contribute more effectively at meetings and becoming more adept in social situations.

It will also help with prepared talks as it will give you the confidence to know that if you 'lose your place' you can talk intelligently for a while until you get back on track.

The techniques below will help you speak with impact, speak to the point and avoid waffling.

## **Are you listening?**

Have you ever had the tendency to mentally 'wander off' when in a meeting, for example? Perhaps use your cell phone? Spend time reading something? Talk to someone else?

To be able to give an effective response, you will need to make sure that you are listening. Note that 'hearing' is passive, while 'listening' is active. Paying attention and keeping up with what is happening will give you the best foundation for speaking effectively. It will allow you to understand the situation and be able to comment directly on the issue.

In addition if you actively listen it shows a level of respect and you will therefore gain more respect once you speak. If you listen to others, they are more likely to listen to you.

Moreover you are able to reflect. You can use what people have said in what you say. This will give more weight to your words.

## **Pause – Work out your end point – Go in a straight line**

The Canadian humourist Stephen Leacock wrote about a man who 'flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions'.

Sometimes people give responses like this! They fling themselves into a response without having given any thought to what they are going to say, and their thought process and subsequent speaking goes 'in all directions'.

# 500 Practice topics

The 500 practice topics are split into sections, each section having 20 topics. The topics are in pairs, that is two topics on a similar theme. Using the suggestions from the chapter on 'Strategies for using the topics' you can speak to the topics in a variety of ways to gain maximum benefit.

<b>Section</b>	<b>Category</b>
I	People
II	Male/Female
III	Choices
IV	Looking at the past
V	General (1)
VI	Favourites
VII	About you (1)
VIII	Health
IX	For and against
X	Quotes
XI	Speaking frames (1)
XII	Computers & technology
XIII	General (2)
XIV	Science
XV	Controversial
XVI	Just one word
XVII	About you (2)
XVIII	General (3)
XIX	Education
XX	Stories
XXI	Semantic fields
XXII	General (4)
XXIII	Speaking frames (2)
XXIV	Persuasive speaking
XXV	In the style of

## Section I: People

1. Elvis Presley – why does the legend live on?
2. Marilyn Monroe – what really made her so popular?
3. What would be happening in Princess Diana’s life if she were still here?
4. If you had a choice would you rather meet Queen Elizabeth I or Queen Elizabeth II?
5. Who has been the best neighbour you’ve ever had?
6. Who has been the worst neighbour you’ve ever had?
7. Who was your hero when you were a child?
8. Did you have a childhood sweetheart?
9. Who has been an inspiration to you?
10. Who’s the funniest person you know?
11. Adolph Hitler – the legacy he left the world
12. Winston Churchill - the legacy he left the world
13. Was Shakespeare the greatest writer of all time?
14. Who do you find the most interesting historical figure?
15. If you could vote for the ‘Most Outstanding Person of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’, who would you vote for and why?
16. If you could vote for the ‘Most Outstanding Person of all time’, who would you vote for and why?
17. Who is the most sensible person you know?
18. Who is the most intelligent person you know?
19. Do you keep in touch with any of your school friends?
20. Tell us about someone you met on holiday

## Section XI: Speaking Frames (1)

Try slotting your response into a speaking frame. This gives a structure to your reply.

For example if you used the Belief Reason Suggestion frame for the question: "What kind of car do you think I should buy?" You may respond along the lines: "I think you should buy an expensive red sports car, so that you can drive around town looking sophisticated. Let's go to the Porsche showroom and see what's there!"

### **The BRS structure: Belief Reason Suggestion**

State what you think or believe, give your reason, and finish off with your advice

1. What's the best way for me to lose 5kg in a month?
2. What's the best way for me to save money when doing the weekly food shopping?
3. Should I exercise every day or every few days?
4. Should I take vitamin tablets?
5. Should I take my husband's surname when I get married?
6. What's the best school in the area to send my child to?

### **The Goals, Obstacles, Solutions structure**

Using the following scenarios, outline what you want to achieve, explain the difficulties, and propose a solution or solutions

7. You are leading the committee meeting for the local tennis club, and want to get the members to agree to raise the annual membership fee
8. You are explaining to your teenage children why you want to have a TV-free month
9. You are trying to convince your husband/wife/partner to let you give up work for six months to go on a course
10. You are trying to convince your boss to let you reduce your hours from 40 to 30 a week

11. Someone asks you for advice on how they can buy a car they can't afford at the moment
12. Your son wants to borrow the car this evening. You're happy to lend it to him, but you also need it tonight

### **The Past/Present, or Past/Present/Future structure**

Say how it was in the past, how it is now, and how you see it in the future

13. The country's education system
14. The weather
15. The kind of clothes you wear
16. The kind of people you mix with
17. How we heat our homes
18. How we cook our food
19. Your weekly supermarket bill
20. Your phone bill