



*Being a Gifted Speaker
Isn't a Gift*
Frances Cole Jones

Despite a pervasive idea that some people are born with a “gift” for public speaking—and that this gift is the reason they excel when presenting themselves—my experience has proven this isn’t so. I believe that everyone can be a great speaker, and this includes you.

So what’s the disconnect? Why do so many people feel they don’t have what it takes to present their ideas with confidence and flair?

Thomas Edison said, “Opportunity is missed by most because it comes dressed in overalls and looks like work.” I find the same is true for public speaking. If you’re willing to put in the time, there’s a science to presenting that’s concrete and available.

FIRST: RAISE YOUR AWARENESS.

The primary concern of most public speakers is, “What am I going to say?” But *how* you say what you’re going to say, and what your body is doing *while* you are saying it, are just as important.

If you’re doubtful, consider the following statistic. Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA, did a study stating that there are three elements to any face-to-face communication: words, tone of voice and body language, and we are influenced by these things as follows:

- 7% of our influence comes from the words we say
- 38% from our tonal quality while saying it
- 55% by what our body is doing while we’re saying it

Breaking down your message in this way makes it far easier to figure out what you need to do to capture your listener’s attention. You can ask yourself:

- Is my language flabby—filled with useless modifiers like, “great,” “amazing,” “exciting?”
- Do I sound happy when I’m giving good news, or genuinely sorry when I’m apologizing?
- If I were on television—and the sound was off—would someone walking by the TV know from my body language that I was enthusiastic about, or committed to, what I was saying?

As with anything, the first step to creating effective change is awareness. A greater understanding of the factors in play when you present yourself means you can begin to pick and choose, strengthen or minimize, bump up or play down each element to achieve the results you desire.

THE WORDS YOU SAY

For example, knowing that people only remember 7% of the words you say could lead to a commitment to colorful, concise, precise language. You might take a look at Yale University's list of the twelve most influential words in the English language and, having discovered that "you" is our most influential word, begin incorporating that into your talk. (For the record, the remaining eleven are money, save, new, results, health, easy, safety, love, discovery, proven, and guarantee.)

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With luck, you'd also begin to incorporate storytelling into your presentation, as people remember stories longer, trust them more, and repeat them more accurately.

Please note that stories don't need to be long to be effective. I saw a great example of this on a morning television segment where the guest was talking about the best new minivans. Describing their largest he said, "This van is so big, I can drive six kids to soccer practice, pick up some lumber on the way home, and build a tree house this afternoon"—I got how big the van was.

A terrific place to watch people tell these short stories is on cooking shows. Because we can't smell the food and we can't taste the food, the chef will say things like, "The smell of these cookies baking reminds me of sitting on grandma's back porch, watching laundry dry on the line." Mmmm. We may not have any idea what the cookies taste like, but we're likely to get up off the sofa and go forage in the kitchen for a cookie of our own.

HOW YOU SAY THEM

Knowing that 38% of your impact comes from your tonal quality could lead to a commitment to never again saying, “I’m happy to meet you,” without actually *sounding* happy. It might also ensure you never again say, “Thank you for being here today,” at the beginning of any presentation without actually sounding grateful. (In my dream world, you would also never begin a presentation by thanking people. Winston Churchill said, “*Opening amenities are opening inanities.*” In other words, they’re white noise—not to mention that thanking people at the beginning of your speech reads as flattery. Thanking them at the end reads as sincerity.)

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You might take the time to consider your tonal quality. Many of us are not speaking from our diaphragms, leading to higher-pitched, somewhat nasal tones. To check and see whether or not you are one of these people, place your hand on your abdomen while you talk. If your hand’s not moving, your diaphragm probably isn’t either.

The fastest way to engage it is to lie on the floor with a heavy book on your stomach—something encyclopedic in heft—and breathe deeply until the book is moving up and down. Then, stand and check your tone. It’s likely it will have dropped at least an octave, making you far more compelling to listen to.

Knowing this might also mean that you make the seemingly small—but indescribably important—decision to listen to, and possibly re-record, your voice mail greeting in order to ensure it offers listeners your most warm, welcoming self. To do this you would stand while recording, as this gives your voice far more energy, inhale before you press record, as no one wants to hear you sucking in a big breath of air, and speak on an exhalation to give your voice added resonance and authority.

Standing while you’re speaking might also become a habit while you are on the telephone—particularly if you are in sales—as the added energy will add to your pitch. If you get really serious about it, you might also consider making these calls in front of a mirror, as this will help you to notice when your energy flat lines.

YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Knowing that 55% of your impact comes from what your body is doing while you are speaking could lead to your coming out from behind the podium whenever possible, as the more we can see of you, the more we trust you. You might also commit to training yourself to stand in “neutral,”—with your feet side by side and your hands by your sides—as not only does this convey absolute ease, it allows you to step or gesture in any direction based on the needs of your presentation. Finally, it might

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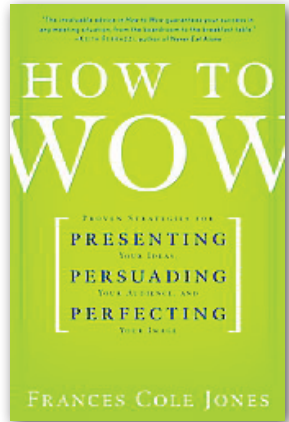
remind you sit up, and forward, in your chair during meetings, avoiding the “too cool for school” attitude conveyed by leaning back and throwing your arm over the back of the chair. You might also begin to make a habit of keeping your feet on the floor, rather than crossing one leg over the other and giving your listener a crotch shot. And, finally, you might keep your hands on the table in meetings, as we trust you when we can see your hands, and we don’t when we can’t.

You might begin to factor in that you are presenting not only while you are at the podium but while you are walking to and from the podium, and so, be sure to take the stage with the maximum of enthusiasm and panache and—regardless of how the presentation might have gone—gloat back to your seat. You might consider that, because we read from left to right, we like you better when you stand to the left of your screen during your Power Point or Keynote presentation. (But also always remember that we trust what’s on the right hand side of the screen, not on the left—which is why all the talk show hosts sit on the right—and so, put the picture you want to have noticed, or the point you want to make, on the right hand side of any compare/contrast Power Point slide in your deck.)

THE GIFT YOU GIVE

Finally, you might begin to think about those “intangibles” that take you from good to great: commitment, excitement, passion. These are the qualities that help to transcend any glitch that might occur with your technology or your verbiage. In the same way that it’s impossible to go to a child’s school play and leave talking about mishaps that might have occurred—you inevitably only remember how enthusiastic the kids were about performing for you—it is impossible not to be moved by someone who is truly committed to the message they wish to convey.

Should you begin to incorporate even half of these changes into your daily presentations—whether they be on the telephone, in a meeting, or speaking to a crowd—you will soon find yourself referred to by others as a “naturally gifted speaker.” 🗣️



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of *How to Wow: Proven Strategies for Presenting Your Ideas, Persuading Your Audience, and Perfecting Your Image*, Frances Cole Jones founded Cole Media Management in 1997. From the beginning, the company's focus has been cultivating clients' inherent strengths to develop the powerful communication skills that will enhance their professional and personal performance. The scope of her work includes preparation for television and print interviews, IPO road shows, meetings with potential investors, and internal meetings with partners, sales staff, and in-house personnel. She also provides presentation skills seminars and speech-writing for clients. She lives in New York City.

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