



An Interview with Ed Barks
Author of *The Truth About Public Speaking*

Tell me why you decided to write a book about public speaking.

In my years as a presentation skills trainer, I have seen too many leaders with fear in their eyes—fear that there is too much to learn in order to become a skilled presenter. What happens? They give up. In the process they sacrifice opportunities for career advancement, new customers, leadership in community affairs, winning an election, and more. I want to give hope to leaders who are holding themselves back and not fulfilling their complete capacity.

You include a foreword from former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell. How did that come about?

I am humbled and honored that a world leader like Senator Mitchell would take the time to put some very kind words in writing and endorse *The Truth About Public Speaking*. I worked for him on Capitol Hill in 1981 as an intern. Upon returning to Maine, where I lived at the time, I served a term as Chairman of the Portland Democratic City Committee, which naturally kept me in touch with the Senator. The opportunity to work for him was truly a life changing event for me. In fact, my experience on the Hill had such a profound impact that I moved back to the Washington, D.C., area for keeps in the mid-1980s.

Did you write your book all in one draft, or did you revise and rewrite as you went along?

Both, in a way. I pulled all the research together, sorted it into logical divisions and created my chapters. Then I wrote. Once the first draft was done, I moved some passages around, deleted some stuff, and bolstered other areas. I try not to overcomplicate things. That's not to say organizing a book is easy. But for me it was a pretty straightforward process.

Were there any tricks you used that helped motivate you to write? And what about writer's block—how did you conquer that?

Well, I hope these don't turn out to be famous last words, but writer's block has never been an issue for me. As for techniques that helped in my writing, every morning I was up no later than 5:30. That was my quiet time to concentrate exclusively on writing. I tend to be a morning person so that pattern worked really well for me. In fact, I still rise at 5:30 to write, whether it's a white paper, an article for a periodical, or to putter around on my next book.

You have written radio news copy, speeches, news releases, white papers, and more. Why write a book?

On a personal level, it was a way of challenging myself, I suppose. While I enjoy crafting articles, speeches, and the like, I was never sure until I actually started on *The Truth About Public Speaking* that I could create a book. From the professional perspective, I can reach a whole lot more people with a book than I ever could leading my interactive small group trainings. I view the book as a way of empowering as many leaders as possible with the tools they need to become better public speakers.

So, what is the truth about public speaking?

The truth is the rewards in life typically go to those who embrace communicating with the public. Think about it. CEOs and political leaders these days need a solid hold on their communications skills when they step before a crowd. Another truth is that nearly anyone can sharpen her or his public speaking skills. By following the Three Keys to Great Presentations™—Preparation, Performance, and Assessing Feedback—business, non-profit, association, government, and political leaders can better advance their goals both professionally and personally.

Give me a few more details about the Three Keys to Great Presentations. That is, after all, the subtitle of your book.

It's a really intuitive and easy to remember system. I am not one for complicated maxims or spaghetti-like flow charts. Keep things practical so people will comprehend and retain the knowledge they can use in real life; that's my belief. Preparation represents the "before" phase of your presentation. Performance is the "during" phase. And Assessing Feedback covers the "after" stage. It seems to resonate with my clients so I thought it made sense for the book, too.

There are a lot of books out there about public speaking. What separates yours from the pack?

I felt like there was a void for a book that pulled together all the crucial elements. There are some good resources that explain how to organize a speech or use acting techniques, and some that deal with other pieces of the puzzle. But for my money, they are too narrowly focused to do most leaders much good. And, frankly, there is a lot of garbage about presentation skills on bookstore shelves. At any rate, I am hopeful *The Truth About Public Speaking* helps fill that void.

If assessing feedback and lifelong learning are so crucial, why haven't other authors focused on them before?

I can't speak for anyone else. What I can tell you is that all the tips and techniques in the world won't do you a bit of good if they are not accompanied by some implementation strategies. That is why I devote significant chunks of the book to assessing feedback and lifelong learning. Beyond devoting separate chapters to both of those topics, each concept is threaded throughout the text. Those two components are critical since they represent the sweet spot for improvement as a presenter.

What do you do when you're not writing?

Professionally, I can be found traveling to lead a workshop or on the phone coaching leaders from various walks of life to sharpen their communications edge. Personally, I tend to be a workout-aholic. I really enjoy hitting the gym as often as possible, though you wouldn't know it to look at my 6'3", 185 pound frame. I am a sports nut in general. Put me in a ballpark (especially in San Francisco's SBC Park!) on a sunny day and I'm in heaven. And, of course, my daughter's dance recitals, cross country meets, and swim meets are real favorites as are the many and varied pleasures of sharing life with a wife who shows me every day what it means to be alive.

Teaching people how to speak in public strikes me as a rather esoteric occupation. How did you fall into that profession?

It is true that there aren't a whole lot of us who focus exclusively on communications coaching. I do it because I love it. Sounds corny, I know. But the fact is when I had broad responsibility for public relations while working for an association, the thing that really made me leap out of bed in the morning was knowing I was scheduled to lead a training that day. For me, there is no thrill quite like seeing the light bulb flick on over a trainee's head when she achieves a moment of clarity thanks to something experienced in the workshop. I am hopeful the book will switch on those light bulbs, too.

I know that you work with a lot of public relations and medical education agencies, training their clients how to speak in public and deal with the media. Could any of them view your book as a competitive threat?

Public relations and medical education agencies hire me for my specialized knowledge and ability to pass it along to their clients. *The Truth About Public Speaking* reinforces the legitimacy of my ideas and puts the knowledge their clients need into one easy to reference publication. Hey, I'll even throw in an autographed copy of the book for each of their clients I train!

What will be the focus of your next book?

The focus will remain on communicating in public, this time when dealing with the media. I'm already in the early stages of writing it.

Do you see yourself becoming a full-time writer?

I always have been a writer and always will be. But full-time? No. I would miss the human element too much—those light bulb moments I talked about earlier. Besides, I am a firm believer in practical learning. If I was cloistered in an ivory tower instead of in the real world conducting trainings, my knowledge would start to wither and die.

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