

## Chapter One: What Are the Three Keys to Great Presentations?

This is a free excerpt from Ed Barks' first book, *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*. If you like what you see, [buy your copy on Amazon](#).

### *The Three Keys to Chapter One*

*You can expect to learn the following about the Three Keys to Great Presentations™:*

- **The basics of the easy to remember yet effective Three Keys to Great Presentations, and how they can sharpen your speaking abilities.**
- **Why leaders – from the Fortune 500 CEO to the non-profit volunteer – need solid public speaking skills to advance their careers and causes.**
- **The power of lifelong learning, and why you need to view improvement as a constant endeavor.**

The world is coming to an end. That is the mindset of many an individual who finds herself slated to speak in public.

The presenter pictures herself striding haltingly to the front of the room, convinced the audience can see her heart leaping out of her chest with every rapid beat. Her knees knock together, keeping a rhythm that would be the pride of any flamenco dancer. Her voice? Forget it. It's as thick as if she just downed up a mouthful of peanut butter. Her face is flushed to the shade of red used by fire engine designers.

Put most speakers in front a mirror, and they might ask: "Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who's the most nervous of them all?" They are convinced the magic looking glass would respond, "you, my pretty."

Well, it's time to separate perception from reality. I want to give you the power of a new reality – one that provides you with a crisp reflection of a new you, the way you will look before every presentation from now on.

Let's look at the facts. Of the millions and millions of presentations delivered throughout history – from the days of Eve addressing the serpent – the earth has continued to spin. After all, when is the last time you read the following headline?

## **Speaker Passes Out from Stage Fright; Audience Erupts into Peals of Laughter Over Prone Presenter**

It just doesn't happen. At the same time, I don't mean to belittle the panic that can strike in advance of a speaking engagement. Most of us – me included – have experienced the sweaty palms, trembling voice, knocking knees, and brain lock.

It doesn't have to be that way. Everyone has the potential to become a solid orator. All you need to do to unlock your "inner speaker" is take advantage of the Three Keys to Great Presentations. This straightforward method charts a course toward a sharper communications edge.

What are The Three Keys to Great Presentations? They are:

- **Preparation**
- **Performance**
- **Assessing feedback**

Why the Three Keys? It's an easy to remember system that works. This ease of recall is important, especially in this day and age. We are inundated by more information in a single day's edition of The New York Times than a 17<sup>th</sup> century inhabitant of England was exposed to during his entire lifetime. Keeping track of our deadlines at work, our carpool schedule for the kids, and all the passwords we need to remember is a taxing endeavor. The last thing you need is a difficult to fathom speaking system that only adds to your overload.

The Three Keys are highly intuitive. Preparation covers what you need to take into account **before** your presentation. Performance deals with how you act **during** your remarks. Assessing Feedback puts you on the road to improvement **after** you speak.

## Why Me?

You may think you can slide through life without top-notch presentation skills. Think again. More people than ever before need to deliver presentations today; opportunities range from a formal speech to a 15-second self-introduction at a chamber of commerce luncheon.

Here's the bottom line: Your goal may be to tune up for a speech to the National Press Club, present as part of a panel at a trade association annual meeting, deliver a sales pitch to a prospective customer, or network effectively at a cocktail reception. Look around you: Time after time, those individuals who have winning presentation skills are the ones who win more customers, gain more donations for their non-profit group, and persuade more people to agree with their point of view.

You are probably reading this book because you want to sharpen your communications edge. Allow me to clue you in to how you can go about getting better. In fact, this is such a powerful idea, I like to offer it as a gift to clients in my presentation skills workshops. I bestow on them a simple three-word mantra: Practice! Practice! Practice!

Practice is the key to success. There are no short cuts. But you do have a wide array of choices when it comes time to practice. I'll detail some of those in this chapter.

## Emphasize the Practical

You will not find any mind-numbing charts or spaghetti-like mind-mapping diagrams here. This is practical information you can use right away. Sure, I'll discuss a bit of theory so you know this isn't some made-up claptrap. And I'll offer lots of insights from the front lines, using my experience as a presentation skills coach.

I have been teaching my clients how to communicate more effectively for many years now. Before that, I served as a radio broadcaster for a decade. I have seen communicators good and bad from both sides of the fence.

These observations taught me about the need for an easy to remember system that could help anybody sharpen his presentation skills. The Three Keys evolved over the years, and will no doubt continue to evolve in the future.

I broke down the art of public speaking into the three main areas that go into a

presentation – preparation, performance, and assessing feedback.

If you want what I deliver to my clients – practical, hands-on, day-to-day techniques designed to raise your level of performance – this book is written for you.

## **Under a Cloud of Anxiety**

It's a well-known fact that most people are nervous before they speak. You will hear some communications trainers loudly proclaim the fact that public speaking is the number one fear of most people. Maybe it tops the list, maybe not. Some surveys disagree (just for fun, if your trainer trots out this golden oldie, ask her for her source. Then stand back and watch the stammering and blushing begin).

I freely admit that I still feel a few butterflies in the pit of my stomach when I step forward to deliver a presentation. I'm not ashamed in the least. Hey, I'm a human being, too. This nervousness is nothing more than a signal that you are normal. I sometimes quiz participants in my presentation skills training workshops, asking for a show of hands if they get jumpy before speaking. The vast majority of hands shoot up into the air.

But there are always a few who think they are cooler than the rest of us. Here's what I ask them to do: Take the first two fingers of their right hand, place them on their left wrist, and feel if they have a pulse. Anyone who is living and breathing should feel a tad anxious. In fact, if you don't feel that extra shot of adrenaline, you will likely prove to be an lackluster speaker, one who will face difficulty persuading or inspiring your audience. Here is what matters: You know how you feel when you prepare to speak – the trembling hands and tightened voice. You are the one that counts here. We are talking about you, not some theoretical automaton.

Many people, even accomplished presenters, still get a case of the jitters when they step to the front of the room. Does that make them some kind of freak? Not at all. If you find yourself feeling a bit edgy before you speak, don't beat yourself up over it. Nerves are normal. That trepidation simply means you're human.

Also take into consideration that your audience normally wants to see you succeed. They are on your side in the vast majority of cases, and will cut you a lot of slack. If you appear a bit nervous, they understand. Many of them have probably been in exactly the same situation.

## Anti-nerve Pills

There is a variety of strategies that can help you calm your jagged nerves. It is up to you to consider them carefully and figure out which work best in your situation.

First, remember that you are the expert. Your host asked you to speak because you have a certain body of knowledge, a special point of view, or a unique ability to persuade. Take confidence in that fact.

In addition, it is important to breathe. Yes, we do this every moment of every day of our lives. But somehow that automatic switch gets knocked into the “off” position when we take to the podium. Breathe deeply – no shallow gasping allowed. This will help you overcome your nerves.

Some individuals find relaxation techniques of great use. I practice meditation daily and am convinced it helps me stay on an even keel. I also utilize simple visualization techniques immediately prior to my speech. I frame a mental picture of how the room will look and envision myself taking ownership of the room for the duration of my remarks. Other people use yoga or daily workouts as a stress release. Find the methods that work for you and use them religiously.

You will also settle down if you take some time to get accustomed to your new speaking environment. Take in the room and realize you have command of it for as long as you speak. At the risk of sounding too mystical about the whole thing, become one with the space. Familiarity breeds confidence.

Some presenters manifest nervousness by coming down with a severe case of cotton mouth. The best solution to combat that dry feeling is plain old water. Make sure you have a glass of water at the ready when you speak. And I do mean water. Other beverages like coffee, tea, and juice dry your mouth, and will only make your cotton mouth worse.

What’s more, be sure to hydrate yourself the day before you speak. Drinking plenty of water in advance of your appearance will lead to less thirst when you are on stage.

Once you are in the spotlight, use what I refer to as your Audio Tools – the way you sound. We’ll talk about how you can maximize these in full detail in Chapter Five. For now, it is important to know that these tools include the volume of your voice as well as your inflection, emotion, enunciation, and rate. Speak with a louder voice or with greater emotion. You will soon find those jitters dissipating.

Also make use of your Video Tools – the way you look. Again, we will cover these fully in Chapter Five. The basics here include movement, eye contact, facial expression, wardrobe, and use of props. Bust those jangling nerves by increasing your hand gestures slightly or displaying a prop.

## **Avoid the Confusion**

I have seen all too often a new client walk into a presentation skills workshop clueless about how he can improve his public speaking skills and fearful of what appears to be a daunting task. This impression that there is too much to learn poses a real barrier to learning.

Worse yet, he may have received bad advice, confused by previous advisors who offered only a scattershot approach. You'd be amazed at some of the whoppers I hear:

- Never use a podium
- Always use a podium
- Never use hand gestures
- Always use hand gestures
- Smile
- Don't smile

You get the picture. The Three Keys to Great Presentations open the door so that you can maximize your own speaking style. I am a firm believer that there is no single model for a good presenter. If someone tries to tell you there is, I strongly suggest you turn and run as fast as you can. Don't let anyone tie you up in a speaking straightjacket. Your personal style needs to fit you like a finely tailored suit.

## **Practice Makes Perfect**

Let's talk about expectations for a moment. If you think you will be magically transformed into an outstanding speaker merely by reading this book, think again. This volume will get you pointed in the right direction, giving you tools you need to improve. But it is up to you – totally up to you and you alone – to use those tools wisely.

You see, great speakers are not born with natural speaking talent. That is a myth I would like to explode once and for all. Indeed, that is why many senior executives who ought to know better shy away from using a public speaking coach. They believe we all emerge

from the womb with innate talent as great orators. Baloney!

Want proof? Here I am. Just ask my high school classmates. I was the shy kid who wouldn't yell "fire!" even if my hair were set ablaze. Now I love getting up in front of a room to speak. In fact, I love it so much, it's how I make my living.

What transformed this bashful youngster into a ham extraordinaire? Three little words: *Practice! Practice! Practice!* And, although I didn't realize it at the time, looking back I can see that I was putting to use the Three Keys to Great Presentations.

I sharpened my public speaking talents thanks to a career in radio broadcasting. Sitting behind the microphone day after day sharpened my verbal and nonverbal skills to a fine point. It also gave me the confidence I needed to address groups large and small.

Your practice may not come behind a broadcast microphone. You may work to gain speaking opportunities before the local Rotary Club or chamber of commerce. Or you might join Toastmasters. No matter your choice of venue, find a setting where you can get lots of practice. As basic as it sounds, there is no substitute for speaking in public if you want to become a better public speaker.

This paragraph is important, so please read it at least twice. If you cannot or will not commit to practicing, save yourself some time and stop reading right now. Pass this book along to someone who will use it. There is no alternative to practice!

In fact, it is so crucial, I bestow the *Practice! Practice! Practice!* mantra on my clients during their public speaking workshops to prepare them for victory as presenters. Success comes only to those who rehearse diligently and pay attention to the Three Keys to Great Presentations.

## **The Essence of the Three Keys**

In the following chapters, we will delve into the details of how this straightforward system can help you. Let's review briefly the Three Keys – Preparation, Performance, and Assessing feedback – and how each works to enhance your ability as a presenter.

*Preparation involves thinking strategically about which speaking opportunities you will accept, and why. It takes solid research and a decision on what presentation format works best for your individual style. Preparation means*

*adding punch to your remarks, heightening your confidence, and ensuring the room is set up to your liking. And, of critical importance, practice, practice, practice!*

Performance demands both substance and style. It requires that you win the Communications Trifecta (see Chapter Five for details) by mastering your video tools, audio tools, and magnetic message. Also keep in mind that you are putting on a show, so find a way to engage your audience. Then do yourself a favor by readying yourself for the all-important Q&A session.

Assessing Feedback encompasses more than evaluation forms. Check your audience's pulse during your talk, mingle with them afterward, and touch base with your host organization to gain the feedback you need. Honest critique leads to improvement.

## **A Word About Leadership**

The Three Keys to Great Presentations show today's leaders how to succeed when they deliver important presentations. I do not intend for the term "leaders" to refer to an exclusive club. Leaders are by no means limited to the CEO who delivers a speech before the National Press Club or the national politico who delivers the keynote to the Democratic National Convention.

One of the secrets of successful people is that they know how to communicate in public. Few people rise to the top unless they have good communications skills. Those who sharpen the Three Keys win success in more than just speaking. They earn success when it comes to business, community involvements, friendships, politics, and more.

Anyone can be a leader in a given situation. Truth be told, public speaking is a great leveler. Taking the lead by delivering a presentation allows you to carve out your own profile as a leader. Individuals who use these Three Keys act like magnets for leadership responsibilities.

Your leadership role may occur at work when you pitch a new product to senior management. If Shirley leads the presentation, you can bet that people in that audience are going to see it as her project. She assumes the mantle of leadership.

It may occur in the community when you lead the charge against a development that would blotch the landscape with urban sprawl. Bob takes on the role of chief organizer

when he is the one who agrees to speak before the city council.

It may occur on a personal level when you propose a wedding toast to a bride and groom. All of a sudden, relatives are coming to you for advice (and, hopefully, not for loans) because you're the one who had the nerve to stand up and celebrate the happy couple.

The Three Keys system delivers a means for you to create a magnetic message. Your audience is there to hear what you have to say – to be informed, persuaded, or entertained by your words. Your words are the essence of your performance.

The Three Keys approach strengthens your nonverbal tools. We'll discuss a bit later just how important these unspoken communication techniques are to your ability as a presenter. Suffice for now to say that your nonverbal cues count for well over half your ability to communicate.

As a speaker, you need a way to get your audience members involved and get them on your side. Heeding the Three Keys does exactly that.

## Traveling the Road to Leadership

We talked earlier about the fact that speaking up is a sure-fire way to be perceived as a leader. How many leaders lack solid communications skills? Sure, there are some and always will be. But in today's heavily saturated communications environment, nearly everyone gets a star turn.

In the old days, leaders with poor communications skills could indeed muddle by. There was no radio or TV, let alone streaming video on the Internet to capture their malaprops. That is simply not a picture of today's world. Cameras, microphones, or at least a small crowd are guaranteed to be present nearly every time you speak.

That means you need to be "on" whenever you deliver an address. Engaging presentations pave the road to success in business, community projects, and politics. They also help you avoid failure and embarrassment. We all understand that is true on a gut level. Let's add some specific benefits you gain when you make use of the Three Keys:

- *Eliminate trembling voice* and knocking knees
- *Stop your rivals* from winning the day

- *Craft* a magnetic message
- *Refuse to be sidetracked* by off-point or hostile questions
- *Avoid highlighting* your competitors' point of view
- *Sharpen* your non-verbal tools for maximum advantage
- *Prevent nasty surprises* from your audio/visual equipment
- *Convey confidence* when speaking before any audience
- *Get rid of* annoying non-verbal habits
- *Utilize visual aids* and presentation software effectively
- *Preempt* your adversaries' arguments
- *Persuade* undecided audience members
- *Avoid delivering* a limp message
- *Take charge* during the crucial question and answer period
- *Gain an edge* on your competition

I want to give you the keys you need – the keys you deserve – to help you improve your public speaking skills. Your goal may include tuning up for a speech in front of thousands at a convention hall, presenting as part of a panel at a trade association annual meeting, delivering a sales pitch to a prospective customer, or networking effectively at a chamber of commerce reception. The Three Keys come to your aid in these situations and more.

## **A Lifetime of Practice**

I would be remiss if I failed to address the notion of lifelong learning. In fact, Chapter Eleven is devoted entirely to this key concept. Earlier, you were granted your mantra of *Practice! Practice! Practice!* Let me explain in a bit more detail what that means.

Larry has a big presentation next month for which he is 100 percent committed to practicing diligently. He knows it must be flawless if he is to win that new account. But Larry has a problem. Although he delivers presentations on a regular basis, it seems that he hasn't logged a serious rehearsal session in many a month.

So it takes him a good bit of time to get up to speed. He feels awkward during his rehearsals. That leads to frustration, which causes him to take his foot off the gas. His practice time dwindles to nearly nothing. The vicious circle has begun.

In one final panicked burst of activity, he pulls an all-nighter before his big show. On the appointed day, a bleary-eyed Larry is far from his best, turning in a lackluster

performance. Kiss that big account goodbye. Larry might even wind up kissing his job goodbye.

If, like our friend Larry, you fail to commit to lifelong learning, you are nothing more than the student who crams for a test the night before. Oh, you might get a passing grade, but you certainly won't retain the information you will need later in life.

So it is with sharpening your presentation skills. Your audience will know, at least intuitively, when you try to slide by. It's disrespectful to them. Plus, you shortchange yourself.

That's why I am a strong proponent of lifelong learning. When I lead a presentation skills workshop for a client, I aim to instill that sense of professional curiosity. Sure, some clients are not forward-thinking and only want a one-time training. I admit that I do plenty of that, more than I'd like.

The clients who improve over time – those who become leaders in the workplace, in the community, and at home – share a commitment to ongoing education. It may come when they review a learning guide that keeps their knowledge refreshed, listen to an audio lesson that keeps their learning current, watch the videotape of their training to remind them of areas they need to sharpen, or take advantage of a refresher course in six months or a year.

I guarantee you that I can watch a speaker and pretty accurately assess his commitment to practicing, not just for that particular speech, but for a lifetime of performance. Those who rehearse earnestly over time exude a presence lacking in those who try to slide by and cheat themselves and their audience. That presence comes across as a little thing people call leadership.

## **The First Key – Preparation**

We will delve into the specifics of each of the Three Keys in later chapters. For the moment, let's take a brief glimpse to set the baseline for your improvement as a presenter.

The first of the Three Keys to Great Presentations is Preparation, which I will cover in detail in Chapter Three. Without preparation, all is lost.

Legendary comedian W.C. Fields may have best summed up the need for preparation, when he said, “always carry a flagon of whiskey in case of snakebite and furthermore always carry a small snake.”

Many speakers fall flat because they forget how far in advance the preparation phase begins. Do you think it begins when you arrive at your venue to speak? When you first set pen to paper or fingers to keyboard? When you get that e-mail asking you to speak at your company’s employee development day?

You need to go back even further than that if you want to think strategically. Chart a course that guides you toward speaking opportunities you want. Even before that phone rings asking you to present, decide which types of speaking invitations you will accept.

Your guidelines should take into account whether this an audience you need or want to reach. Let me give you a personal example. I know in advance that if I receive an invitation to speak before a group of senior public relations executives, I will quickly accept. Why? I partner with many public relations agencies; that is an audience I long ago made a conscious decision to target. On the other hand, even an engraved, personalized invitation from the local knitting society will not get me before that organization. That is not part of my target audience (unless my research tells me that a senior public relations executive loves to knit and is a member of the group).

Chapter Three gives plenty of ideas detailing how you can gain the advance information you need so that you can target your remarks to the audience at hand. I will also talk about how you can get someone else to brag about you in front of your audience. And we will talk about the need for practice, the most vital preparation step you can take. Are you confused about how to structure your speech? Chapter Three also goes into detail on the choices you have and when it is appropriate to use each one. Once you have decided upon your main message for each individual performance, I will show you how to punch up your wording and avoid dry, sleep-inducing language.

When you speak, do you use gear like microphones, laptops, or LCD projectors? There is a bucketful of strategies in Chapter Three that will help you stay away from any technical snafus. And if they should arise unexpectedly, I’ll show you how to work around them.

In addition, you will receive pointers on how you can diplomatically assume control of your speaking venue – everything from planning your seating arrangement to what you need to check when you arrive onsite.

And if you are curious about the best methods for fielding questions from audience members, Chapter Eight is for you. It spans the range of issues from the friendliest softballs to the zinger posed by a heckler.

## **The Second Key – Performance**

You have graduated to the second of the Three Keys – Performance. This is your chance to blend substance and style into a convincing speaking combination. Performance is much more than a matter of simply reading a speech.

To cultivate a receptive audience, you must be interesting to watch and listen to. Think of the speakers you've seen who had Grade A content but put people to sleep because they droned on in monotone or stood stiffly behind a podium. Perhaps the vice president who heads your division at work fits this description. Or maybe the president of the non-profit board on which you serve comes to mind. I can even think of a college professor or two who had stimulating ideas, but spoke in voices so disinteresting they nearly put students to sleep.

Chapter Four covers performance in depth. It outlines how an intriguing introduction can put the audience on your side right from the beginning. In that chapter, I also introduce you to the concept of Winning the Communications Trifecta – using your Video tools, Audio tools, and Message – more powerfully. The Trifecta is dealt with more fully in Chapter Five.

For those who use lecterns when speaking, I will explain how to use (and how not to use) that tool. In fact, we will discuss lots of seemingly small points about your speaking environment that add up to a positive setting that boosts audience attention. How can you pick out friendly faces in the crowd to raise your confidence level? Chapter Four has the answers for you. Your all-important nonverbal performance gets the full treatment in Chapters Five and Six.

Of course, you also need to know how to close your remarks for full effect. You will find lots of pointers in Chapter Four.

## **The Third Key – Assessing Feedback**

Let's move on to third of the Three Keys to Great Presentations, Assessing Feedback. This is the one that most presenters ignore. Do so at your own peril.

It is difficult if not impossible to succeed if you don't evaluate how you perform. Better speakers get better results, whether your goal is to climb the corporate ladder, win a grant for your non-profit group, or champion an environmental cause.

It is my observation that most speakers pay so much attention to drafting their remarks and delivering them, that they fail to find ways to gauge how they did. The tendency is to spend a disproportionate share of time drafting their remarks. Practice comes in a distant second. Often, assessing feedback is not even on the radar screen. It needs to be, for assessing feedback is a key to lifelong improvement.

Why is this key so important? It avoids future failure and embarrassment. I doubt you are the type of speaker who wants to flop in front of a crowd.

The most basic means most people use to assess their speaking performance is an evaluation form. By all means, use one, but don't make it the only measurement you take.

Chapter Nine is dedicated to a detailed discussion of assessing feedback. I will cover a bounty of methods for measuring feedback that go well beyond the evaluation form.

## **Three Keys Work in Harmony**

Preparation, Performance, and Assessing Feedback – the Three Keys to Great Presentations. Is one more important than the others?

Each of these keys is vital to your success as a speaker. In addition, they must work in combination, harmonizing with one another if you are to gain maximum advantage.

Think of it this way: Your car needs gas, oil, and water to run. Don't fill up the gas tank and you will soon hear the sputter of your engine choking to a stop. Neglect to change your oil and you will lurch to a stop when your engine seizes up. Fail to add water and it won't be long until the billows of white smoke pour out from under your hood. If you neglect to use any of those necessities, your car isn't going anywhere.

Similarly, if you don't heed each of the Three Keys to Great Presentations, you're sure to encounter a roadblock on the path to speaking success.

This straightforward speaking system shows you how to succeed when you deliver your next presentation. You will sharpen not only what you say, but of equal importance, how you say it. The Three Keys give you a way to get your audience involved and on your side.

Now you have the baseline of information you need to begin to systematically improve your public speaking skills. Let's move on to examine why becoming a good communicator matters.

Ed Barks works with communications and government relations executives who counsel their C-suite leaders, and with businesses and associations that need their communications strategy to deliver bottom line results. They gain an enhanced reputation, more confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals. He authored the book that advances your career and causes, [The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations](#). Contact Ed at **(540) 955-0600** or [ebarks@barkscomm.com](mailto:ebarks@barkscomm.com). Learn more at [www.barkscomm.com](http://www.barkscomm.com).

