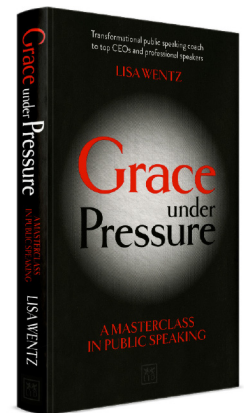


Grace Under Pressure

A Masterclass in Public Speaking

by **Lisa Wentz**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Humans are born communicators. As we grow older, however, parenting and societal influences make us second-guess ourselves and become more inhibited, less confident, and more afraid of failure. We think that we just don't have what it takes to be a competent public speaker. This is an emotional reaction not based in reality. With training, all of us can develop our public speaking skills.

Grace Under Pressure: A Masterclass in Public Speaking unveils the tools that great speakers use to develop their skills. It is the rare book that addresses all three areas of a speaker's training: an understanding of what holds us back, physical training for vocal power, and delivery techniques to enliven performance. It is full of exercises to strengthen your voice and explore its role in sharing your message and connecting to your audience.

Author Lisa Wentz, a public speaking coach, draws on decades of training in psychology, theatre arts, and vocal pedagogy to deliver in-depth information essential for training yourself to become a speaker whom others will envy and admire.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What holds you back from being an excellent public speaker
- How to train and harness the power of your voice
- How the purpose of your speech affects its content
- What techniques will enliven your public speaking

What Holds Us Back

The greatest challenges and the greatest opportunities with public speaking are often psychological, stemming from the experiences or conditioning that lie beneath the surface of our daily lives.

Stage Fright

Public speaking exposes us and makes us vulnerable. It can trigger the flight-or-flight mechanism we inherited from our ancestors through 500,000 years or more of evolution. In our early evolutionary history, being watched closely was often preliminary to being attacked by an enemy or animal. Today, this instinct isn't helpful in the context of public speaking.

Physiologically, your muscles tighten, restricting your breathing and your voice. To work through this, you must address what is triggering you. The underlying cause is often an unrealistic expectation of perfection and a fear of judgment. Many try to cope either by avoiding preparation and any acknowledgment of the problem or by overthinking the event to the point of obsession. Neither of these coping mechanisms works.

False Beliefs

Several common beliefs afflict would-be public speakers: the belief you should be good at something you haven't trained to be good at; the belief you're a fraud (you're not good enough to learn this skill); a potpourri of negative messaging you may have absorbed in your formative learning years.

Compare and Despair

Comparing yourself to others serves no purpose other than getting you stuck. The path to becoming a confident speaker is not to become like someone else—it is to discover, develop, and bring forward your own physical training, presence, and purpose for speaking.

Like athletes and musicians, public speakers must train to become good. People are not magically born great speakers.

Impostor Syndrome

Feeling like a fraud, unqualified to be doing what you're doing, is common, and strikes even people who by any objective measure are highly qualified and successful. Impostor syndrome is completely reversible.

People in Positions of Authority Are Always Right

A 35-year-old man had been told by a teacher when he was

a teenager, after he explained something in front of a class, "You are not smart and you never will be. Sit down." Many years later, he felt judged when he spoke, though he was successful and personable and had a good life.

There is no way of stopping all negativity and criticism, but you can learn how to interpret such situations and avoid absorbing these messages. Negative messages are not a reflection of who you are.

The Inner Critic

As a public speaker, you need to cultivate an inner dialogue that supports you. This is easier said than done—you may need to bring your attention and efforts to dismantling an inner dialogue that is harsh, judgmental, and undermining.

Growing up in an environment where your basic emotional and/or physical needs are not secure can send messages similar to the effects of trauma. Alcoholic or dysfunctional homes are examples. Survivors of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse will often have an inner critic. This critic can have a debilitating effect until the person makes a conscious decision to remove it.

An inner critic often develops from unreasonable expectations. Children who grow up with high expectations to succeed become adept at hiding their inner critic. It does not occur to them that they have been deeply wronged by their caregivers, who gave them strong messages that failure of any kind was not an option. They were pressured to be "perfect."

Physical Habits and Challenges

Various habits, patterns, and physical challenges may impact your public speaking.

Most of us adopt postural and nonverbal communication habits from the environment we grow up. Some are subconscious; some we are aware of. You probably identify with your habits as part of who you are. Not all of them are helping you to be a better communicator.

Observe yourself and determine if you have nonverbal habits, such as: throat clearing, coughing, speeding, or vocal fry (commonly associated with the "valley girl" accent).

Some people have damage to their vocal track that an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) doctor may need to address or a speech-language pathologist may need to diagnose. Difficulty swallowing, a breathy sound, a break in your voice when you change pitch, and pain when speaking suggest the need for a medical evaluation.

Vocal Training

A speaker, like an actor, must understand and train their vocal use. Before you walk out to the podium, you should know how your instrument (your voice) works and how good use of your instrument affects the audience and serves your goals.

To train and harness the powers of your voice, you need to go off autopilot. This involves understanding how sound is produced; eliminating unnecessary tension; and learning to access, enjoy, and rely on your body's natural resonant capacities rather than straining your voice. The best attitude is one of curiosity, experimentation, observation, and gradual progress.

Posture and Coordination

It is important for your body to be in its natural neutral posture: being balanced without excess tension or slouching, knees hip-width apart, feet parallel under the knees, and the back with its natural curve without overextension.

As adults we often lose the coordination and centered fluency of our movements because of inactivity or holding fixed postures for long periods (for example, sitting in front of a computer all day). For a speaker, this can result in a strained or limited voice and distracting movements and postural habits. The Alexander Technique can help you to restore your mind-body connection.

Breathing

We can develop breathing habits—conscious and unconscious—that greatly affect our voice. Many speakers hold their breath while speaking and take little top-up breaths as they speak. This is not ideal.

The job of a public speaker is to make the powerful breathing fueling the voice seem fluid and harmonious, without using excess tension. The resonant sound of your voice, your articulation of sound, your ability to stay focused, your ability to calm an adrenaline rush, and your influence on your listeners are all dependent on how you breathe.

Resonance

In voice and speech training, projection is called “resonance.” Most speakers need to increase the resonant sound of their voice. It's not about making your voice perfect or fitting into an idea of what's beautiful. It's about being free of tension and letting your voice naturally emerge in all its character, range, and color.

Delivery

There are reliable techniques that will enliven your delivery. These foundations of great stage presence and delivery have been used by theatre artists and directors for decades.

Purpose and Setting

Why are you speaking and to whom are you speaking? Consider the purpose of the overall event and why you are being asked to speak. Because you're an expert? Because you have a personal story to tell that is relevant to the overall event? Because your purpose matches the overall part of a conference? These considerations should affect the content of your speech. To improve your public speaking, strip away your personal agenda (getting people to hire you or like you, for instance) and focus on storytelling.

Structure and Storytelling

Humans are born storytellers. We are hardwired to share experience and information and to connect with each other using stories. Stories are powerful. They make your content relatable and memorable. They help the audience connect with the speaker and build a rapport so the audience is more open to suggestion. Most audiences are predisposed to be skeptical about what the speaker is saying. By telling a story, by getting people to relax and relate, you start to open their minds to different ideas.

Choose your stories based on the theme and purpose of your speech. Then, you need to focus on telling them well. Try some simple techniques to invigorate your stories and your storytelling delivery, like: using details and imagery, stressing words appropriately, and delighting your audience.

Tone, Pacing, Pausing, and Body Language

There are essential techniques for developing a delivery that matches your content and that brings your message to life in a way that ensures you reach your audience.

Tone

Match the tone of your delivery with your content. If you are sharing great news, you should be happy and upbeat. Sharing negative information should be done in a serious, sincere tone. If your audience is hostile, ground yourself in what you believe to be the truth and how it may benefit others. Bring courage, fortitude, creativity, and respect into your tone rather than fear, judgment, or discouragement.

Pacing

Many speakers speed up their rate of speech due to adrenaline or nerves or a sense of pressure to entertain coupled with a fear of being boring. Slow down. Match your speed to your content.

Pausing

Humans are not built to constantly hear and take in information. Continuously listening to the sound of a human speaking, especially while being expected to remember facts, ideas, or discussions, is exhausting. There is a need for silence—for pauses.

Pauses should be silent. Work to rid yourself of the dreaded verbal pause, such as “hmm.” Instead of a verbal pause, breathe.

Body Language and Stage Direction

Posture and coordination are the foundation of body language. What should you do with your hands while speaking? What feels natural to you, while maintain a neutral posture.

Where should you look while speaking? If your audience is large (over 100), your eyes should stay at the horizon level. If it is smaller, you'll need to occasionally make eye contact. Face the audience—don't ever let them see the back of your head.

Presence

Presence refers to the command of attention the speaker has from the audience. The quality of your presence, or your effect on others, is something that can be consciously developed.

Charisma and Gravitas

Charisma, or charm, is a quality that many speakers who

deliver great speeches possess. But you do not need to be charming for your presence to be strong and commanding.

Presence flows from a speaker's authenticity and focus. The tone or mood you display should fit with your content and the objectives you'd like to achieve with the particular speech or moment. The audience wants to see you, not your idea of what an audience might like. You are interesting enough. Never worry about whether you are compelling or interesting.

Bringing It All Together

As you come into the final stretch before giving a speech, pitch, or presentation, consult this simple checklist:

- Finish your slides, ideally, five to seven days before your talk.
- Ground yourself in your purpose and setting.
- Practice and time yourself.
- Ask the organizers of your talk appropriate questions so you are well prepared.
- Wear comfortable, stylish clothes that you feel confident in.
- Avoid wearing shoes that make noise when you walk.
- Minimize the amount of jewelry that sparkles.

The journey of a speaker is an ever-evolving process. Embrace it—enjoy the stage you're in, and work to make yourself a speaker you can step back and admire.



Lisa Wentz is the founder of the San Francisco Voice Center, a public speaking expert, and accent specialist. Considered one of the top coaches in the San Francisco Bay Area, Lisa regularly coaches speeches, presentation skills and accent reduction with executives and managers from Fortune 500 companies. Her resume includes Adobe, Genentech, Google, Oracle, Salesforce and VMware among others.

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