

Want to Start Your Speech Off Right? Here are a few traps to avoid

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You're standing in front of 250 lawyers and clients. Your heart is pounding. Your palms are sweating. You're about to deliver a presentation that you hope will boost your image in the minds of your colleagues and business partners. Your first words are critical. They can put you on the path to a successful speech. Or they can set off a downward spiral that will make you and your audience miserable.

What are some keys to ensure that you don't start off *badly*?

- Don't apologize.
- Don't tell a joke.
- Don't beat around the bush.

Don't apologize

"Ladies and gentlemen, I want to start by telling you that I'm not really a very good speaker. And I'm really nervous. So I hope that you'll bear with me."

I hear this at the beginning of a lot of speeches. And I cringe every time.

Never start with an apology for your own anxiety or even worse, your lack of preparation ("I'm sorry I'm a little disorganized this morning, but I just got word that I was supposed to speak yesterday.") Apologies put the audience on the defensive and make everyone in the room uncomfortable. Your listeners think, "This is going to be another bad speech that I have to endure." You've now made it more difficult to connect with your audience.

It's O.K. to be nervous. To deal with anxiety, practice like crazy. Practice the entire presentation out loud over and over until you could say it if a bomb was to explode in the back of the room. And rehearse your *first line* even more so that you'll be confident when you're most nervous.

But don't let that first line be "Please bear with me because I'm nervous."

Don't Tell a Joke

"I'd like to start this presentation by telling you what Elizabeth Taylor always tells her new husband: 'This won't take long.'"

I heard someone begin a presentation with that horrible joke. Unfortunately, this joke is typical of most "ice breaker" jokes that begin presentations. They aren't funny. They are irrelevant. And they are often offensive (If anyone is offended by the Elizabeth Taylor joke, I apologize.). As a result, opening with jokes makes you seem amateurish.

A far better way to begin is simply to describe a key issue facing your audience. If you start by focusing on something that's important to the audience, they're more likely to want to hear more.

Don't beat around the Bush

“Before I get started this afternoon, I have a lot of people I'd like to thank.”

If you have to thank one or two people, then do so. But I've heard the “thank you's” go on for five minutes. No one is listening or cares. It's a waste of time. Thank your introducer briefly. Pause. Then start right into the meat of your message. People's time is valuable. Don't waste it.

Beginning a presentation confidently sets a positive tone for the rest of the speech. To make sure that you don't fall on your face in the first few sentences, never apologize, avoid jokes, and minimize the “thank you's.”

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