

Let's face it, not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of people, whether you're an adult, child or youth. But anyone can learn to be more confident in front of a group, whether big or small. Take Taylor, for instance, an eleven year old who loved to go unnoticed and hated being called upon to speak in front of any group. Her stomach would tighten into knots and the lunch she'd just eaten threatened to reappear on the floor at her feet. Fortunately for Taylor her mom insisted she take some drama lessons, even though she had to drag her there. It wasn't long before Taylor was learning the 'basics of drama' which are important tools in the art of communicating. As she practiced these basics it helped her to conquer some of her fears and not feel like losing her lunch during presentations. She even felt confident enough to participate in a play.

There are Nine Basics of Drama that Taylor, or anyone for that matter, can learn. They are: diction, projection, expression, eye contact, body language, memorization, body movement, character, and finally, practice. Here they are in more detail, along with some fun exercises to try.

1) Diction is learning to speak clearly so you are understood. Many people barely open their mouths when they speak so their words are a mumbled mess. You don't want lazy mouths. Exercise: Take a pencil and place it horizontally between your teeth. Try the following tongue twister as a mouth warm-up, being sure to talk around the pencil so you can be understood. "How much wood can a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" (3x's) Afterwards your mouth should feel as if it was being stretched. Now say, "Unique New York" (3x's) quickly. Most likely you flubbed it. Do it again but slow it down and properly enunciate. Slowing down and not rushing through your words helps to give you proper diction.

2) Projection is about having a strong voice. What good is what you have to say if no one can hear you? Note to parents: this is NOT about screaming or yelling (thank goodness!) A 'drama voice' requires more energy than an average speaking voice does. It should come from your stomach muscles and not your throat. Exercise: Put your hand on your diaphragm and force the air out of your stomach by saying, "Ha! Ha! Ha!" Your hand should move. Find a large room or go out to your back yard and practice by reciting a nursery rhyme or tongue twister. Think about getting your voice to reach the other wall (or fence). Remember it's not

So You Think You Can't Act?

by Deanna Storlie

about yelling.

3) Expression is making your voice interesting to listen to by adding emotion and energy. Nothing dull, tired or monotone is allowed.

Exercise: Repeat the following, "The dog ate my homework"

while saying it as if you are: angry, sad, tired, happy and nervous. You've just made that one line much more interesting.

4) Eye Contact is about knowing that your eyes communicate as strongly as your words. It's also knowing where to look when you are presenting a piece of poetry or acting out a part. Not everyone finds it easy to look people in the eye so they look everywhere but at the person. Here's a great exercise to practice with someone.

Exercise: The first person repeats, "Did you take the cookies from the cookie jar?" while looking the second person in the eye. The second person avoids eye contact while repeating, "I didn't take the cookies from the cookie jar." Now repeat the exercise but the second person holds eye contact with the first while he says it again. Which one would you believe? Switch.

5) Body Language is being aware of how your body communicates. Whether you realize it or not people recognize you by your mannerisms. How do you stand? Do you slouch or stand tall? How do you sit? Straight or with legs crossed? How do you walk? Quickly or do you saunter? Next time you're at the mall watch people and see what their mannerisms are.

Exercise: Try standing, walking and sitting like the following: a grumpy old person, a soldier, a tight rope walker, a cowboy, a clown, a famous movie star.

6) Memorization of the words or dialogue is necessary in order to pull off any play. Without it your play is merely a reading or an improvisation, which is okay but memorization takes it to the next level. You should know your material as well as you know the ABC's. Your dialogue should roll off your tongue. If you have to pause and think about it then you don't 'own' it and you need to keep working on it. A myth about memorizing is that you either can or you can't. Repetition is the key to making something 'stick' in your brain.

Exercise: Go on the internet and find a joke or go to the library and find a joke book. Pick one and start memorizing it until you 'own' it and can say it in your sleep! Don't be afraid to try a longer one.

7) Body Movement is where you stand in relation to your audience and about using your area (stage) to its fullest potential. It's

important not to turn your back to the audience but to have an open stance to the people in your audience. Also try not to keep yourself rooted to one spot but move around your performing area. Consider using some props like a chair, stool or table.

Exercise: Put a chair in the middle of your performing area and recite your joke using your space and the chair to sit on, lean on, fall over or stand on. (In the final performance pick only one or two of these movements).

8) Character is all about becoming someone other than yourself. Whether it's a king or an ogre, a baseball player or a ballerina, a monkey or a snail, they all behave differently and so it is up to the actor to copy or imitate those differences and brings the character to life.

Exercise: Find a simple costume. It could be a super hero (tie a sheet around your neck), a knight in shining armour (cut a shield out of cardboard, cover with tinfoil), a princess (a fancy table cloth for a robe), a monster (a cut up paper bag) or a newspaper reporter (dad's trench coat and hat). Tell your joke the way this character might tell it.

9) Practice is the time consuming part, but it's what will set your play or presentation apart.

Exercise: Put all the basics together: speak clearly, in a loud voice, in an expressive voice, with good eye contact with your audience, move your body like your character would, make sure you own your joke, make sure you use your performing space, become your character as you tell your joke. And when you've done all that...practice...and then practice...and then practice some more.

Think of it as baking a cake, though you might be like me and cheat by using a cake mix. However, the analogy still works. First you have the basic ingredients: oil (diction), eggs (projection), milk (expression) and, of course, the cake mix (eye contact).

Without these four you wouldn't have a very good cake. Put them all together in a bowl (body language) and then with a hand mixer (memorization), blend them. Next you need to add the batter to your cake pan (body movement), which helps to contain it so that it doesn't spread all over the oven. Don't forget to bake it (practice). Remember it takes time to properly bake a cake and without this step it's just a gooey mess. Last but not least is the icing (character). After all, what's a cake without all that yummy icing? It's what finishes things off and leaves a lasting impression that puts a smile on everyone's face.

Now that you've gone to all of this work here are some ideas of where you could 'perform'.

1. Have a family performance night in your living room (invite friends and relatives).
2. Turn your back yard into a stage by using some bed sheets for curtains and lawn chairs for the audience. Send out emails or call and invite friends.
3. Consider calling a senior center or home and perform for them. They'd love it.

4. What about the children's ward of your hospital?

5. Or your next home school event?

Wherever you choose to perform don't forget to have fun while you act up!