

confessions of a public speaker

scott berkun

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What to do when things go wrong

Since all public speaking is a kind of performance, things can and will go wrong, no matter how good you are. This list comes from my own experiences, as well as conversations with other veteran speakers. It's a handy reference for minimizing fears you might have, or for diagnosing how you could've done something differently after it happened.

You're being heckled

Hecklers are rare. When it happens, the audience is usually as frustrated with him you are. Use this to your advantage. If you engage a heckler, you often look mean, but if you get the audience on your side, things end quickly.

Hecklers are people who wish they were on stage, are drunk, or think they are helping you by contributing.

How to prevent:

- Set the rules for how the audience can interact with you. If you want questions held until the end, say so; or, if you're OK with them at any time, let the audience know. Also set boundaries for Twitter and event chat rooms. I always give out my email address so everyone in the room has an outlet to say things they're not sure are appropriate during the lecture.

How to respond:

- Always remember you have more power than any heckler. If you have the microphone, you are amplified; he is not. You can interrupt or talk over him, and he can do nothing to stop you. It's really not a fair fight in any sense. As soon as a heckler realizes this, he will silence himself.
- Address whoever spoke and ask him to hold his comments or questions until the end. Done politely and calmly, this nearly always works. It shows you won't be rattled and that you'll stop the problem before it gets out of hand. Even if someone makes a joke at your expense, don't make it into an argument; politely ask him to wait until your presentation is over.
- If you are confident, you can quickly dispatch a heckler with a joke or funny comment—but be careful. If you're not good at this, you're entering a battle you might lose. It's easier to laugh at the joke, even if it's at your expense. Say, "That's interesting, thank you" but continue with your point. This gives him some respect, as you're acknowledging his voice, but keeps you in control.
- If someone is clearly out of line and upsetting other people, ask the event host to help. If the crowd is hostile or behaving inappropriately, the host should be willing to take action. You can ask the heckler to leave if he can't respect your rules, and the host should help make this happen if it's necessary.

Everyone is staring at their laptops

Every audience has a culture, and in some cultures it's common for people to stare at something other than the speaker. This often takes energy away from the speaker, so it's usually to the speaker's advantage to have as much eye contact from the audience as possible. Sometimes people are just taking notes or sharing what you say with other people, which is good for you, but other times they're playing Solitaire or wandering the Web, which isn't good. People in the audience should be free to choose how they want to listen, but you are also free to influence how they make that choice.

How to prevent:

- You can ask people to close their laptops. Don't demand it—respect their right to do what they like, especially if they are paying to be in the room. But you can tell them you think you'll do a better job if you have the room's undivided attention.
- Sometimes I say the following: "Here's a deal. I'd like you to give me your undivided attention for five minutes. If after five minutes you're bored, you think I'm an idiot, or you'd rather browse the Web than listen, you're free to do so. In fact, I won't mind if you get up and leave after five minutes. But for the first 300 seconds, please give me your undivided attention." Most people close their laptops.
- Keep in mind that some people take notes on their laptops. They might be live blogging or tweeting what you're saying, vastly increasing your audience beyond the room. An open laptop doesn't always mean you're being ignored.

How to respond:

- There isn't much you can do, but you should focus on the people who are fully engaged.
- Go with the flow. Have Twitter open on your laptop, project it on the screen, and take a moment midway through your talk to review comments and questions.
- Ask the host to monitor Twitter or the event chat room as a way to get the best questions and comments from the back channel into your presentation. Let the audience know this is happening and how they can send a question to the host.

Your time slot gets cut from 45 minutes to 10

Event schedules have mistakes, and speakers pay the price. Cancellations, travel delays, or other logistical problems put event organizers in difficult spots where they have no other choice but to limit your time. If your slot is late in the day, you may be forced to give a shorter presentation to make up the time.

How to prevent:

- Unless you're the organizer, it's not your job to keep others on time. If you do notice the schedule getting behind and your talk is late in the day, let the organizers know. Recommend they cut a break short, or ask several speakers to make up a few minutes each rather than force you to pick up the slack for the entire day.

How to respond:

- If your talk needs to be cut short, ask the organizer to introduce you and to tell the audience it's not your fault the schedule has fallen behind. This will at least get you some additional sympathy from the crowd.

Everyone in the room hates you

There are days when the vibe in the room is all wrong, and it feels like the audience either hates you or just wants you to shut up. It can especially feel this way when speaking in foreign countries or in corporations that have just announced major layoffs (but no one told you this before). Or, maybe you actually did something stupid, and they rightfully hate you for it.

How to prevent:

- Your host is your guide. He should tell you if there is something you need to know, like recent layoffs or other bad news that might be on people's minds. If you're paranoid, you can ask, "Is there anything that happened recently I should know about?"
- Get there early. If you are early, you can introduce yourself and talk to people who will be in your audience. You'll get a feel for what they're like; it may change how you approach the larger group.

How to respond:

- On some days you just have to go into robotic mode, and give your presentation as if you are speaking to a crowd who likes you. Just do your thing and don't worry about the audience. If they hate you, they hate you, but don't fall into the trap of trying to change your presentation on the fly out of fear that

they don't like you. It's impossible to do. Go on with the show enthusiastically for the sake of the handful of people who might hate you less than you think.

- Cut material to get to your Q&A quickly. If you have optional stories you sometimes tell, drop them. The sooner you get to Q&A, the faster you can diagnose what's going on. And at worst, the sooner your talk will be over.

One guy won't stop asking questions

This is the polite variant of the heckler, and it's much more common. Some people don't realize they are abusing their question-asking privileges and fail to notice they are speaking almost as much as you are. Just be glad you're not married to someone like this—you'd never get a chance to speak at all.

In some cases, these people answer questions addressed to you because their drive to impress you, and others, is so strong.

How to prevent:

- The general rule is that people raise their hands with questions, and you pick who gets to speak. If you keep calling on the same person, whose fault is it?
- If people are yelling out questions or comments, ask them to first raise their hands.

How to respond:

- Realize the audience hates these people. They're annoying and often come off as teacher's pets, which no one likes. The sooner you quiet them down, the happier the audience will be with you.
- Just because a question is asked does not mean you are obligated to answer. Ask the audience, "How many people are interested in this question?" If only a fraction of the audience raises their hands, tell the asker to come up afterward and you'll answer then.
- During a break, talk to the person in private. Thank him for his contributions, but ask him to hold off on asking more questions so others can have a chance to contribute. Give him your email as an alternative way to ask questions.

There is a rambling question that makes no sense and takes three minutes to ask

A good warning sign of this is a question that has a 60-second preamble. Whoever is asking a question this long hasn't thought about it enough yet to even form a question.

How to prevent:

- This is tough. Warning people to avoid rambling questions tends to intimidate them from asking anything at all. It's much better to respond when and if it happens.

How to respond:

- Ask a clarifying question, "Do you mean X or Y?" Interrupt people if necessary. If they seem lost, ask them to rethink their question while you answer the next question. Then go back to them later. This is pushy, but if you do it with charm, the audience appreciates it.
- Realize the audience hates these people, too. They didn't come to the session to hear someone's rambling, poorly formed pseudo-question. If someone is 30 seconds into a question, and you think he's going nowhere, you're the only one in the room who can do anything about it.
- If you do cut him off, remind him of your email address and mention that longer questions are fine—just not in real time.
- Sometimes people want to make a point of their own, which is more than fine, provided it's short. Same advice as above applies in this case.

You are asked an impossible question

There is nothing wrong with a tough question you can't answer. There is no law that says you as the speaker must know everything. If you are speaking on an interesting topic, of course there will be questions you can't answer. There were plenty of questions Einstein couldn't answer either. Even omnipotent speakers can't answer the question, "What is something you can ask omnipotent speakers that they can't answer?"

How to prevent:

- The only solution is to have a talk so boring, or so obscure, that tough questions are impossible because the audience doesn't know what the hell your point was. Don't do this.

How to respond:

- Learn to say three words: "I don't know." They are easy to say. You will not die instantly if you say them.
- Write down the question or ask someone to email it to you, and promise you'll post an answer to your blog.
- Offer the question to the audience. Maybe you're not the only one who can't answer the question. If no one in the audience knows, they seem at least as dumb as you do. And if someone does know, you've helped the person who asked the tough question get an answer, even if it's not from you.

The microphone breaks

Often microphones only partially break. They have feedback or flitter in and out. This is incredibly distracting for an audience, and they will blame you for it. If after a couple of minutes the problem doesn't resolve itself, assume the microphone is broken.

How to prevent:

- Pray to the gods of A/V equipment.
- Demand a sound check before your talk.
- Ask the A/V people where there are sound problems in the room.

How to respond:

- Confirm with the audience they are hearing the same problems you are. Sometimes the problems are only heard at the front of the stage.
- Get the tech crew involved. This is why they are paid. As embarrassing as it is for you, if you get them to help, the audience will know it's not entirely your fault.
- In moderately sized rooms (100 people or less), the acoustics are often good enough for people to hear you without a mike if you project well. Step forward, and you might be able to get started while the tech crew fixes things.

- The best filler material is to ask people what they hope to learn. Or ask people who have been in their current job for fewer than five years to raise their hands. They will always be able to answer, and it gives you some useful background data.
- If it's a long session, take a break. People like breaks. Rather than force them to watch you struggle with the equipment, give the audience five minutes to get coffee or go to the restroom.

Your laptop explodes

At every conference, there is always at least one person who has technical problems with his computer. Some events force you to use their lectern computer to help minimize problems, but with video codecs and font issues, this sometimes makes it worse. Mac or PC, all computers have issues, and every projector and video system has charming idiosyncrasies that the tech people who manage them are in denial of.

How to prevent:

- Use your own gear.
- PC laptops are more popular, and I'm convinced they have fewer issues with projector compatibility. Problem is, they're PCs.
- Demand a video check before your talk.

How to respond:

- The big question is when to abandon your laptop. Ten minutes is my cutoff point. If after 10, you're still not sure what to do, go with Plan B.
- Plan B: know your core points (see Chapter 5). Be able to write them down as a short bulleted list. Do a shorter, less formal version of your talk. Don't constantly say, "If I had my slides" or "In my real presentation...." The audience doesn't care about what they might have seen.
- Have a printout of your slides with you. Worst case, you can use this as your notes.

There is a typo on your slide (nooooo!)

This one is easy. Who cares? Sure, it's nice to spell people's names right and to try to make things perfect for your audience, but mistakes will be made. The web, blog, and Twitter world has made everyone much more forgiving of bad spelling and punctuation. If a typo is your biggest mistake, you've done very well.

How to prevent:

- Have a friend flip through your slides.

How to respond:

- Thank whoever caught it and make a note to fix the mistake. Then move on.

You're late for your own talk

For reasons explained in Chapter 3, this can happen easily if you are speaking somewhere new. Being late, honestly, happens when you don't plan to arrive early enough. You can make sure traffic, late flights, confusing directions, and all the things that cause delays don't kill you, provided you arrive hours early or the night before.

How to prevent:

- Get there early. Fly in the night before. Do not assume the travel world works perfectly because it never does.

How to respond:

- At the first moment you think you might be late, call your hosts. They may be able to swap your time slot with another speaker. The sooner they know, the more options they have, and the less they will hate you.
- When you do arrive, no matter how late you are, take a moment to reset yourself. If you are frantic and panicked, you can't possibly do a good job. It's worth being an extra 30 seconds late to make sure that you're calm for whatever time you have left to speak.
- Before you close, offer to stay late for anyone who has follow-up questions. It's a good habit anyway, but this might mitigate people's gripes about your late arrival.

You feel sick

This is a judgment call because everyone handles being sick differently. Some people can manage a cold or a headache so well that if they don't mention it, no one would know. Other people can't concentrate at all.

How to prevent:

- If you know you're speaking the next day, don't go out drinking the night before.
- Eat an apple a day.

How to respond:

- The big question is whether you should cancel. This depends heavily on how easy it is to reschedule. Talk with your hosts as soon as you feel sick and let them tell you what the options are. Given the choice of seeing a half-baked lecture from a sick person or rescheduling to see a good lecture from a healthy person, most of the audience would prefer the latter. But if it's a one-shot deal, like at a conference or if they've all come just to hear you, they'd prefer the former.
- Always bring some aspirin with you. It won't cure your flu or cold, but it will make you feel better for a couple of hours, just enough time to get through a presentation.

You're running out of time

This happens much more often than people ending early. Since most people practice to finish exactly on time, with little buffer, it's not a surprise.

How to prevent:

- If you build your presentation right, there should be a steady rhythm throughout the talk that informs you of your pace every step of the way (see Chapter 6). This prevents you from discovering you have one minute left to cover half of your talk.
- Practice to use less time than you are given.
- Plan to have 20–30% of your time slot for Q&A. If you run over, you can eat some of that Q&A time.

- Use a remote control that has a timer.
- Ask your host to warn you when there are 15 minutes remaining, or whatever is one-third of your total time.

How to respond:

- Don't get lost. If you can't get through the material, put it aside and focus on your audience. If you have three sections left and only time for one, let the audience vote on which section it should be.
- Quality is always more important than quantity. Don't cram or rush. Always be willing to abandon material so the material you have time for can be done well.
- Offer to provide the slides on your website for any material you did not get to.
- Offer to come back again to cover the remaining material and answer any follow-up questions people have.

You left your slide deck at home

Hey, it happens. Perhaps you copied them to the wrong place or left your flash drive in the airport restroom.

How to prevent:

- Put your slides in three places: on a flash drive you bring with you, on your own laptop, and on a website you can access from any web browser. Redundancy wins.
- For the paranoid, print out a copy as well. Sometimes analog beats digital—if the power goes out and you have a flashlight, you'll be all set.

How to respond:

- The gutsy way to go is to admit it to the audience. Apologize. Beg their forgiveness and improvise a way to be useful to them anyway.
- The simple trick is to make a list of 10 questions at the start of your talk, pulled live from the audience, and answer each question in turn. What do they expect to learn? This may turn out to be much better material than what you had planned.

Your hosts are control freaks

Sometimes the people who host you ask—or are told by their bosses to demand—all kinds of annoying things. This can include using ugly slide templates, instructing you not to say certain things or tell certain stories, and most often, wanting you to sign waivers that give them the right to videotape and photograph you for use of their own choosing.

As the speaker, you are providing a service. You can refuse or ask to strike out conditions you don't like.

How to prevent:

- You can let organizers know you don't like being videotaped, or set other conditions, early on. Professional speakers often have info sheets they give prospective venues that list their requirements or things they won't do.

How to respond:

- Politely explain why the condition works against your goals. If videotaping makes you nervous, regardless of why, explain that videotaping will reduce the satisfaction of people actually in the audience.
- Slide templates are stupid 95% of the time. They're meant to improve slide quality, but they're always based on PowerPoint templates, which are notoriously bad, bullet heavy, and ugly. A decent compromise is to use the title slide from their template but nothing else. Never let them auto-update your slides based on a template, as it always messes up layouts and complex slides in evil ways event organizers will rarely notice.
- Simply strike out the offending clauses, initial them, and return the contract, mentioning what you did. This is often perfectly acceptable.
- If they insist on video or audio recording, demand a Creative Commons license so you can reuse that recording yourself. This will allow them to do what they wish with the recording, but also gives you the right to post the video on your website or to YouTube, or to sell it. It's quite fair to ask for this: you get a professional recording you can reuse, and they get the right to film you at all.

You have a wardrobe malfunction

This happens to people performing at the Super Bowl all the time. And even for people less famous than Janet Jackson, many unfortunate things can happen to clothing over lunch or in a public restroom.

How to prevent:

- Have the host or a friend in the audience look you over before you begin.
- Remove all nipple piercings well before your lecture begins.
- Always make a pass through the restroom before you go on and check yourself in the mirror. A good time is right before they want to put a microphone on you and after you've made sure your laptop and other tech gear are working properly. Check your teeth (spinach is evil) and your fly, and talk at the mirror and move around just to see if anything silly is going on.
- One plus to being early on the schedule is that the odds of spilling something on yourself go way down.

How to respond:

- If you notice something you can fix discreetly, hide behind the lectern to do it. The lectern covers many sins.
- Bring a sweater or extra shirt just in case something bad happens. A sweater can be put on over your shirt or wrapped around your waist, covering whatever it is you wish to hide.
- And of course, find a way not to care about superficial things you can't change. Make a joke or tell a story of a worse experience, but above all, don't let yourself be upstaged by a stain, a rip, or an open zipper.

There are only five people in the audience

There is a magic number when the audience is so small that it's no longer an audience but more of a group. The mistake is to pretend it's still a big crowd and to give a fancy presentation designed for a large audience. It won't work. You have to switch gears.

How to prevent:

- Have a sign-up sheet for your talk. Most conferences do this by default. You should always know how many are registered. Drop-off rates for lectures are high, usually around 50%. If 100 people sign up, you should expect 50 to attend.
- Do some research. How many people showed up to the last lecture that took place at this venue? Are there good reasons to assume your material will draw a larger crowd?
- Promote yourself. Two things have to happen to have a big crowd: interested people need to be made aware of your talk, and then they need incentive to come.

How to respond:

- Use the density theory. If you're in a big room, get everyone together. If it's really only five people, make a nice semicircle so a conversation is natural.
- Drop your prepared slide deck. Odds are slim that it will go over well with a small group. Switch to informal mode, and start the session by making a list of questions as described previously in "You left your slide deck at home." Then answer them.

What to do if your situation is not here

Well, my friend, there is only one fail-safe maneuver. You must pay attention to what happens so you can tell your friends about it later. As you'll see next, true disasters always make for great stories you can share with other people.

You can't do worse than this

We all have great stories we tell our friends about something in life gone horribly wrong. Bad things happen. Life goes on. And eventually what was miserable becomes funny, at least for our friends. These stories work because they make others feel better about things going wrong in their lives, including the person it happened to.

I've compiled this list for that single reason: to make everyone feel better. Whatever you're afraid of, I suspect it's not anywhere near as bad as what happened to these folks. And these are all smart, experienced speakers. It's an honor to make the list, and I'm grateful to all the people who contributed a story.

Does anyone speak Georgian?

My worst was also one of my first. I was asked to “attend” a conference of “senior government officials” in Georgia (as in the Republic of). I arrived late in the evening and was taken to a government house to sleep. The driver woke me at 7 a.m., and we left at 7:30 to drive an hour or so to a government office. When I arrived, I found about 50 top officials, from the president of the Supreme Court (and most of the Court), to the leaders of the parliament, and about 20 representatives from the president's office. I was seated at the head of the table. No translator for me. The president of the Court began—two sentences in English welcoming me, and then 20 minutes or so to the audience in Georgian.

He then turned to me and said in English, “Now, we’d like you to give a one-hour talk comparing the German, French, and American constitutions, with any special insight for Georgia.”

I know, you’ve had that dream. But this was for real.

—Lawrence Lessig
*Professor of Law,
Stanford Law School*

What to do when the SWAT team comes

Moscow, 1997. I was one of several speakers at a consumer electronics company-sponsored “thank you” dinner in a magnificent restaurant. Several important executives had flown in from Tokyo for the evening.

Thirty seconds into my talk, the doors burst open and six balaclava-hooded and heavily armed OMON troops (Moscow equivalent of a SWAT team) moved into the room. They did not speak. Neither did I.

Four of them occupied the corners of the room while two headed directly for a table on the far side, AK-47s drawn. They grabbed a man at the table, stood him up, and marched him out of the dining room. All quiet, the remaining four sidled out.

I finished my talk. The Tokyo executives never returned to Moscow.

—Dan Roam
*author of The Back of the
Napkin (Portfolio)*

A funny thing happened on my way to the stage

After a long night of conference partying many years ago, I overslept and woke up only moments before I was supposed to give a talk. Not only did I have a killer hangover, I was fairly certain that I was still drunk. I raced out of the hotel room in which I had fallen asleep, horrified to realize that, at some point during the night’s adventures, I had swapped my shirt for a new T-shirt that read, “I fuck like a girl.” Given how late I was and how far away from my own hotel, I had to go as-is. Before entering the conference hall, I decided that I needed a cigarette. I walked up to a cute girl who was happy to offer me one. Yet, after I took a deep inhale, I quickly realized that it wasn’t filled with tobacco.

Somehow, I still managed to give my talk. Luckily, this was SXSW, a conference jokingly called spring break for geeks, and many in attendance were wearing sunglasses to cover their own remnants of the night before.

—danah boyd
Social media blogger

Death by lecture

One of the few stories of a lecture killing someone comes straight from the Bible.

“Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him.”

from Acts 20:9–12

CEO demo gone wrong

While working at Microsoft, I flew all the way to Toronto to do a demo during Steve Ballmer's keynote for COMDEX Canada. The whole demo was supposed to be five minutes. I walked on stage, clicked one button, the demo machine started flashing and having a seizure, and 15 seconds later I was headed off stage.

All that time and money spent for 45 seconds of public humiliation. And of course, the picture on the front of the Toronto paper the next day was of me and Ballmer laughing uncomfortably while I was flailing. I'm sure he loved that the press decided that my 45 seconds were the most important part of his keynote.

—Hillel Cooperman
www.jacksonfish.com

Do not set anything on fire

Twenty-five-year-old Leonard Susskind was asked to give a talk at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University. In the front row were J. Robert Oppenheimer, Nobel Laureate T. D. Lee, and many other notables. Susskind was young and terrified, and responded by being overly aggressive and defensive. It was 1965, and at that time they used opaque projectors, which were

sandwiched between glass and projected by a bright light on a screen. Famous physicist Marvin Goldberg asked a question, and in trying to answer, Susskind got his red tie stuck in the projector he was using to give the presentation, and it burst into flames. Goldberg stood up, grabbed a glass of water, and splashed Susskind in the face to put it out.¹

No one likes surprise porn

Back around 2004, I was running a presentation to the newly formed New Zealand Chapter of the Usability Professionals' Association. The room was full of geeks, web managers, consultants, and librarian-types.

To introduce new and potential members to the organization, I opened a web browser to call up the website and proceeded to type *http://www.upass.org*.

Unsavory things being done to butts flashed up on screen, followed by gasps and laughter, some fainting, and one "Yahoo!" A quick Alt+F4 came in handy. Since then, all my presentations have had very high turnouts, although a significant portion of the audience wears dark shades.

The proper URL was *http://www.upassoc.org*.

—Zef
http://www.zefmedia.com

I see sleeping people

Early last year, I was presenting at a user group. Partway through the presentation, I noticed some of them giggling. One of them even left the room briefly to regain composure. Fearing that it was something about the way I was presenting, I started rushing things and having mental blanks partway through sentences (hoping I wasn't *that* boring). In between the muffled giggling, I heard this deep, nasal breathing. Looking toward the source, I discovered an older guy was actually asleep! I remarked, "Oh, we've got a sleeper." With that, the room erupted in laughter, waking the poor guy up. He left the session embarrassed.

¹ Leonard Susskind tells the full version of this story at a lecture at Stanford University, February 2, 2005. You can watch it here: *http://tinyurl.com/susskind*.

I felt really awkward about that whole presentation. I just hope to God that the video isn't lurking somewhere on the Internet.

—Daniel

At worst we will shoot you

I'm afraid many of my best stories are classified. But the gist is the same: presenting at any kind of high-security facility is infallibly a nightmare. Does your laptop have (a) WiFi, or (b) Bluetooth, or (c) an integrated camera, or (d) a microphone, or (e) a USB port (into which thumb drives may be inserted), or (f) an Ethernet or Firewire port, or (g) a PC card slot, or...etc. If so, then it's not coming through our door. Basically, if it's not a pure output device, we can't admit it. And no, you can't bring the presentation in on a thumb drive. Mail us a PDF of the slides, which we'll "wash," install on a secure server, then our technician will run them for you from a locked room somewhere else in the building. Oh, and never leave the direct line-of-sight of your designated escort, because then (at best) it's a rubber glove search for you. And at worst? We might mistakenly shoot you.

—Damian Conway
author of Perl Best Practices
(O'Reilly)

Don't blame the trains

Years ago I was a freelancer, hired to do talks and courses about Microsoft Office technologies and programming. One morning, I was traveling by train to start with a new group, and all circumstances were against me. The Dutch railway system fucked up my schedule with so many ridiculous problems, I couldn't keep count. So I arrived half an hour too late, and apologized for my lateness.

I then tried to repair my damaged image by making lots of jokes and complaints about the Dutch railway system. (I thought that if there's one thing that unites an audience, it's the sharing of pain.)

Unfortunately, it turned out that this particular group was working for, and sent by, the Dutch railway company. My reputation with them never recovered.

—Jurgen Appelo
www.noop.nl

You work where?

In 1997, after I'd been working at the highly influential HotWired website for a year or so, I went back to my alma mater to give a talk to a web design class about working in the nascent web industry.

I stood in front of the class and told what I thought were highly entertaining stories about life at HotWired for a half-hour. When I finally stopped and asked if anyone had questions, one hand meekly raised in the back.

The question was, "What's HotWired?"

—Derek Powazek
<http://powazek.com>

Watch your slides

I was traveling to FOSDEM in February 2006 on the Eurostar from London. I was due to give the opening presentation in the Mozilla room on the state of the Mozilla Foundation. The Foundation/Corporation split had happened in mid-2005, so people were eager to hear what the future held.

I arrived at Brussels Midi and decided to save a quid or two of the Foundation's money by taking the subway rather than a taxi. I went down into the subway station and tried to buy a ticket. The ticket machine utterly baffled me. After five minutes of trying, I turned round in frustration to find that my wheeled luggage had been stolen. I had lost everything except, praise God, my passport, wallet, and return ticket, which were in my jacket pockets. But my suitcase, clothes, and laptop—with my presentation for Saturday—were all gone.

Fortunately, I arrived early enough that I had time to go clothes shopping. But the 45-minute talk had to happen from memory. These days, I always take a cab to the hotel.

—Gerv Markham
www.gerv.net

Why you don't want to be up against Bono

For my first major speaking engagement, I was to speak at COMDEX on "Building Large-Scale e-Commerce Systems."

This was during the first boom, before Amazon was #1, when scale was *very* hard. We'd done it, and folks wanted to hear about it.

I was flown to Chicago to give a 90-minute talk in a room that could hold 1,200 people. It was empty, so I set up. As the time to speak approached, I wasn't sure why the room wasn't filling up. I walked around, checked the signage, confirmed the room number and time. There was just a smattering of people in the room. I figured I could start late if something had happened.

The time to start came and went...five people in a room to hold 1,200! Was I going insane? I could hear the crowd outside—COMDEX *was* packed that year. I went into the hall, toward the din, and saw him. Linus Torvalds (founder of Linux). Speaking in the room across from the room I was speaking in. That room had standing-room only, overflowing into the hallway.

I returned to my own 1,200-seat room, sat on the edge of the stage, and delivered my talk to five attendees.

—Scott Hanselman
www.hanselman.com

You will never speak of this to anyone

Standing up in front of 30 bright-eyed high school seniors the first day back to school from the Christmas holidays in 1983 will stand in my mind for all eternity. We used “chalk” back then, and I was at the chalkboard doing one of my brilliant presentations about vector analysis (I think I was as bored as my students) when I dropped the chalk. I bent over to pick it up, and guess what? In short, I farted in class. It was not an SBD (silent but deadly) but a real rip-roarer. I don't really know where it came from. I stood up and turned to the class to see the astonished faces staring at me in disbelief. All I could think to say was, “Excuse me.” Then we all cracked up. I threatened them with every inch of their lives and told them I would fail anyone who uttered a word of this to the outside. Yeah, it made the school paper the next week. Took me the rest of the semester to live that down. When Facebook came out, I hooked up with a bunch of my old students to see how they turned out. Yep, they all reminded me of the incident. I think it was permanently engraved on their brains forever.

—Martin Yarbrough
www.mpttech.com/blog

Watch where you sit

In 1996, I was giving my first-ever conference presentation at a workshop about quantum information held at the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico. I was 22 years old and very nervous, since the audience contained many quantum information big shots. The talk went well, and I got to the end. The audience clapped, and the Chair started to suggest that we should break for lunch.

I say *started* because he didn't complete what he was saying. The spotlight of attention having moved elsewhere, I decided to relax. Unfortunately, I did this by starting to seat myself on the "table" that had supported the overhead projector during my talk.

I say "table" because it looked superficially like a table, but it actually didn't have four legs for support. In fact, it was supported on a single pillar, so nothing supported the edges. I sat down on an edge, and the entire table collapsed, catapulting the projector all the way over my body, now lying prone on the floor.

—Martin Nielsen

Please make a new talk and give it five minutes from now

In February 2002, I was invited to TED to talk about Project Orion (the post-Sputnik pre-NASA interplanetary space vehicle). At TED, everyone gets 18 minutes on stage—no exceptions. I had 18 minutes of slides all set. The conference closely followed 9/11, and all eyes were on the invasion of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. At the last minute—and I mean last minute—Chris Anderson, who was just taking the helm of TED, managed to secure Zohra Yousuf Daoud, the first (and so far only) Miss Afghanistan, as a speaker. Could I cut my time to eight minutes? I guess so! No time to edit my slides, so I divided 80 into 480 seconds and set them on 6-second auto-advance, climbed on stage, and tried to keep up. Finished right on time, but I don't remember anything else.

—George Dyson
*author of Project Orion (Holt)*²

² You can watch this talk here: http://www.ted.com/talks/george_dyson_on_project_orion.html.

Check your mirror

Last year, I had a morning speaking engagement in Florida. Always the prepared flyer, I planned my flight for the day before. One hurricane-level winds in Houston warning, a stopover in Cleveland, a layover in Nashville, and 24 hours later, I landed in Orlando. On the bright side, I only travel with carry-on luggage. My computer, clothes, and everything I needed were right there with me. On the downside, I realized somewhere between Nashville and Orlando that I would be arriving with minutes to spare, and I was in my jeans-and-T-shirt travel outfit.

With the help of a sympathetic stewardess, I did my hair and makeup, then I changed into my suit, using every yoga position imaginable within that tiny airplane bathroom.

My cab got me from the airport to the convention center with 10 minutes to spare. I made it onstage, gathered myself, and walked out with a smile. I made it through the hour, and wrapped up the presentation (a training for the IT-challenged about online software) with a line I used often:

“You see, you don’t have to be a techie to understand even the more complicated programs, you just have to know how to explore.”

Then an audience member piped up, “No, but it helps if you’re a Trekkie!”

I noticed the sound guy trying not to fall over laughing offstage. He pointed to me, then pointed to his chest.

I glanced at the video screen behind me to discover that the shirt I had hastily dressed over was clearly showing off its main graphic—a yellow and black Star Trek communicator—right through my blouse.

—Cassandra

Waterproofing cannot save you

At TED I did a live, and unfortunately, unrehearsed demo of the Nanotex waterproof khakis. I took a glass of water and splashed my waist with vigor to show how it would leave no mark. In a freak instance of fabric folding, the bolus of water hooked into a gaping open pant pocket. The inner pocket lining did not have any

Nanotex coating.... So, for the entire talk my boxers were soaking wet, but you wouldn't know it because none of the water could seep through the outer pants fabric.

—Steve Jurvetson
*Managing Director,
Draper Fisher Jurvetson*

Why you should not lecture in bars

My flight arrived into Boston, Massachusetts, at 5:05 p.m., and I needed to be at Tommy Doyle's bar in Cambridge for a 7 p.m. keynote. I planned to take the subway, but it turned out the Silver line from the airport was actually just a twice-an-hour van driven by an idiot. I arrived at the bar at 6:59 p.m. The place was packed, but packed with people who had been drinking since happy hour while waiting for the event, Ignite! Boston, to begin. At 7:02 p.m., I learned the only laptop I could use was a Mac, a Mac that completely rejected my remote control. I was forced to stand on stage, with someone else's laptop on a bar stool, and manually click through my slides.

The bar was long with my small stage at the far, short end, creating a wind tunnel of bad acoustics. Not only could I not hear myself well, but the long, tunnel shape of the bar channeled all the noise from the large crowd of people drinking in the back up and over the much smaller crowd trying to listen. This made everyone unhappy and not so interested in listening to me. In response, much of the crowd, even those up front, were having their own conversations, often commenting to one another about what I was saying as I said it. Just minutes in, struggling to feel in control of the room, I was heckled by a woman when I mentioned Crick and Watson discovered DNA, without recognizing the often-overlooked Rosalind Franklin. I had enough and was pissed off. I made a joke about how now we know where the feminists in the crowd are. A joke that received mostly boos. It was all downhill from there. I finished as quickly as I could. I made a beeline for the bar, downing beers and shots of vodka, trying to forget what happened.

Hours later, Ignite! nearly over and me finally in a proper drunken stupor, the organizers found me. They wanted me to speak *again*.

To the same hostile crowd in the same awful room as the dreaded unannounced closing speaker. I did something I would never do again: I said yes. They were friends who seemed desperate, and I was shitfaced, so how could I say no? I got up on stage, grabbed the microphone, and extemporaneously talked about...I don't remember what I said. Which is probably the best for all involved.

—Scott Berkun
Public speaker