



A LIGHT HEART AND A FOCUSED MIND IN THE LAW

Part Three: Speak Slowly and Carry a Big Mic.

The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops... until you stand up to speak in public. Sir George Jessel (English jurist)

I. INTRODUCTION.

Welcome back, Friends. This is the third and final piece on common-sense strategies for having a lighter heart and a more focused mind in the legal profession. The first and second cover (1) mental wellness and self-care, and (2) how to play more nicely in the office sandbox. In this piece, we will boldly go where so many of us fear to tread: The public speaking arena (cue the *Twilight Zone* theme). We will then review a few simple tips on better writing and efficiency.

II. PUBLIC SPEAKING

These words often strike terror in hearts and minds. Although relatively few of us have to get up in front of a large audience and give a speech, whenever we talk to a group (regardless of size) we are essentially “speaking in public.”

I’m not asking you to try to emulate great orators such as Winston Churchill or former President Obama. I just want to pass on some of things I have learned as a lawyer and a mental wellness public speaker. I’m glad to report that I can now get through a presentation without passing out in terror. And so, Dear Reader, can you.

A. Preparation’s the thing!

There is a fine line between winging it and overpreparing to the point of paralysis. Here are some simple tips that should help you walk (sometimes with watery knees) that line.

1. Practical preliminary steps:

- Figure out who and how large your audience will be. What is the dress code? (At least from the waist up in these days of Zoom sessions.)
- Strike a balance between over-rehearsing and simply hoping that something coherent comes out of your very dry mouth. Hope is **not** a plan. However, don't obsess that you may forget to say some things you planned on saying. You'll probably hit at least 85 to 90 percent. That's not bad at all, sports fans.
- Realize that you will look and sound better once you're on stage talking than when you rehearsed in the mirror or with friends.
- Find out what your time limit will be, and have someone track time and give you periodic alerts on how much of that precious commodity remains.
- If you are speaking at a conference, check out the venue ahead of time if possible. Be sure that there are no A/V glitches. Get a wireless mic or keep the handheld right up to your mouth. It's annoying trying to hear a person speak who doesn't follow this fundamental rule.
- If you are using a PowerPoint, run through it at least twice ahead of time in slideshow mode. Speaking of slide decks...

2. Designing slides:

I think using a deck is usually a good idea, but only if my slides conform to these rough guidelines:

- Tell the audience that they can get a link to your slide deck after your talk so they can read the details later, and not worry about taking notes on all the brilliant stuff you are saying now.
- Each slide should have only a few bullet points, and every point should contain as few words as possible.

- Don't compound the annoyance of dense text in a slide by reading it *verbatim* to the audience. It's distracting and boring! This tedious practice can also give the impression that you don't have a firm handle on your subject matter.
- Put some pictures into your slides. (Be sure you've bought the rights to them on Shutterstock *etc.*)
- Animate the bullet points so they appear click by click. You don't want your audience to be distracted by reading ahead to point #five while you are still waxing lyrical about point one.
- Try not to use too many dense charts/tables. If these data-heavy distractions pop up in your slide deck, phones will pop up in the audience. They will anyway, but charts make it worse.

3. Oh no. Oh please, *no*!

Oh yes! You're finally on the stage. It is Go Time! In addition to taking the proverbial deep breaths before you start, focus on some of these little strategies, and...it will all work out just fine:

- Imagine that your talk is nothing more than a one-sided conversation with an engaged friend.
- Don't start off by asking the audience inane, let's-all-be-friends questions such as "*How is everyone?! I can't hear you! Has anyone ever...?*"
- Try not to read from a script. You will seem less rehearsed if you use a simple outline. It will also allow you to make better eye contact. This will get easier as you get more experienced. My PowerPoint serves as an outline and keeps me on track.
- S-p-e-a-k s-l-o-w-l-y. There is *no* rush. *It's your talk*; set your own pace.

- Pause...from time to time to emphasize a point. Former President Obama is a master of this art.
- It's also effective to sometimes repeat a short sentence or phrase for emphasis.
- Mention a few interesting takeaways and refer to them periodically as you go.
- You are *not* a comedian. A little levity often has a place in a talk. However, unless you have stumbled across a very funny, completely appropriate joke (sadly, there aren't as many as there should be), don't tell one.
- Get in the habit of cutting out what I call the lard words: *Um, uh, unh-hunh, duhh, so, yeah, OK, well, Omigod! totally, pretty, sure, basically, to be honest, literally, you know, like, look, I guess, kinda, sorta, and right?!*
- Never end sentences with that last word. Here's an example: *We need to thrive, right?* When a speaker uses this crutch, I start to dread hearing it again. So, stop doing it, right? (You saw that one coming, right!?)
- Have water handy, but avoid this rookie mistake (I've made it): Do not imbibe a carbonated drink during your talk. Belching will not impress your audience.
- There will be times when you lose your train of thought. All good. Make it look like an intended pause. Breathe. Then say something else.
- Don't worry about the people in the audience who are looking at you, if at all, with blank faces. Blank faces often mask interested listeners.
- Address your talk to and make eye contact with folks in the audience who are clearly engaged. They will be your allies.
- When all else fails, picture how much fun it would be to say, *All right, you knuckleheads, here's the mic. Let's see if you've got anything interesting to*

say! Of course, you might also have to start picturing yourself looking for a new job.

III. A FEW MORE TIPS WHILE I'VE GOT YOU.

A. Writing with simple words in short sentences.

If I had had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter.

Blaise Pascal

My thoughts:

- Others (and you) should actually enjoy reading what you write.
- Read a good book on good writing. My favorite is the classic *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk & White. I also enjoy and find good advice in Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.
- Start the project ASAP so you can manage your time, but resist the temptation to just start writing.
- Create an outline of your main points. Don't worry that the first draft (which only you should ever see) needs more work.
- You will procrastinate. How do I know this? Because I do. Everyone does. So just sit down and open the laptop. Type a word or two.
- Don't freak out when (at least to your fevered mind) garbage appears on your screen. You can't create a decent looking clay pot without starting with an ugly lump of clay. (You are the potter in this metaphor: Do not use CHAT GPT!)
- Relax! Perfection and excellence are related but different. The former is the human equivalent of infinity. You will *never* get there. Striving patiently for eventual excellence, on the other hand, can be a wonderful process.

- Shorter is always better. (Lesson learned, Monsieur Pascal!)

Working more efficiently.

In the interests of efficiency, I only have four points here:

- Avoid doing easy busy work (another sign that you are procrastinating) before turning to more difficult tasks.
- To do lists are good, but don't make them endlessly. I knew I was procrastinating recently when my task list had this entry: "Make a task list."
- Work in a group less often. A cohort can be comforting and sometimes even helpful when shared skill and knowledge promote excellence. However, working in a group often morphs into lengthy gossip sessions and even selfie (I'm trying to think of a "word" I loathe more) exchanges.
- *Hypocrisy alert:* If you feel there just aren't enough hours in the day (and—I hate to say this—sometimes in the evening), turn your cellphone off and put it in a drawer in another room for a bit.

IV. CONCLUSION.

You've got this, right!?

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Cam [blogs](#) and creates short [videos](#) on wellness, daily resilience, and self-stewardship.

A former member of Princeton's varsity tennis team, Cam is an avid cyclist, and the proud dad of two adult children and a sweet little grandchild. A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, Cam now lives in San Anselmo, CA with his spouse, Laura Docter, a health coach and educator.