

Start Strong with Any Audience!

The beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing; for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken.

—PLATO

You have heard the saying “First impressions are lasting; you never get a second chance to create a good first impression.” I’m sure you’ve also heard this one: “Well begun is half done.”

When you start your speech, you must focus everything on making a positive first impression on your audience members.

This opens them up and prepares them to listen to and be affected by your remarks.

Your Introduction

If you’re making a presentation where someone is introducing you, it’s the introduction that sets the stage. The purpose of the introduction is to build expectancy in the audience. Its goal is to cause the audience to lean forward mentally and emotionally to hear what you have to say. Therefore, you must carefully plan your introduction in advance.

A good introduction sets the stage by telling the audience about your accomplishments. It then leads to the title of your speech. Your name comes last. Depending on the topic or length of your talk, it can be brief or expanded.

Here is a short example: “Our speaker tonight has started 22 businesses and made more than one million dollars in eight different enterprises. Today he is going to tell us how we can ‘Succeed in Business By Really Trying.’ Please put your hands together and help me welcome Mr. Brian Tracy.”

A longer introduction would include more details about the background and accomplishments of the speaker, especially as they relate to the subject. The focus is always on building expectancy and credibility so that the audience members have the attitude of “I can hardly wait to hear what this person has to say.”

After the Introduction

Lots of things need to happen between the end of the introduction and the beginning of your speech, so keep the next five things in mind as you are taking the stage. They will help you make a positive impression on the audience and set the right tone for your speech.

Step up Confidently

When you are introduced, step up to the podium and shake hands with the introducer. Give him or her a hug if it is appropriate. Let the introducer leave the stage, and then turn to the audience.

Start with silence to settle and to center the audience. Smile and sweep your eyes slowly around the room for a few seconds, as if you are really happy to be there with these people.

As you stand silently, smiling, the audience will very quickly settle down, becoming silent and attentive, waiting for you to begin. When the tension is palpable and everyone is silent, begin with a strong, clear, friendly, interesting, attention-grabbing opening statement that leads into your talk and ties into your closing remarks.

Look the Part

The rule here is that nothing in your clothes or grooming should distract from you or your message. People make a decision about you in the first 30 seconds. For this reason, your image, your dress, grooming, and stance are very important.

Your appearance tells the audience how you think and feel about yourself. It is an expression of your own self-image. Your appearance also tells the audience members how you think and feel about them. The rule is, “If it doesn’t help, it hurts.”

Many speakers think that it is “cool” to get up in front of an audience dressed casually, as if they had just been working in the garden. But what this often tells the audience is that you respect neither yourself nor them. This impression downgrades the perceived value of what you have to say.

Time and time again, my clients hold their annual meetings in beautiful resorts in the South and West. They will say, “Everyone will be dressed country-club casual” and that I am welcome to dress casually as well. I never take them up on their offer. The rule is to always dress equal to or better than your audience. You must always look like a professional.

Build Positive Expectations

Your first job is to raise expectations. You want to make the audience members feel glad that they came. You want them to be open and eager to hear more.

Remember that everyone in your audience wants you to succeed. They are already on your side. They sincerely want your talk to be a good one. Your first words should confirm that it will be.

It is important that the audience like you from the start. The more likeable people perceive you to be, the more open the audience members will be to your message, and the less resistant they will be to any controversial points or ideas that you bring up.

Take Charge Immediately

When you stand up to speak, you become the leader. The people in the audience want you to be in control. They want you to take charge of the room. Act as if you own the room and as if everyone works for you. They will follow your commands.

When you are introduced, walk straight to where you will be speaking, shoulders up, smiling and confident, with your eyes wide open and your chin up. Be alert and aware and walk briskly, with energy and determination.

When you begin speaking, focus in on a single person in the audience. Start off by speaking directly and warmly to him or her. Then, casually move on to another face, and then another, and another. This direct eye contact slows you down, calms your nerves, and helps you to develop a relationship with the people in your audience.

Be Authentic and Humble

The very best way to be liked is to be both authentic and humble. You achieve authenticity by being genuine and open. You can appear a little embarrassed and overwhelmed by the positive attention the audience is giving to you. Smile openly and warmly as your eyes sweep the audience. You exude humility by not appearing as if you know it all or as if you are superior to the audience in any way. Sometimes, after I receive a glowing introduction, I will turn to the introducer and say, “Thank you. You read that exactly the way my wife wrote it. But I still can’t get my kids to go to bed when I tell them.”

A Long List of Ways to Start a Speech

Now that you're in the spotlight, how do you get the ball rolling? There are several ways that you can start a talk effectively. All of them are intended to engage your audience right off the bat so that you have everyone's full attention for the duration of your speech.

Thank the Organizers

You can start by thanking the audience for coming and thanking the organization for inviting you to speak. Refer to the person who introduced you or to one or more of the senior people in the organization in the audience. This compliments them, makes them feel proud and happy about your presence, and connects you into the audience like an electrical plug in a socket.

Start with a Positive Statement

You can begin by telling the audience members how much they will like and enjoy what you have to say. For example, you might say: "You are really going to enjoy the time we spend together this evening. I am going to share with you some of the most important ideas that have ever been discovered in this area."

Compliment the Audience

You can begin by complimenting the audience members sincerely and with great respect. Smile as if you are really glad to see them, as if they are all old friends of yours that you have not seen for quite a while.

You can tell them that it is a great honor for you to be here, that they are some of the most important people in this business or industry, and that you are looking forward to sharing some key ideas with them. You could say something like, "It is an honor to be here with you today. You are the elite, the top 10 percent of people in this industry. Only the very best people in any field will take the time and make the sacrifice to come so far for a conference like this."

Make a Thought-Provoking Statement About the Audience

Often when I am speaking to the members of an entrepreneurial or networking group, I will start off with, "Thank you very much for having me. I was just told that today I would be addressing a roomful of self-made millionaires."

After making this statement, I stand silently, smiling and looking around, allowing my words to soak in. I then continue by saying, "What I learned was that everyone

here is either a self-made millionaire or intends to be sometime in the future. Is that correct?’’

This opening always brings a loud chorus of ‘‘Yes!’’ Everyone smiles and agrees that his or her goal is to be a self-made millionaire. After this kind of opening, everyone is wide-awake, alert, and ready to hear what else I have to say.

Refer to Current Events

Use a current front-page news story to transition into your subject and to illustrate or prove your point. You can bring a copy of the newspaper and hold it up as you refer to it in your introduction. This visual image of you holding the paper and reciting or reading a key point rivets the audience’s attention and causes people to learn forward to hear what you have to say.

Refer to a Historical Event

For many years, I studied military history. Especially, I studied the lives and campaigns of the great generals and the decisive battles they won. One of my favorites was Alexander the Great.

One day, I was asked to give a talk on leadership principles to a roomful of managers for a Fortune 500 company. I decided that the campaign of Alexander the Great against Darius of Persia would make an excellent story that would illustrate the leadership qualities of one of the great commanders in history. I opened my talk with these words:

Once upon a time there was a young man named Alex who grew up in a poor country. But Alex was a little bit ambitious. From an early age, he decided that he wanted to conquer the entire known world. But there was a small problem. Most of the known world was under the control of a huge multinational called the Persian Empire, headed by King Darius II. To fulfill his ambition, Alex was going to have to take market share away from the market leader, who was very determined to hold on to it.

This is the same situation that exists between you and your major competitors in the market today. You are going to have to use all your leadership skills to win the great marketing battles of the future.

Refer to a Well-Known Person

You can start by quoting a well-known person or publication that recently made an important statement. Here’s an example:

Today we are going to talk about why it is that some people earn more money than others. Gary Becker, the Nobel Prize–winning economist, wrote recently that almost all income inequality in America is the result of a knowledge and skills gap. In the next few minutes, I am going to show you how you can develop the knowledge and skills you need to narrow this gap and lead your field in the years ahead.

Here's another example: One of the subjects I touch upon regularly is the importance of continual personal and professional development. I will say something like, "In the twenty-first century, knowledge and know-how are the keys to success. As basketball coach Pat Riley said, 'If you are not getting better, you are getting worse.' "

Repeat a Recent Conversation

Start by telling a story about a recent conversation with someone in attendance. For instance, I might say, "A few minutes ago, I was talking with Tom Robinson in the lobby. He told me that this is one of the very best times to be working in this industry, and I agree."

Make a Shocking Statement

You can start your talk by making a shocking statement of some kind. For example, you might say something like, "According to a recent study, there will be more change, more competition, and more opportunities in this industry in the next year than ever before. And 72 percent of the people in this room will be doing something different within two years if they do not rapidly adapt to these changes."

Quote from Recent Research

You can start by quoting from a recent research report. One example is, "According to a story in a recent issue of *Business Week*, there were almost 9,000,000 millionaires in America in 2007, most of them self-made. And this number is going to double by the year 2015."

Give Them Hope

The French philosopher Gustav Le Bon once wrote, "The only religion of mankind is, and has always been, hope."

When you speak effectively, you give people hope of some kind. Remember, the ultimate purpose of speaking is to inspire a change of thought, feeling, and action. It is to motivate and inspire people to do things that they would not have done in

the absence of your comments. Everything you say should relate to the actions you want people to take and the reasons that they should take those actions.

Start with Humor—Maybe

You can start a talk with humor, but only if you are naturally funny. You must be sure that the audience will interpret your story or joke as humorous. For this reason, you should try out your humor several times on other people to make sure that it works well. Only use humor if you personally think that the joke or story is funny, you can deliver it well, and the audience is likely to be receptive.

Some of the best professional speakers start with humor that is so pointed and appropriate that it cracks up the audience members and grabs their complete attention. But this is an art. It takes a special type of personality to use humor effectively.

Here is an important point. It is fairly easy to start with a joke of some kind. I used to do this to open almost every talk. Then I learned that my initial remarks set the tone for what is to come. If I start with humor, the audience assumes that my talk is going to be funny and entertaining. If I then switch into a more serious or thoughtful subject, people will often become confused and disappointed. Be careful.

Be an Entertainer

Bill Gove, one of the best speakers in America, would walk onto the stage after his introduction as if he had just finished talking to someone on the side and was breaking off to give his talk to the group. The audience got the feeling that his entire talk was one continuous conversation.

Bill would often go to the edge of the stage and then drop his voice in a conspiratorial way, open his arms, and beckon the audience members to come a little closer. He would say, “Come here, let me tell you something,” and then he would wave them forward as though he was about to tell a secret to the entire room.

The amazing thing was that everyone in the room would lean forward to hear this “secret” that he was about to share. People would all suddenly realize what they were doing and break out in laughter. It was a wonderful device to get the audience into the palm of his hands.

Ask a Question, Conduct a Survey

You can open by making a positive statement and then asking a question requiring a show of hands. Try something like this: “This is a great time to be alive and in business in America. By the way, how many people here are self-employed?”

Raise your hand to indicate what you want people to do. I have used this line, and after a number of hands go up, I then say to someone who raised her hand in the front, “How many people here are *really* self-employed?”

Invariably, someone will say, “We all are!”

I then compliment and affirm the answer: “You’re right! We are all self-employed, from the time we take our first jobs to the day we retire; we all work for ourselves, no matter who signs our paychecks.”

Get Them Talking to One Another

You can ask people to turn to the person next to them to discuss a particular point. For instance, you could say, “Tell the person next to you what you would like to learn from this seminar.”

Whatever you ask your audience members to do, within reason, they will do it for you. Your commands and your leadership will easily influence them, as long as you ask them with confidence.

Open with a Problem

You can start with a problem that must be solved. If it is a problem that almost everyone has in common, you will immediately have the audience’s complete and undivided attention. For example, you could say:

Fully 63 percent of baby boomers are moving toward retirement without enough money put aside to provide for themselves for as long as they are going to live. We must address this problem and take action immediately to ensure that each person who retires will be able to live comfortably for the rest of his or her natural life.

Make a Statement, Ask a Question

You can start by making a strong statement and then asking a question. You then follow with an answer and ask another question. This gets people immediately involved and listening to your every word. Here’s an example:

Twenty percent of the people in our society make 80 percent of the money. Are you a member of the top 20 percent? If not, would you like to join the top 20 percent or even the top 10 percent? Well, in the next few minutes, I am going to give you some ideas to help you become some of the highest-paid people in our society. Would that be a good goal for our time together today?

It is an interesting psychological phenomenon that people are conditioned from infancy to respond when they are asked a question. Whenever you ask a question of any kind, people instinctively and automatically answer you, even if only to themselves.

When you ask, “How many people here would like to double their incomes in the next one to two years?” almost all of the audience members will instinctively and automatically raise their hands or shout out agreement.

Whenever you ask a question and then pause a few seconds to allow people to process the question, you take complete control of the audience. The fact is that the person who asks the questions controls the conversation and controls the person who is answering the question.

Even if people do not answer aloud, they are helpless to stop themselves from answering. Sometimes I demonstrate this point by asking some common questions such as, “What color is your car?”

Everyone in the audience automatically *thinks* about the answer. I ask, “What is your address?” People automatically and instinctively *think* of their addresses. People cannot *not* answer when they are asked questions.

Start with a Story

You can start your talk with a story. Some of the most powerful words to grab the complete attention of the audience are “Once upon a time . . .”

From infancy and early childhood, people love stories of any kind. When you start off with the words “Once upon a time . . .” you tell the audience that a story is coming. People immediately settle down, become quiet, and lean forward like kids around a campfire. When I conduct full-day seminars and I want to bring people back to their seats after a break, I will say loudly, “Once upon a time there was a man, right here in this city . . .”

As soon as I say these words, people hurry back to their seats and begin to listen attentively to the rest of the story.

Build a Bridge

One of the most important parts of starting a speech is to build a bridge between yourself and the audience members. Begin with something that you and the audience have in common. It can be the fact that you work today, or have worked in the past, in their industry. You may have children, just as they do. You could be familiar with their town or a supporter of the local football or basketball team. You could even have a concern or problem that is similar to the concerns and problems that the members of the audience are facing in their lives or work.

When you take a few minutes to build a bridge of commonality between yourself and the audience members, you immediately put them on your side. They see you as “one of them.” They become more open to your words and comments. They become more forgiving of any mistakes you make. They feel that you are more knowledgeable and approachable because of your common backgrounds.

Tell Them About Yourself

Very often, I will start a speech to a business, sales, or entrepreneurial group by saying, “I started off without graduating from high school. My family had no money. Everything I accomplished in life I had to do on my own with very little help from anyone else.”

It is amazing how many people come up to me after a talk that began with those words and tell me that was their experience as well. They tell me that they could immediately identify with me because they too had started with poor grades and limited funds, as most people do. As a result they were open to the rest of my talk, even a full-day seminar, and felt that everything I said was more valid and authentic than if I had been a person who started off with a successful background. Building a bridge like this is very helpful in bringing the audience onto your side.

Summary

The ability to start strong with any audience is a learned skill. Knowing how to structure an introduction and knowing how to take the stage can make or break your speech. And by finding ways to open your talk with greater warmth, friendliness, or impact, you can have the audience eating out of the palm of your hand within 30 seconds of beginning to speak. This is your goal.