The 15 Biggest
MISTAKES
Speakers make on Stage

Hugh Culver

You might be a seasoned pro with hundreds of presentations under your belt or a rank beginner with high aspirations, either way you've seen - even suffered through - a bad speech.

It doesn't have to be that way.

In the over 1,000 presentations I made I'm sure I've made every mistake you can make. I've also become a student of great presentations.

In this short guide I'm sharing some of the biggest mistakes speakers make on stage. And there's good news - these are easy to avoid.

Enjoy the list and remember, nobody cares what we did yesterday, only what we do today. So go ahead and use this list to make your next speech world-class and bring your audience to their feet.

Be your best,

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We've all been there - watching a speaker on stage and feeling nervously uncomfortable. Maybe their content is great - even brilliant - but we're so distracted by that little mannerism, habit, or (ahem) "unique" clothing choice we can't, for the life of us, pay attention.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Even before getting on stage, there's a host of mistakes speakers make, like being demanding, not researching their audience or asking for last minute A/V changes. Assuming you got through the 'Before' steps successfully, the test is now on stage.

Here are 11 things you should never do on stage (if you want to get rehired):

1.   Not knowing the audience

There was a day when "canned" speeches were the norm. Nobody seemed to mind that they were watching a photocopy of the last 84 speeches that speaker delivered. No longer.

Sure, if you're a retired quarterback or sold your startup for $300 million, go for it. But I learned a long time ago to have impact with an audience I need to know them.

I deliver 35-45 paid speeches every year, so systems are essential. One system that's saved my bacon countless times is my before/during/after check-list. A part of the "before" list is to interview delegates. Here's how it works.

First I have a conference call with the planning committee. I prep for the call with a bit of on-line research so I at least know how many branch offices they have, what they sell, who the executives are, etc. I have a standard list of questions for the call (venue, timing, agenda, objectives, etc). Next, comes the secret sauce.

I suggest my presentation will be more effective if I conduct short interviews with four to six delegates. With their approval, I ask one person on the committee to select a cross-section of 10 delegates (based on tenure, position, etc.) and to send an email (that I supply) saying I may be calling to interview them. I block 90 minutes for these calls and I don't leave voice mail messages (that's why I need extra names in case people are not available when I call).

What I learn in those 10 to 15 minute calls is pure gold. I learn their challenges, fears, frustrations, even their special language, like names of departments, products, processes, and simple details like is a client a "client", "member", or "customer".

I'm getting paid a small fortune to speak for an hour - a few phones calls is a great investment.

2. Lacking a clear message

3. Thanking the host

Thanking the host, the sponsors, the event planner, or your dog is self-serving. Your job is to serve the audience—get on with it. Instead of drooling on ad nauseam, here's how to kick off your next speech:

- Jump right into a story. Nothing makes people lean in more than a great story. Make it relate (even slightly) to the problem you're there to fix, and you're off to the races.

- A bold claim. A speaker I know starts with "Imagine if the next 60 minutes give you exactly what you need to create your best year ever." I might have doubts, but you got my attention.

- Tell a joke. This is the riskiest – if you can't guarantee people will love it, don't go there.

- Be controversial. For example, if your talk is about marketing, say you don't believe in marketing – you believe in relationships. A little shock value will grab your audience's attention and provide a segue into your topic.

4. No presentation structure

5. Starting slow, ending fast

When a speaker kills five minutes thanking the sponsor, telling the audience how happy they are to be there (we know you're happy – you're getting paid), sipping from their water glass, adjusting their notes – we get a bit nervous. I don't know about you, but I seriously start worrying about the next 55 minutes.

Your job is to educate, entertain, and engage the audience - that starts as soon as your introduction is being read. I want the audience laughing and leaning in within five minutes. I want to take them on a roller coaster ride of emotions and I want to end strong, but without rushing.

That takes planning and practice. Here three tricks-of-the-trade I use every time I prep for a speech:

Plan your first five minutes. In psychology they talk about primacy and recency – the first thing you experience and the last – that's what we remember the most. So, your job is to make those critical first five minutes so good they can't wait for the next 55 minutes.

Script your last 10 minutes. Like a marathon runner dragging their sorry butt across the finish line, all too many speakers fade in the last 10 minutes. Organize and script the key points you need to make. Is there a summary? Back-of-room sales? A call-to-

action? A final quote? Audiences will only remember 10% of what you tell them, so decide what is your best 10% and knock it out of the park.

Use cut-off times. Just like any project, you need to hit milestones on time if you want to finish on time. I take large index cards with me on stage and like to leave them handy on a small table or the lectern, off the side. On those cards, with a sharpie felt pen I've added the cut off times I need to hit for each major part of my speech.

6. Not matching the audience

7. Not involving the audience

The brain can pay attention for about 10 to 12 minutes before it leaves the room. Speakers that drone on ad nauseam are setting themselves up to be ignored. Sure there's a room full of faces, but nobody's home.

This skill is hard to teach, but mastering audience interaction will serve you well for the rest of your career. First, you need to plan to involve the audience within the first five minutes and about every 10 minutes following. No if's, and's or but's – do it and you will get paid more.

My absolute, died-in-the-mud, fail safe technique is the 90-second dyad. Here's how it works:

I start with instructions: "In a minute I'm going to ask you to turn to the person next to you. There might be a few groups of three – that's OK, but try to form a group of two (note: in small venues, I will quickly help them form groups of two – some adults have trouble with math). And then I'll give you 90 seconds to share with your partner 'When do you experience stress at work' (or whatever). Ready? OK, choose your partner, Go!"

Obviously, second time around requires less instructions.

In a 60 minute speech I will have three dyads and one peer coaching dyad. Hint: get them to stand during their dyads and the energy shoots up another notch.

The 90-second dyad (done right) guarantees 100% participation, the energy is up, the meeting planner loves you and you look like a rock star.

8. Being demanding

Seriously! You want to get paid like $100 per minute and now you need three A/V technicians to drop everything to help you find WIFI on your five-year-old PC laptop that you never bothered to learn how to use properly, so you can show a 10-year-old Youtube clip that has no relevance to your message but it makes them laugh so you keep using it. I think not.

Here's five mistakes you want to avoid (only if you want to get asked back, that is):

- last-minute changes to A/V set-up (like requesting sound pick-up from your laptop when it should have been requested a month before)
- asking that the stage set-up be changed (like clearing the stage even though a panel of six will immediately follow you and need chairs, table, water, etc.)
- disappearing just before you go on stage—guaranteed to make any event planner come unglued.
- Not clearing off the stage quickly so the next speaker can set-up.
- Having the event planner book your travel and then, as the event gets nearer, you ask for three changes to accommodate other bookings.

It's simple. Put yourself in the shoes of the event planner and make their life easier. If they give you a check list of requirements (most professional event planners will do this) with specific cut-off dates (like send a copy of your Powerpoint slides by this date), book on your calendar one week before to send that off (don't worry if you use a MAC, or your slides aren't ready, nobody looks at them).

It's simple. Put yourself in the shoes of the event planner and make their life easier. Be a partner, not a prima donna, and they will love you for it.

9. Bad Powerpoint

10. Reading your slides

If you're reading your slides you either don't know your material or your slides are poorly designed. Either way, put less content on slides and you'll never need to refer to them again.

Reading your notes is fine for US Presidents and academics when precise wording in paramount—not so for us peons. Studies have shown that within 24 hours, audiences retain as little as 10% of what you say, so does it really matter how precise you are with your message?

Instead of reading from notes, stay on track with a point-form list and *speak* to each point. You will sound more natural and can put more attention on emphasis, timing, and responding to audience reaction.

11. Fiddling (with anything)

Your audience has a hard enough time staying focussed for the 45 minutes or hour you have on stage. Give them a distraction and they're gone faster than you can say 'squirrel!'

Here's a short list of distractions to avoid (I'm sure you can add some dandies of your own):

- fiddling with your hair - I watching in amazement one speaker touch her hair some 30 times in the same number of minutes.

- wiping your nose - in a small group session I was leading, my client quietly pushed a kleenex box in my direction thinking I must be coming down with a cold.

- shirt partially untucked, collar turned up, button undone.

- putting eyeglasses on every time you need to refer to your notes.

- misplaced lavalier (clip on) microphone rubbing against the tie, suit jacket, or shirt.

12. Saying 'I' more that 'you'

Stories about sleeping only three hours a day, earned your Ph.D over a long weekend, and parachuting to work after pulling a family of eight from a burning restaurant are, perhaps, impressive.

And they're all about you.

Your goal as a speaker should be to impress your audience with valuable, relevant solutions *they can use*, not with exaggerated claims of grandeur.

Use words like 'you' and 'your' and be there to serve – people can always read about your heroics in your bio.

On a related (and hopefully obvious) point: if you're speaking to an business audience, use stories about business (office politics, management, competition, communications, etc.). If speaking to a non-business audience use stories about life (kids, travel, marriage, health, etc.).

Here's where it can go wrong. I recently listened to two women present to a room of mostly men, all who had started businesses in heavy industry. The presenters were skilled, knowledgeable and knew their topic inside out. But when making a point they used stories about their children, husbands' and personal life - all interesting stories, but not completely relevant to an audience who needs to take the lessons from the presentation to deal with employees, contractors, budgets, and competition.

13. Using redundancies

You job, on stage, is to educate and (hopefully) entertain. And when it comes to educating your audience and truly helping them to boldly move forward to their goals, you need to project certainty in your language.

If you drop dead-weight words and idioms from your language you will immediately have more impact.

Here is a short list of redundancies that undermine your message, weaken your lessons and that you should avoid:

"Honestly…" / "In all honestly…" REALLY!??!?! Have you NOT been honest so far in this conversation?

"Truth be told…" WARNING! I've been listening to lies and now the good stuff is coming.

"Let me be perfectly clear…." What have you been up to this point?

"In my opinion…" And exactly who's opinion were you sharing a minute ago?

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon." William Zinsser, On Writing Well

"I may be wrong but…" or "This may sound stupid but…" – YES! You're right, it already sounds stupid.

"Let me say…" or "For the record…" – THANK YOU Raymond Burr! I didn't know court was in session.

"Just saying…." – FASCINATING. You feel the need to tell us those were words we just heard. Thanks for that.

"Basically…" What does that even mean? ARE YOU so sophisticated y'all gotta dumb it down for lil' ol' me?

14. Making the audience squirm

Make your audience uncomfortable and the autonomic fight/flight reaction gets sparked, pupils dilate, heart rate increases, and blood leaves the brain – perfect! Meanwhile you're trying to teach them something brilliant.

Here are five things speakers do that make audiences squirm (and that you must avoid doing):

- inappropriate language or humour. It might have been hilarious when you heard it in the bar with your buddies, but if you have any doubts - don't use it on stage.

- announcing it's going to be interactive. If you want the majority of your audience to throw their hands in the air and run screaming to the door, announce that your presentation will be interactive - works every time. Instead, when it's time for the dyad or small group discussion, simply give them the instructions and lead them through the exercise.

- asking for a show of hands, like: "Who will admit they're a pretty bad listener?" Nobody wants to put their hand up to admit they're a: bad listener, boss, husband, or procrastinator. Your job is to educate and entertain and if you need audience interaction then orchestrate a dyad (two-person conversation) or small group discussion, but don't call them out in front of their peers.

- leaving the stage to walk through the audience. Sure, once you've warmed up the audience and established their trust you can leave the stage, but not before.

- asking for a volunteer from the audience. Instead, meet people ahead of time and then ask them if they would volunteer.

- blaming the audience. It's great to talk, in general, about gaps in personal or corporate performance, but once you start mentioning names, or talking about specific campaigns, or departments, you've crossed the line.

15. Going overtime

Aaaaaarggg. PLEASE READ THIS. If there is one mistake you must, must, must avoid, it's this one. I don't care if some celebrity hogged the stage and your 60 minute slot just shrunk to twenty – never go overtime.

Imagine you've been working on this event for the last six months, sweating over every minute of the agenda. You've lined up speakers, worked with catering, answered all your bosses questions and now the 1:00 speaker is droning on about some taxi ride she had (ten years ago, no less), clearly she is going overtime and five staff, $3,185 worth of pâté, crackers, cheese, stale cookies, and lukewarm coffee is simmering in the hallway. Bad plan.

Be a partner, not a prima donna and they will love you for it.

If you've ever suffered through a speaker nervously flipping through their final 20 or 30 slides, all the while mumbling "Oh well, we'll just skip over this one, and this one…" you know what bad looks like.

There is an art to chopping 10 minutes off a sixty minute speech with nobody knowing - I've done it dozens of times.

Think of your speech as a Bento box of connected chunks of information. No one is going to miss what is not there – so simply delete a chunk and move on.

Here's the trick with slides: before you get on stage, record the number of the slide that is the start of your close. In my case that will put me about 7 minutes from closing. If I need to cut time, I enter the number of that slide on my keyboard, hit Enter and Presto! I'm back on time.

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