



How to improve speaking skills

Speaking skills are the ability to communicate effectively with others by conveying information verbally. They include:

- Clarity: Being able to speak clearly and be understood
- Logic: Making points logically and considering what listeners already know
- Language: Using appropriate language, tone, and gesture
- Engagement: Using facts, examples, visual aids, and expression to speak engagingly
- Adaptability: Being able to adapt to the response of listeners and be ready for different scenarios

Improving your speaking skills can be helpful in a wide range of social circumstances. Here, we look at the importance of speaking skills, and how to develop them.

Speaking is something that everyone does to some extent or other. The average person might expect to utter thousands of words on any given day. Some working environments, however, require much more. If you improve your speaking skills, you'll find that all kinds of doors may suddenly open for you.

Unfortunately, effective speaking skills are too often regarded as something that you either have or you don't. As a result, many of us settle into accepting a certain level of speaking ability and remain there. But it is certainly possible to become a better speaker, and there are plenty of strategies you can employ to take your speaking skills to the next level.

What are speaking skills?

Effective speaking means bringing together a range of different skills to communicate and make an impact. At the very least, you need to find the right words, put them in the proper order, and pronounce them correctly so that you can be understood.

Other aspects like emphasis, cadence, and delivery are vital, too. Just think of a great stand-up comedian – simply memorising the words and repeating them isn't enough to give a compelling performance and connect with an audience.

You might even extend the 'effective speaking skills' umbrella to cover other elements of communication such as body language and gestures. You'll also need to be able to listen to what other people are saying while you're at it. We've already blogged on how to boost your communication skills – but now let's focus on speaking in particular.

Importance of speaking skills

Effective speaking skills can improve your life in myriad ways. They'll allow you to inform, persuade and entertain, much as a great performer can. So, where might this come in handy?

Better social life

If you're socialising, then you'll probably need to be speaking. Having the confidence in your ability to speak will allow you to participate in a range of conversations, and help you to judge when to stop talking and listen. Conversation tends to be at the root of most successful relationships and friendships. Being able to speak clearly may not guarantee fulfilling social relationships, but it can be an excellent foundation.

Career advancement

Conversational skills are essential in the workplace, too, and are also useful for meetings and presentations. Speaking well can be so important that most employers won't even consider hiring you until they've had a long, formalised chat with you.

The job interview isn't just a way of seeing how prospective hires react when they're put under stress. It's also a test of your ability to listen and communicate. Having great ideas isn't enough – you also need to be able to convey them.

By developing your skills and experience in an interview format, you might find that you develop broader speaking skills that can be applied to other areas of your professional life. If you're hoping to develop your interview skills, then why not look at the University of Sheffield's How to Succeed at Interviews course.

Some career paths will require more specialised forms of speaking than others. For example, if you're working in a call centre, or as a journalist. You'll find specialised courses for both on the FutureLearn site.

Politics and activism

It isn't just in the workplace that you might want to communicate your ideas. Suppose there's a cause to which you'd like to dedicate your time and energy. Speaking skills will help you to spread the message. This applies whether you're looking to raise awareness about the state of the environment or raise money to repair the roof of your local church or community centre.

If you're committed to advancing a certain set of principles or policies, then you should make the effort to learn to communicate them effectively. Engaging people's interests will probably yield better results than simply shouting slogans at them.

Those wishing to learn more about effective activism might look into the University of Nottingham's course on propaganda and ideology or the University of Michigan's course on Influencing People.

How to improve your speaking skills

So, exactly how might we develop our speaking skills? The answer usually involves incremental improvement that is supported by helpful habits. Let's look at a few of those habits.

1. Pronounce words correctly

Several words in English are notorious for tripping people up when it comes to pronunciation. Commonly mispronounced words include hyperbole, epitome, espresso, viscount, and mischievous. You can risk embarrassment if you get these wrong, even if many people do so. This is especially important if you're pronouncing words incorrectly during job interviews.

If you're not a native English speaker, then certain words – like strengths – might require some serious practice. But it'll be worth it. Having a support group of English language students to lean on can be helpful, as can introductory English courses. King's College London's course on Basic English is a good example. It's been designed with the needs of Middle Eastern and North African refugees in mind.

Being able to pronounce the words you're speaking will establish your authority, and eliminate miscommunication. Pronouncing words correctly will give you confidence, and also give your listeners confidence that you know what you are talking about.

2. Listen to spoken English

Listening to a language is the primary means through which we learn to speak it. This generally applies in adulthood as well as childhood. When it comes to the availability of the spoken word, we've never had it so good. With podcasts, audiobooks, talk radio, and television, you can easily absorb hours of English every day, and develop an ear for the language.

You should listen to the kind of material you'd like to replicate. Suppose you want to have productive discussions with colleagues. In that case, listening to informed debates between informed people might be a useful approach. If you want to be a bit more expressive, then listening to improvisational comedy, drama, or poetry might be the path to take. Chasing Time's courses on learning English through TV drama will help you to do this effectively.

Above all, try to listen to content that you find engaging. If you get bored and stop paying attention, you're unlikely to get much from the exercise.

3. Read aloud

One exercise that's always worthwhile is to read something out loud. Many seasoned writers recommend this as part of the editing process. If a sentence sounds good out loud, then it's probably a good sentence.

Reading aloud also confers several key benefits in a more everyday context. Canadian researchers have found that reading aloud makes it easier to remember what you're reading – which can be great for boosting vocabulary.

Additionally, reading aloud will allow you to practice and even troubleshoot your speaking skills. If there are specific phrases that you're constantly tripping over, then there's nowhere to hide when you're reading aloud.

The practice might also help with your pacing, and your ability to speak at a natural rate.

You don't have to do all your reading aloud. It might be considered slightly intrusive if you're doing it on a crowded train. But the benefits are tangible, so setting aside a portion of your reading time for out-loud practice might be highly desirable.

4. Learn to sing

By learning to sing, you'll pick up a range of skills that can also be applied to more everyday conversation and speech. You'll know when and how to project your voice, become more aware of what's going on physiologically, and get the confidence that comes with performing in front of people.

The relationship between singing and reading is explored by Mark Sweetnam, of Trinity College Dublin, in this video. It's part of the university's course on the History of the Book in the Early Modern Period, that is, between 1450 and 1800. We've also got a range of music courses to check out.

5. Learn to act

In a similar vein, learning to act can confer many benefits, even if it's simply landing a supporting role in an amateur-dramatics society production. In addition, acting can help you to confront aspects of the language that you might not yet be familiar with. If you spend most of your time working with dry, technical concepts, then getting creative with the language might be more than worthwhile.

Luleå University of Technology's Introduction to Acting provides a sound starting point for would-be thespians. You might also find a local am-dram group and see if you can get involved. Doing so will also help you to meet and talk to strangers – which, as we'll see, is also tremendously helpful.

6. Get into poetry

Quite a few of us carry around preconceptions about poetry, which can get in the way of really enjoying and appreciating it. Unlike a novel or an essay, a poem is intended to be spoken aloud, in much the same way as song lyrics are meant to be sung. Getting to grips with the mechanics of what makes a good poem will help you speak more fluently.

The University of Newcastle Australia's course on Creative Writing and Poetics is a great place to acquaint yourself with the art form. It lasts six hours, spread over three weeks. The University of York's course on How to Read a Poem might also appeal.

7. Build your vocabulary

The more words you know, the more easily you'll be able to reach for the right one when you need it. A strong vocabulary doesn't just mean exposing yourself to as many words as possible, but being able to draw upon them, too. We've all found ourselves grasping at an elusive term now and again. By building your vocabulary, you'll be able to ensure you have the necessary words for effective communication.

You might think that a strong vocabulary is a product of reading widely. The more words we consume, the more we're likely to absorb. When many of us read, we might be tempted to skim over the words we don't quite understand or to infer their meaning from the context.

Understanding some words might require a little study. Do you know the difference between 'which' and 'that'? What about 'insure' and 'ensure'?

In some cases, you might assume that you know what certain words mean and inadvertently put your foot in it. Misusing a word in a professional setting can be embarrassing, but with the internet, it's not difficult to check on the meaning of a word if you're unsure.

8. Speak to strangers

Speaking effectively means taking into account the person with whom you're in conversation. If you're going to improve, you'll want to talk to as broad and diverse a range of people as possible. That means talking to strangers whenever the opportunity arises. It might be that opportunities for speaking with many different people will occur quite frequently if you're open to them.

If you're interested in getting your message across to a broad audience, then the University of Surrey's four-week course on Communicating with Diverse Audiences may prove invaluable.

9. Work on any speech impediments

A speech impediment, or disorder, is a condition that prevents you from speaking clearly. In some cases, these develop in childhood. In others, you might begin to suffer later in life. Speech disorders can take a variety of forms. In some cases, they can be mitigated through practice, training, and psychological help. If you have greater difficulty speaking when you're in a particular emotional state, then dealing with your emotions may be a necessary part of managing the disorder.

In most cases, a speech impediment can be managed with the help of specific interventions, which may require specialist help. The support of a qualified speech therapist may be necessary.

10. Practice public speaking

In many ways, getting up and delivering a monologue in front of an informed audience is the ultimate test of your communication mettle. If you can do this, then you should be able to cope with most speaking challenges.

We've covered the various challenges of speaking publicly in our blog on mastering the art of public speaking. The words we present to an audience constitute a tiny fraction of the words we speak in our lives – even if you're a prolific public speaker. But becoming good at public speaking will boost your confidence, resilience under pressure, and your ability to string an articulate sentence together whatever the circumstances.

If you're interested in this, the Royal Observatory in Greenwich runs a three-week course on public speaking. It'll equip you to inject a little bit of flair into your speeches, and help you develop confidence.

If you'd like a taster, be sure to check out our pointers on how to make your presentation accessible, audience interaction, and what to do when things go wrong. From the same course, we've also got a few top tips to get you on the right track.

It might also be worth looking at the University of Leeds' course on Presenting Your Work with Impact, which provides a more rounded look at presentations in general.

Final thoughts

Communication is one of a handful of core soft skills that can make a significant difference in just about every aspect of life. You can read about the importance of soft skills here.

For many of us, effective speaking skills don't always come easily. For some, they require work, patience, and determination. You can't expect to turn into an amazing orator overnight. Developing eloquence may take sustained effort, regular practice, and reinforcing helpful habits over years or even decades.

If this sounds disheartening, remember to focus on why you're doing this. By improving your speaking skills, you'll enjoy many benefits professionally and personally. Develop at your own pace and enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes from expressing yourself well and participating in rewarding conversations. So, why not get started?

Resource: Futurelearn

www.kindcongress.com

