



# Overcoming Public Speaking Anxiety & Amplifying Our Authentic Lawyer Voices

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**M**any lawyers experience public speaking anxiety, even though the stereotypical gregarious advocate seems to be born with the gift of gab. Instead of getting down on ourselves when we experience public speaking anxiety, or forcing ourselves to “just do it,” we can tap into our authentically empowered voices through a bit of mental and physical reflection, and then a reframed mental and physical action plan. Try this activity to amplify your advocacy voice in an authentic manner. No “faking it till we make it!” Let’s be our genuine impactful selves.



## 1. ENVISION THE SCENE

First, envision an interpersonal interaction, a command performance, or a public speaking scenario in the legal context. Let’s be specific: Is it a courtroom scenario? A law office interaction? A meeting with opposing counsel? A conference call? A negotiation? An argument or speech?

## 2. MENTAL REFLECTION

For some of us, when we anticipate nerve-racking performance scenarios, we hear negative mental messages that can rattle us, but often we don’t know what to do with this information. In this activity, let’s listen and transcribe, so we can eventually delete the negative and re-craft some positive personal slogans.

First, what mental messages do you hear when you anticipate the lawyering scenario? What are the exact words, language, or phrases you hear? Write them down. How do those words, language, or phrases

make you feel? Agitated, annoyed, nervous, angry, numb? Now, try to think back to events in your past when you experienced similar feelings and heard

comparable language. Who was there? What was happening? What were their exact words, language, or phrases? Make a list of those past messages and their sources.

Now think about how much time has passed since you originally received those messages. Do any of these past messages have any

relevance to your present life in the law? Can you view the original messengers in a different light, perhaps with compassion, and realize their words might have come from a place of their own fear, but have no relevance to your legal persona now? If you can, label the messages as no longer useful, and name the original sources as no longer relevant or influential in your legal persona.

## 3. PHYSICAL REFLECTION

Next, catalogue your body’s physical responses when anticipating the performance-oriented event. Try to notice both subtle and obvious changes in your body and record each one, as if someone is snapping photographs of each new physical response the instant it appears.

What part of your body do you feel or sense first? When you first felt the emotional kick of stress or anxiety toward the interpersonal exchange, did your physical body shift in any way? Were you sitting or standing? Did you subconsciously cross your legs? Fold your arms? Hunch or crouch lower?



Grit your teeth? Clench your fists? Grip an object? Avert eye contact? Did you feel anything different internally? Did you gulp, take a deep breath, or lose your breath? Is your heart beating faster? Does your stomach hurt? Does your head ache? Are you noticing any external clues? Are your hands or knees shaking? Are you blushing? Sweating? Do you feel hot? Cold? Numb? When/if you speak, does your voice sound different? Is your voice shaking? Is it higher or lower pitched than usual? Are you swallowing more? Or less? What else do you physically feel or notice?

## 4. MENTAL ACTION

Now that you have reflected on messages from the past that re-appear in the face of a future performance-oriented event, contemplate a list of new personal taglines that can help you recalibrate and take control of your thoughts. Consider these prompts:

- **I feel strongest and most like a rockstar when:** \_\_\_\_\_.

[Note: This could be weightlifting at the gym, playing the guitar, cooking, running, painting a picture, rehabilitating an abused pit bull, whatever. Be specific with the details. The point is to identify an environment in your life where you feel almost invincible. We want to bring some of that swagger into the legal context.]

- **I am really good at:** \_\_\_\_\_.

[Note: This can be completely unrelated to law. Again, we are trying to identify aspects of ourselves that showcase our strengths. Then, we bring some of that swagger into the legal context.]

- **I feel really smart when I:** \_\_\_\_\_.
- **I feel really physically capable when I:** \_\_\_\_\_.

- **People seem surprised when I:** \_\_\_\_\_.
- **My best day was when I:** \_\_\_\_\_.
- **My ideal day is when I:** \_\_\_\_\_.
- **People listen to me when I talk about:** \_\_\_\_\_.
- **I bring something different to the table because I:** \_\_\_\_\_.
- **I am not afraid to speak to others when:** \_\_\_\_\_.

## 5. CREATE 10 POSITIVE SLOGANS

Now that you have reflected on the scenarios in your life in which you feel most powerful, write out at least 10 positive personal slogans. If you need a prompt, or are not sure how to phrase them, try these:

- I am a \_\_\_\_\_ person.
- I bring \_\_\_\_\_ to the table.
- I care about \_\_\_\_\_.
- I deserve to be treated \_\_\_\_\_.
- Perfection is boring; be \_\_\_\_\_.
- Who cares if people can see [insert your least favorite visible physical response to stress]; I will keep talking and it will go away.
- Who cares if I don't express myself perfectly; it is more important in this moment for me to be \_\_\_\_\_.
- Not everyone needs to like me; \_\_\_\_\_ likes me.
- This doesn't have to go perfectly; my goal is to get through the experience, while doing the best I can while I am learning, and reminding myself that \_\_\_\_\_.



- I do not need to be perfect at this; this is just practice in \_\_\_\_\_.

## 6. PHYSICAL ACTION

Armed with new information about how your body instinctively responds to anxiety toward a public speaking event, consider subtle changes to your physical stance and movement that can help channel your energy, blood, and oxygen flow in a productive manner. How about these:

- **Stance and Posture:** Do you have a favorite athlete? How does he or she stand when preparing to move? Most athletes stand in a balanced, open stance. Consider watching a helpful [TED Talk by Professor Amy Cuddy](#) about “power poses” —standing in a powerful pose for a few minutes before a performance event.
- **Breath:** Practice breathing to slow your heart rate.
- **Appendages:** Open your arms and hands; let that excess energy jump out of you, or direct it into a podium or desk.
- **Eye Contact:** Practice channeling excess energy out of you by projecting eye contact to various individuals around the room.
- **Voice Projection:** Practice channeling excess



energy out of you by projecting your voice to the person furthest away from where you sit or stand.

- **Blushing or Sweating:** For some of us, blushing or sweating are normal bodily reactions to anxiety. Because we cannot change this instinctive reaction, we instead can embrace it. As author Erika Hillard says, “[t]o see a blush is to celebrate life’s living . . . fullness, ripeness, color, and flourishing life.” Let’s also make ourselves as physically comfortable as possible; we can wear clothing that helps us breathe!

## 7. PRACTICE

Identify one low-stakes performance-oriented event in the lawyering context, to practice your new Mental and Physical Action Plans. It could be a team meeting, a one-on-one meeting with a supervisor, or a phone call with opposing counsel.

## 8. DEVELOP A PRE-GAME & GAME-DAY STRATEGY

**Brain Pre-Game:** What substantive preparation is necessary for your first exposure event?

**Body Pre-Game:** Can you visit the exposure event location? Will you be sitting or standing? Where? What adjustments can you make to your physical stance and comportment to channel your energy, oxygen, and blood flow in a constructive manner?

### Mind Pre-Game:

- Have you written out and reread your new positive personal taglines?
- What can you do the night before the event to minimize anxiety?
- What will you do the morning of the event to minimize anxiety?
- What will you do a half hour before the event?
- What will you do right before you enter the room?
- Visualize the exposure event space. Imagine your



entry into the room, and the chronological steps leading up to the moment you begin speaking. Anticipate the potential influx of the negative thoughts and physical responses. Rehearse halting the negative soundtrack and replacing it with your positive mental taglines. Envision physically adjusting your stance, enhancing blood, oxygen, and energy flow.

## 9. APPLY YOUR LEARNING

- Step into the event with your new Mental and Physical Action Plans:
- Consider doing a “power pose” for a few minutes before the event
- Remind yourself that the natural mental and physical manifestations of anxiety will naturally re-appear...but we have a plan now!
- When the usual negative mental messages re-appear, apply the fire-drill mantra of “stop, drop, and roll”: Stop for a moment; greet the messages; remember that they are no longer relevant now in your lawyering life; remind yourself of your NEW mental messages;
- When the usual physical manifestations of anxiety re-appear: Stop for a moment; breathe deeply; adopt a balanced athlete’s stance (seated or standing); send excess energy out of you and into a podium or desk or into the air; make eye contact; project your voice; remember that, for some of us, blushing or sweating is just life surging through us!

## 10. TAKE TIME TO REFLECT

After the event, reflect. What worked great? What techniques could use adjustments for next time?

## 11. CELEBRATE!

Congratulate yourself for an amazing effort!

## REFERENCES

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