

# The 5 Bad Habits of Experienced Speakers (Aug 11)

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By Olivia Mitchell

I've been through a long journey (25 years) of developing as a speaker. I started off shy, nervous and tentative. Now I'm a high energy, animated speaker and I love connecting, laughing and riffing with an audience. But along the way I've picked up some bad habits. Attending Doug Stevenson's [Story Theater Retreat](#) helped me identify some of these habits. So I'm starting off this list with my bad habits and then I'll go onto list habits I've observed amongst other experienced speakers.

## 1. The Plastered-On Smile

At the Story Theater retreat, I discovered that I smile most of the time when I'm speaking. Start talking – smile, that was my pattern. This was a cringe-making discovery. I've observed other speakers with this habit and internally mocked them – without realising that I too, suffered from this problem.

For me the habit probably started from wanting to portray myself as warm and friendly to my audiences, but it had become so ubiquitous that I was smiling even when I was describing unpleasant events.

I broke the habit by identifying the segments of my presentation when I shouldn't smile, and then rehearsing those segments consciously keeping my face relaxed. Just before starting my presentation, I would remind myself again of the segments when I didn't want to smile. Now that I've broken the habit, I just remind myself to 'live my content', to be in touch with the feelings behind what I'm saying and live those feelings in my speaking.

## 2. Relying on memory

As a beginner speaker, I scripted all my presentations word for word. As I became more comfortable and more experienced, I let go of the need for a script and trusted myself to say what needed to be said. I took on the concept that I was communicating ideas, not sentences. And that's what I teach to most of my clients who are beginner and intermediate speakers.

Doug Stevenson advocates scripting your stories. Having eschewed a script for so long this took me a while to grasp. But here's the paradox. At some point in your speaking career, you will reach a point where you can't improve without going back to scripting again. That's because you should be fine-tuning and replicating your best lines. You can't do that consistently unless you write those lines down.

I'm lucky in that I work most of my time with my partner Tony and we listen to each other speaking and write down the great lines. They then go into our notes so that we can use them again. If you don't have a partner to do this for you, record your speeches (it doesn't have to be a camera, it could just be a sound recording) and then listen back noting your best lines. Now you can consistently replicate them.

## 3. Hamming it up

As you get more experienced and start to get in the swing of telling stories and acting them out, it gets tempting to ham it up. For example, in one of my presentations I act out the drama I have in my head about people being able to see that I'm nervous as I'm giving a presentation. The more I ham it up, the more people laugh. But there are other situations where hamming it up has no effect at all on the audience. The distinction between these two situations had eluded me. Doug Stevenson had the answer:

*Humor is big, drama is small*

When you want people to laugh exaggerate. But when you want to portray emotion, think Colin Firth – be subtle.

For more on Doug's take on humor see: [How to be Funnier](#).

#### **4. Power corrupts**

Speaking can be like a drug. Being at one with the audience, riding a wave of interaction and laughter, is a great feeling. You feel on top of the world, with this audience in the palm of your hand. You are all-powerful... and yes, power corrupts!

You start improvising, riffing, you get hyper! Most people in the audience appear to be having a great time. Problem is these manic offshoots don't take the presentation anywhere.

Sure, play with your audience – but don't forget the point of your presentation.

#### **5. Throwing out random questions**

And then there's the opposite situation where you just can't seem to make it with a particular audience. Your best lines are falling flat, you're facing a sea of unresponsive faces.

Some speakers in this situation get desperate. They depart from their plan and start throwing out random, clichéd questions hoping for just a breadcrumb of interaction from someone... anyone in the audience.

Don't let it happen to you. Audiences are different. Some will show their delight in the ride overtly. Others may be quieter in their appreciation.

Asking questions of the audience can be an excellent interactive technique. But your questions should be carefully planned – in their placement, wording and implementation. For more on asking questions check out this post: [The 10 steps to asking questions so you get an answer every time](#).

#### **About the Author:**

Olivia Mitchell is a presentation skills trainer and blogger. Visit her blog [Speaking about Presenting](#) for many more presentation tips.

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