

# Take the step: beat your public speaking anxiety



Rachel Johnson is a member of Toastmasters.

Picture: Les Smith

**T**alking. We all know how to do it and some of us don't know when to stop.

But when a room goes silent and all eyes are focused on just you, the brain can suddenly go blank and all previous ability goes out the window.

Talking becomes no longer enjoyable and natural.

It has become public speaking – and public speaking, for many people, is their number one fear.

Whether you're giving a maid of honour or best man speech at a wedding or you're an office worker making a presentation, speaking before a large group can be terrifying.

And this is why Toastmasters exists.

"We are all about effective communication," member Colin Davis said.

"There are so many things in life where you need to be able to stand up in front of a group and make a speech. There are weddings and funerals, job interviews and work presentations, service clubs and other things like being in Miss Wagga."

So what exactly is Toastmasters? And, no, they don't make toast.

From a humble beginning in 1924 at the YMCA in California, Toastmasters has grown to become a world leader in helping people become more competent and comfortable in front of an audience.

The non-profit organisation now has nearly 220,000 members in 11,300 clubs in 90 countries, offering a proven way to practice and improve communication and leadership skills.

Most Toastmasters meetings are comprised of about 20 people who meet regularly for an hour or two. Participants practice and learn skills by filling a meeting role, ranging from giving a prepared speech or an impromptu one to serving as timer, evaluator or grammarian.

There is no instructor.

Instead, each speech and meeting is critiqued by a club member in a positive manner, focusing on what was done right and what could be improved.

"This is done by an experienced

## facts

### Tips for public speaking

Feeling some nervousness before giving a speech is natural. It can even be beneficial. But too much nervousness can be detrimental.

Here are some proven tips on how to control your butterflies and give better presentations.

➤ Know your material. Pick a topic you are interested in. Know more about it than you include in your speech. Use humour, personal stories and conversational language – that way you won't easily forget what to say.

➤ Practise. Practise. Practise. Rehearse out loud with all the equipment you plan on using. Practise with a timer and allow time for the unexpected.

➤ Know the audience. It's easier to speak to a group of friends than to strangers.

➤ Know the room. Arrive early, walk around the speaking area and practice using the microphone.

➤ Relax. Begin by addressing the audience. It buys you time and calms your nerves. Pause, smile and count to three before saying anything.

➤ Visualise yourself giving your speech. Imagine yourself speaking, your voice loud, clear and confident. Visualise the audience clapping – it will boost your confidence.

➤ Realise that people want you to succeed. Audiences want you to be interesting, stimulating, informative and entertaining.

➤ Don't apologise for any nervousness or problem – the audience probably never noticed it.

➤ Concentrate on the message. Focus your attention away from your own anxieties and concentrate on your message and your audience.

➤ Gain experience. Experience builds confidence, which is the key to effective speaking.

member of the club and the feedback is always positive," he said. ➤ ➤ ➤ **Continued Page 3**

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## the facts

### Biggest public speaking blunders

- Starting with a whimper. Don't start with "Thank you for that kind introduction." Start with a bang. Give the audience a startling statistic, an interesting quote, a news headline – something powerful that will get their attention immediately.
- Attempting to imitate other speakers. Authenticity is lost when you aren't yourself.

- Failing to use relaxation techniques. Do whatever it takes – listening to music, breathing deeply, shrugging your shoulders – to relieve nervous tension.
- Reading a speech word for word. This will put the audience to sleep. Instead use a "keyword" outline: Look at the keyword to prompt your thoughts. Look into the eyes of the audience, and then speak.

- Using someone else's stories. It's okay to use brief quotes from other sources, but to connect with the audience, you must illustrate your most profound thoughts from your own life experiences. If you think you don't have any interesting stories to tell, you are not looking hard enough.
- Speaking without passion. The more passionate you are about your topic, the more likely your

- audience will act on your suggestions.
- Failing to prepare. Your reputation is at stake every time you face an audience – so rehearse well enough to ensure you'll leave a good impression.
- Failing to recognise that speaking is an acquired skill. Effective executives learn how to present in the same way they learn to use other tools to operate their businesses.

# Putting your best self forward at Toastmasters

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"Everyone who is there is there to learn. And with public speaking, like many other things in life, you only learn from experience. So positive feedback is very important."

The Wagga Toastmasters meet on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month from 6.50pm to 9pm at the Rules Club.

Each meeting focuses on different aspects of public speaking such as gestures, using humour, body language, eye contact, the tone of your voice, and the differences between speaking to persuade an audience and speaking to inform them.

The nature of each meeting has the added benefit of being able to meet new people.

"The meetings are tight – we have a lot to get through in the two hours that we meet. And our club is quite large, compared to others."

Colin said there are about 25 members of the Wagga group whose ages range from early 20s to late 60s.

The one subject all workshops on public speaking have in common is how to deal with the dreaded word 'um'.

In fact, observing how people use the 'um' word is a great way to gauge the speakers ease and knowledge of the subject matter he or she is discussing.

How to remove it from your speech is the big challenge.

The Toastmasters approach is to have an audience member count the number of times a speaker utters this word.



**No ifs, ands, or ums about it – speaking in public can be tough. Just the thought of having to stand up in front of a crowd is enough to make people nervous. The best place to start is Toastmasters. This group is devoted to helping its members overcome stage fright and performance anxiety. Just ask Toastmasters Wagga members Rachel Johnson (front), Colin Davis (back left), Paul Zalitis, Dianne Zalitis and Victoria Dalglis.**

Picture: Les Smith

"The 'um' word can be very tricky."

"They are usually put in a sentence when a person is trying to think of what to say next, or they can't find the right word that

they're looking for."

Other nuisances that can trouble a speaker include putting your hands in your pockets, facing away from the audience while you are speaking, not making eye

contact or pacing too much.

"Another important thing that people need to try and remember is pausing."

"Not enough people

realise the importance of the pause in between sentences.

"So these are all things that we focus on in our meetings."

If you are interested in

attending a meeting or to find out more information on Toastmasters Wagga, contact Colin Davis on 6928 5519 or log on to [www.toastmasterswagga.org.au](http://www.toastmasterswagga.org.au).