
The Art and Skill of Effective Public Speaking

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Maybe you've felt the anxiety: sweaty palms, racing heart, dry mouth – it's your turn to get up in front of a room of people and speak. For some, it is truly terrifying. Knowledge@Wharton High School reporter Katlyn Grasso sat down recently with communications specialist Arthur "Buck" Benedict to discuss the qualities of an effective public speaker.

An edited version of the transcript appears below.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Hi, I'm Katlyn Grasso with Knowledge@Wharton High School. It is my pleasure to welcome Buck Benedict to our studio today. Buck Benedict teaches public speaking and speech writing at the Fels Institute of Government [the graduate program in public policy and public management at the University of Pennsylvania]. He began teaching at Wharton in 2002, where he taught management communications in the MBA program for eight years. He won the first Fels Teaching Award in 2009 and was also nominated for the 2013 Provost Award for Teaching Excellence. Buck also works as a communications consultant and a speech writer. Thanks for joining us today, Buck.

Buck Benedict: Thanks, Katlyn. It's a pleasure.

KWHS: What does being a communications consultant entail?

Benedict: I started out in corporate communications and worked for a couple multinational companies. Part of my job — I had various assignments — was to write speeches. After I left corporate work in the early 1990s, I decided to go off into business for myself as a consultant. The job that I created was to help companies in crisis situations deal with the media and the public because of my experience in the chemical and pharmaceutical industry. And then also, to write speeches for CEOs in those industries. So, a communications consultant is somebody who helps the heads of companies to communicate better.

KWHS: That's great to know for our high school audience. How did you make the transition to being an instructor at Wharton in 2002?

Benedict: I got lucky. It was a time when Wharton was greatly expanding its MBA program and they needed more adjunct [faculty] to help teach the required core course in communications – it's called management communications. Like lots of others, I came in, auditioned for it and got the part. That's how I got started. It was a great opportunity, and I had a chance to teach in a couple of other schools, as well. But my focus [was] on Wharton and teaching management communications. Ultimately, I made a transition to the Fels Institute of Government when a job opened up there.

KWHS: How does your course at Fels help your students improve their communication skills?

Benedict: Well, communications is a skill. If you're an athlete, you know that you've got to practice, have a coach and have repetition in terms of learning good things and doing them over and over again. What I've tried to do as a communications consultant and as a teacher is to give people the opportunity to practice, to give them assignments that are going to be helpful to them and then give them the opportunity to get feedback — from me, from their classmates and [from videotapes]. Seeing themselves on videotape will help them, as well. [We also look] at great speeches that I think will have something for the students to learn from. We get them off YouTube or we get them off presidential archive sites of speeches. [From there], I ask them to make a speech.

[My students give] different types of speeches. There's an introduction speech to somebody at the beginning of the course. And there's an occasion speech, which can be for any particular occasion. There's a persuasive speech, and there's an inspirational speech. I let them use their own course work or I let them use their own work experiences to build on things that they know they're going to have to work on themselves. I try to make it as practical as I can.

KWHS: I had the chance to sit in on your class a few weeks ago, and it was fascinating and inspiring for me. Generally, what do you hope that your students will take away from your course?

Benedict: [The No. 1 thing] is confidence. I want them to feel better about their own speaking abilities. I also want to give them the opportunity to see themselves. [They might get a] criticism from their peers or from me or the teaching assistant, but unless they actually see it on camera, they're not going to necessarily believe that they do this or they do that and that it could be a distraction [in their speech]. I want them to take away the fact that how they look [is important].

["It's natural to be nervous speaking because people are going to be judging you. How we look is going to be important to how we feel about ourselves."?](#)

What my students learn very, very quickly by looking at the videotape and by getting feedback is that, "I may feel nervous, but it doesn't necessarily come across on the camera." That leads to a freeing up of exaggerated concerns that they have. I try to build confidence. I try to build comfort. And by [having them] speak again and again, I try to give them the opportunity to learn and to organize their material. In a speech as opposed to a book, you don't have the opportunity to look back over something. You can't underline it and go back to the key things. You have one time to [capture the information]. A speaker has the responsibility to organize his thoughts so that they flow logically. And also, to try to emphasize with their voice and their body language those things that are most important. It's like underlining.

KWHS: I know an important theme in your class is speaking the truth. So, what does speaking the truth mean to you?

Benedict: It's something I teach from the very first class, right up to the last class when they give their inspirational speeches. Who are they? What are they all about? What are they passionate about? Tell their story; tell the stories of their families. I get a lot of immigrant stories in my class in the inspirational speeches about parents or grandparents who have made major changes in their lives; given up their homeland to go someplace else and create a family in a new country. It's a wonderful inspiration for everybody else.

["Speaking the truth for me is all about who you are."?](#)

My belief is that if you are able to expose yourself, if you're able to be vulnerable, then you'll be in a position to get other people to speak [about their own vulnerabilities]. All of a sudden, there's a much, much deeper connection between people. It's a much more honest communication.

KWHS: What are the characteristics of effective speakers?

Benedict: We talk about confidence. I think that's very important. But again, think about confidence in terms of it's your own sense of self worth. It's your own feeling. I tell people in my classes, "I want you to talk about what's important to you. I want you to feel that it's necessary to communicate to that audience out there what you're all about and what's important to you." Part of that confidence is feeling good about what you do.

It's important to make eye contact to let the audience know that you care about them, to let them know that you're paying attention to them. But I say it's a two-way street, because I [also] want you as a speaker to be taking in what the audience is telling you in return. They're making all sorts of comments with their body language, with their facial expressions and things like that. You as the speaker have to be able to read these things so that you know how to adjust and do everything you possibly can to adapt yourself to what's happening in the audience at that moment.

One of the hardest things for speakers to do is to part from [their] scripts because of the confidence factor, because they practiced it [and] they feel good about it. But a lot of times they have to make these adjustments in order to be present in the moment to that particular audience. They as speakers have to be reading the signals that [the audience] is sending back to them.

Lastly, I want [speakers] to respect the audience. I think it's awfully important that if an audience is paying attention to a speaker, the speaker owes them the obligation to listen very carefully to questions the audience might have that still haven't been answered. A lot of times speakers finish a speech and they go, "Whew, that's all over." But it's not all over. The most important thing to that particular audience is the answer to their questions. So, I want people to be looking forward to those answers as the opportunity to pay back the audience for all the time and attention that they've given them.

KWHS: That's great advice. I know that you teach undergrads, but mainly graduate students.

Benedict: That's right.

KWHS: How can you apply these skills you mentioned to high school students?

Benedict: One of the best teaching experiences I ever had was right here at Penn in the Upward Bound program. I had a class [of high school students]. I've got to say, they scared me to death. They were full of energy. These are summer school students. They expect to learn a lot in a very short time. There must have been 22 of them — high school seniors and juniors.

I got them in a class and, quite frankly, I didn't know how to relate to them. And I thought, "My God, how can I do this? What do I have that's going to be helpful to them?" I took my basic course of 14 weeks and I tried to narrow it down to three or four or six classes. I basically tried to give them the idea that they have to connect with the audience. They have to be able to be honest about themselves and tell their stories. They have to be able to read what the audience is saying back to them.

[I showed them] Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which I show to every class.

["I don't care whether you're a high school audience or a graduate school audience: everybody should see and appreciate that speech."](#)

But I also try to have them read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address because I think, again, here is a beautiful example of really boiling down important ideas into very few — 272 — words.

I think the same lessons pertain to high school students that pertain to graduate students — be yourself.

["Be honest with yourself, communicate with the audience honestly and get into a conversation with the audience if you possibly can."](#)

Read their body language. So often we go in and we don't have a sense of who the audience is. You've got to do your homework, because if you're going to communicate with them in their language and in ways that they're going to understand, you've got to be in a position to know who they are and what they care about.

KWHS: Thank you so much, Buck, for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be here with us today. It was an honor to have you at the KWHS studio. Just to leave the audience with one final question, what are your favorite speeches of all time?

Benedict: That's a hard question to answer. I'd like to give you a range. I use TED talks a lot because they're current. [TED is a nonprofit organization devoted to "ideas worth spreading." It runs a TED Talks video site on which it features more than 1,500 free talks to "stir your curiosity."] I get complaints from my students: "Your speeches are so old. Why

don't you have something current?" So, I use TED talks a lot. I use [a speech from] Susan Cain. She wrote the book *Quiet* about introverts in a world of extroverts. It's a wonderful story about her being a young girl and an introvert going to camp. She goes there with a whole slew of books and she thinks summer camp is going to be the greatest experience of her life because she's going to have the chance to read all these books. She never had a chance to read one because the summer camp was doing something else – it's extroversion.

Isabel Allende's talk about passion is very important for people to look at. Another one is Amy Cuddy's talk about power positions and getting people ready to face interviews or speeches.

YouTube is a great source of speeches. I think a very good one is a very short one. It's the singer Bono's acceptance speech of the NAACP Award back in 2007 or 2008.

["It's only four minutes long but, boy, if you want to see somebody speaking their truth and the passion of their conviction, take a look at Bono's NAACP acceptance speech"?](#)

KWHS: Thanks again, Buck. I'm Katlyn Grasso with Knowledge@Wharton High School, and thanks for joining us, everyone.

Questions

What does Buck Benedict mean by "speaking your truth?" What is your truth? If you were giving an inspirational speech, what topic might you focus on?

Should a public speaker be as focused on the audience as they are on him? Why or why not?

Watch one of Benedict's recommended speeches, referenced below, and reflect on its content. List 5 reasons why he might think this is a good speech. Did the speech interest you? Inspire you? Why or why not?

Related Links

- [Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech](#)
- [KWHS: What Is a TED Talk?](#)
- [Ted Talks Video Site](#)
- [TED Talk: Susan Cain: The Power of Introverts](#)
- [TED Talk: Isabel Allende's Tales of Passion](#)
- [TED Talk: Amy Cuddy: Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are](#)
- [Bono's NAACP speech](#)
- [TED 11 Classic Talks](#)
- [KWHS Lesson Plan: Communication Styles](#)
- [KWHS Lesson Plan: Your Personal Brand](#)