

# STEAL *the* SHOW

*from* **SPEECHES**

*to* **JOB INTERVIEWS**

*to* **DEAL-CLOSING PITCHES**

HOW TO GUARANTEE A STANDING OVATION  
FOR ALL THE PERFORMANCES IN YOUR LIFE

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## How to Rehearse and Stage World-Class Performances

WHEN I STARTED SPEAKING PROFESSIONALLY, I already had five years of experience running meetings for hundreds of employees at a time; five years of experience as a professional actor; three years at NYU's Graduate Acting Program, where I earned my M.F.A. under the tutelage of some highly esteemed instructors; and another few years in college where I majored in theater. That translated into thousands of hours of studying and training in voice, speech, acting, singing, movement, body awareness, dramaturgy, directing, and more. When I began speaking professionally, I could pull it off because, in addition to my training as an actor and performer, I also learned how to produce content, I am pretty quick on my feet, and I can usually make people laugh.

But pulling it off is different from deserving, earning, and owning the stage. I wasn't masterful because I hadn't yet put in the hours to learn the discipline of public speaking. I did not connect that the time it takes to develop and rehearse a world-class theat-

rical production equated to delivering a speech or a similarly high-stakes performance.

But I do now. If you want to steal the show and create a meaningful experience for your audience, and if you want to truly own your career's spotlight moments, I hope you'll prepare differently than you've likely done in the past. This means rehearsing in a way that leaves as little to chance for your big moment as possible. Just to give you an idea, I spent roughly four hundred hours over five months preparing for my *Think Big Revolution* keynote. By preparing I mean I wrote, content mapped, used blocking techniques, directed, produced audio and visual elements, used improv methods to continue to develop and improve the content, memorized the material, rehearsed onstage, and received feedback from invited audiences. But remember, it's not just putting in the requisite time and effort, it's *how* you rehearse that matters. With this said, I don't expect you to spend nearly this much time on rehearsal unless you make your living giving speeches. I share this extreme example with you to demonstrate the amount of time that goes into creating world-class performances. I'm simply suggesting that you consider dedicating more time to your preparation.

Let's get this out of the way first: What expectations do you have about rehearsing for your presentation or performance? How do you approach rehearsal now? Do you think about your speech in your head, or do you rehearse on your feet, out loud? Do you learn everything you can about the facility or room where you'll be presenting at the earliest possible moment, or do you show up on the day and hope that what you've created will work? Do you rehearse in front of a mirror?

By the way, the rehearsing-in-front-of-the-mirror thing is as odd as the "imagine your audience naked" advice. How does looking at oneself while performing make any sense? How are you supposed

to react to a mirror image of your face? Find me one award-winning actor who rehearses in front of a mirror and I'll eat my words. The only time you'll see a professional looking in the mirror is either (A) to experiment with facial prosthetics or makeup and costume to alter their looks or (B) to admire their jawline. In fact, you'll probably see the latter more often than the former.

### THE SEVEN STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL REHEARSALS THAT PRODUCE GREAT PERFORMANCES

#### *Why Should You Rehearse?*

Tell me if this seems like a crazy idea: giving a live speech onstage in front of an audience and barely rehearsing beforehand.

I'll let you in on a secret: it happens all the time. Okay, maybe you've done it. But does it really make any sense at all? Even a priest or rabbi (or choose your equivalent celebrant) makes you rehearse for your wedding ceremony, yet most people resist it and find it nerve-wracking.

The importance of holding effective rehearsals and knowing what makes them effective is the most commonly misunderstood area among the people we coach. It is also the biggest gap between a trained performer and a person who doesn't do a lot of public speaking. If you aren't well rehearsed, you've stacked the odds against giving the performance you want to give. My goal in this chapter is to turn those odds around.

Here's what I typically see: Most people procrastinate to some degree and spend very little time rehearsing for an important moment—a job interview, a speech, or a meeting. If they do rehearse, they do so in their heads or in their living room for a few minutes at

a time. The truth is most people wing it – I know, because I’ve done it myself.

The results are common mistakes: changing the content at the last minute; focusing too much on visuals rather than on content and performance; relying too much on notes; thinking that you don’t need to rehearse the stories you’re going to tell because they’re moments you’ve lived. I also frequently hear something along these lines: “I find rehearsing makes me nervous so I keep it to a minimum.” That’s even more of a reason to rehearse – to keep your nerves at bay for your big moment.

This brings me to another point, if anxiety or nerves are part of why you are here with me. Going through the steps for an effective rehearsal will help you master the inner game of performance by redirecting your mental focus. You often psych yourself out worrying *about* the speech rather than working on it. You may obsess over how you’re going to perform, who is going to be in the audience, how you’ll be received and perceived, and how you should prepare for it. This continues to feed your stress, which sets you up for more avoidance behaviors rather than moving you forward. This way, you keep adding to your anxiety rather than creating confidence. Moreover, the best way to reduce anxiety is to actually know *what* you’re doing and *how* you’re going to do it.

It may seem obvious, but the fact is our brains work this way. If you go through the rehearsal process effectively, you deepen the grooves in your mind around the words you’re memorizing, the movements you’re blocking, and the emotional connection you’re making to your material so you can confidently deliver your presentation with less self-consciousness. By creating these new neural pathways and connections, you’re helping your brain so it doesn’t have to work as hard to do all the things you want it to do when you perform. You’re creating new muscle memories you can access

effortlessly with unconscious competence. The rehearsal process builds one very thin layer of experience at a time, strengthening those pathways every time you work through your material. This is an important part in the process, so keep it in mind.

Maybe you're an experienced speaker. Maybe you already make a commitment to prepare. That's fantastic. The reality of performing in the spotlight – whether it's a conference room for an interview or an auditorium stage at Davos – is that no matter how much you've prepared, no matter how confident you are, even if you're an experienced speaker, the audience will only know and remember what you give them *live*. You don't get points from your audience for the show you rehearsed in your hotel room. That's the difference between the spotlight and the screen: *you can't edit the show one last time while you're performing it*. My rehearsal process gives you a reliable approach for translating the performance you effectively *prepare* into the performance you *deliver* – but it still allows for spontaneity and improvisation.

In Chapter 10, you worked on and polished *what* you're going to say: your big idea, your promise, and more. Rehearsal is where you explore, prepare, and internalize *how* you're going to perform; it's where you work on *showing* the audience your big idea, not just *telling* them about it. My seven-step process for successful rehearsals that turn into great performances will make this transition accessible and even fun (that's when you'll know you're making progress – when you're having fun). The seven steps are:

1. Table reads
2. Content mapping
3. Blocking (I'll also address props, costumes, and use of multimedia)
4. Improvisation and rewriting

5. Invited rehearsal (maybe even with a coach or peer with actual training)
6. Open rehearsal (with people in your target audience)
7. Dress/tech rehearsal

During this discussion, I'll also provide tips and techniques for universal concerns such as wardrobe, memorization, and the unbeatable strategy for when and how to use slides and other visual aids.

### ***Step 1: Table Reads***

Okay, you've got your speech, talking points, script, or other form of content. The first step, which I've adopted from theater and screen, is the *table read*. A table read is when actors sit around tables in a large room and read through the script out loud. This lets the actors make sense of the material, and it allows the writers and the creative team to hear how the script sounds. So, a table read serves a number of good purposes. The actors don't attempt Academy Award-winning performances at the table read; rather, they simply try to get a feel for the story, the relationships between characters, rhythm, pacing of the language, and more. They try to make sense of the story.

Now you try it. Sit in a quiet space (at the dining room table will work just fine) with good seating and lighting and read your content aloud. You can do a table read with a trusted mentor or friend who will listen and provide only high-level general impressions. You can also table read alone, perhaps making an audio recording for playback and review on your smart phone.

I want you to sit and read for a few reasons.

1. Reading aloud lowers expectations and allows you to start working on the material by easing into it.

2. By sitting, you take away any distraction of your body and stage movements so you can focus on the words and how they sound and feel when you let them leave your mind to be spoken aloud. There's a big difference. You don't have to think about gestures, eye contact, or blocking.
3. By keeping your eyes on the page, it's easier to absorb the words, their rhythm, and their feel (yes, words have feeling; *cut* feels different than *love* when you say them out loud). Table reads work for an outlined speech as well as for a formally written speech; simply incorporate the spoken material you'll be using between the big scripted points in your outline.
4. Remember, writing content and saying it out loud are very different, and this is where you can begin to explore the friction between the two. For example, writers can make use of punctuation, headings, layout, and other graphic/visual effects in written text. A speaker can use timing, tone, volume, and timbre to add emotional context. It's also possible to leave much unsaid or implied when speaking directly to a few people or even a large audience.

Table reads can take place over a few days or more. After each reading, make general notes on passages you will want to revisit and think about later in the process. Additionally, written language and spoken language often have different rhythms, paces, and styles. The table read is where you begin to turn your written language into spoken language. However, when you write a speech, try to write in the way that you speak, not in the way your eighth-grade English teacher taught you to write. Most of all, this gets you ready to do content mapping in Step 2.



### *Step 2: Content Mapping*

After a few table reads, you're ready to start mapping your written material for a live rehearsal. You'll do this by marking up the printed pages with notes on how you want to deliver your spoken words: sounds, pace, emphasis, and more.

Content mapping allows you to work deeper into the experience of your presentation as you speak it. You will learn what makes certain passages sing and others fall flat. You will discover the poetic words and phrases in your material as well as the run-on sentences. You will see how to tighten up your opening story or add an extra pause to the punch line you're going to land.

Your goal is to arrive at a map of the vocal presentation of your speech. The words you emphasize, and the words you throw away. The pauses you want to use every time.

Yes, many things will change from performance to performance, but by working through and sculpting the backbone of how you will deliver the words, you'll start wiring your brain for *performing* the content, not reading it. On page 126, you'll find a typeset re-creation of two paragraphs of my *Think Big Manifesto* speech that shows how I content mapped those pages, with the code I use for the shorthand.

The elements of your content map are:

- **Beats** – pauses, long and short, are moments that emphasize a point, turn into a transition, or allow for a listener to absorb an idea.
- **Operative words** – the most important words in the sentence to communicate the meaning, as you believe it to be. The ways to make a word operative include volume, pitch, tone, pauses, linking, extending a vowel, or sharpening a

consonant. Note Kennedy's operative words in this sentence: "And yet the **same** revolutionary beliefs for which our **fore-bears fought** are still at issue around **the globe** – the **belief** that the rights of **man** come not from the **generosity** of the **state** but from the **hand of God**." *Same* is an operative word because it supports the major concept of the sentence.

#### Excerpt from the Think Big Revolution Keynote

Joseph Campbell once said, "The privilege, the privilege of a lifetime is being who you are." Well, this is who I am. What I just told you, what you see in front of you, what's in my books, they're all just parts of me. I believed in this presentation for a long time. I have believed in thinking big for a long, long, long time. Long before I was able to do it, because I, Michael Port, stand for thinking bigger about who you are and about what you offer the world.

stand on chair

off chair downstage

See, I want to think bigger in my world, and I want to help you think bigger in yours. Everything I do in my work and my personal life is driven by this purpose. I decided to stop being big and actually start playing big instead.

go into house

Look, I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that I know what thinking big looks like to you. I don't know what your dreams are. But I know that you have them. And I also know that I'm not somehow special. I'm not the only person that is willing to stand for something.

- **Lists** – the use of beats, emphasis, timing, and rhythm to deliver the elements of a list with the emphasis you want. In this list from Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address, note how he uses beats to give the list mounting power: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” Additionally, if you listen to the speech, you’ll notice how he builds tension with each successful bullet point. He drives through them toward the end of the points even though he puts a beat in between each point. That forward movement is compelling to listen to. He doesn’t drop the energy with each successful point. Rather, he *increases* the importance of each point through to the end.
- **Parentheticals** – the vocal shift we make when we share an idea as if it is in parentheses.
- **Repetition** – the use of beats and emphasis to vocalize repeated words, such as my use of “long, long, long time” in my script on page 126.
- **Rhythm** – the pacing you use to vocalize one-syllable and multisyllable words in a sentence. Savor the texture and tension of how Kennedy delivers this long sentence with its purposeful weaving of short and longer words: “Now the **trumpet summons us again** – not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need – not as a **call to battle, though embattled we are** – but a **call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle**, year in and year out, ‘rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation’ – a struggle against the **common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.**”

In the mapping process, create as much vocal contrast as you can. Content mapping your text creates the foundation upon which you will stage your presentation. *This doesn't mean that you're constrained to deliver the language exactly as mapped when giving your speech.* Far from it, because as you integrate elements of improv when you are rehearsing, your content map may change.

If you're working from an outline rather than a complete text, you should still content map it because there will be passages and stories that you'll share as though they were scripted, employing the same punch line, same rhythms, and same operative words.

To learn more about content mapping, visit the free video training section at [www.StealtheShow.com](http://www.StealtheShow.com) and you'll be able to look over my shoulder as I content map actual text from one of my speeches.

Now it's time to restart your table reads (out loud, always out loud) and content map your text.

### ***Step 3: Blocking***

Blocking is your plan for how you will move during your performance in varying degrees of detail depending upon your style, the space you're in, and the event itself. Most commencement speakers are expected to stay behind the podium, for example. But that doesn't mean you have to. For most speeches, if you can, try to avoid speaking from behind a podium (or any other piece of furniture, for that matter). A podium puts a barrier between you and the audience. People will often choose to stay behind a podium as a way of hiding from the audience or simply because they need to read their speech.

Remember the importance of contrast in your performances? If you're behind a podium for more than a few minutes, your physicality doesn't change. Your lack of movement offers only visual and kinesthetic sameness. With that said, also remember my man-

tra that there isn't one way to perform. Performance of all kinds is an art, and every situation and performer are different. There may be times when speaking from behind a podium is perfect, although the one time I tried it, I bombed. But, hey, that might just be me. Just like all the choices you make when performing, if you choose to stand behind a podium, make sure you're doing so for the right reasons. And practically, if it's a long speech and you need notes, you'll likely need the podium.

Blocking will involve considerations such as the use of props, costumes, and multimedia, as well as how you will choreograph your use of the specific performance space where you'll next deliver the presentation. This could be a conference room where you'll be having negotiations on a deal or, more commonly, a stage, hotel meeting room, or large auditorium. When your performance is fully blocked, the process of polishing and refinement begins as you deliver your lines using your notes while practicing movement.

In a speech that's not been blocked or rehearsed, you can see the telltale signs. Typically you'll see the speaker pacing; wandering around the stage; shifting his weight uncomfortably; displaying discomfort with his hands; hiding behind the podium or other props; repeating gestures; feeling trapped in one spot; continuously looking down at the ground or at the computer screen; standing too close to the audience or too far from them; or not finding the light and standing in the dark. These characteristics are indicative of someone who has not rehearsed her performance—whether she is on a stage or in a job interview.

It's important to learn blocking because it will solve most of these problems. In case you're interested, the term *blocking* comes from the practice of nineteenth-century theatre directors, who worked out the staging of a scene on a miniature stage using blocks to represent each of the actors.

When you block your movement, you're moving in a way that

enhances your message and creates dynamics through contrast. It actually also helps you remember your material because it anchors it in different parts of the stage, and you can continue to revisit that part of the stage when unpacking that content. Blocking also helps the audience understand and digest your content by creating a visual flow. I often have students ask me if blocking is too confining or overscripted for a presentation. There are two answers: One, as I've said, by polishing and perfecting your intentional movement plan through rehearsal, you develop the muscle memory and confidence to improvise. Two, blocking provides in most cases a richer, cleaner visual experience to help allow your big idea and all your content to land with power and purpose.

Start this step by making blocking notations in your script using macro and micro stage directions. Macro directions are:

- US – upstage
- DS – downstage
- SL – stage left
- SR – stage right

Micro directions are specific movements on specific words that can include but are not limited to:

- Sitting
- Kneeling
- Standing on a chair
- Going down into the house

Keep in mind some basic blocking no-nos:

- Don't spend too much time close to the front row if you are not on a stage because it will be harder for the audience in the back rows to see you. Plus, you don't really want the front row staring at your crotch, do you? Don't answer that.
- Don't spend too much time in one part of the stage, whether stage left or stage right, upstage or downstage: you want to use the stage to connect with *all* the seats.
- Don't present in the dark – “finding your light” is a theater term for making sure that you are always lit. You want the audience to see your bright smile and beautiful eyes, don't you? Hotel ballrooms are notoriously problematic when it comes to lighting. Examine how the stage or platform is lit (typically from above) as part of your preparation, and when you are presenting, keep in mind that you always want to find your light.

But here's the key: You have to know your material well enough so that even if you didn't do any of the blocking you rehearsed, you would still be fine. Stay flexible, even after content mapping and blocking your material. Why? Venues will be different. Lights will be different. Remain adaptable. Apply your blocking to your venue.

You might have heard that you shouldn't walk and talk at the same time onstage. That doesn't make sense – people do it all the time in real life, so why not on the stage as well? You want to be as authentic and natural as possible, don't you? I think the intended gist of this advice is that you shouldn't walk while speaking important statements or during key moments. That advice is right-on. Just remember that not everything you are saying is of equal importance. Movement is a good time for transitions, secondary points, or getting to the other side of the stage to answer a question. So, you can walk and talk at the same time but not while delivering the most

important points. Block out what kind of content you can move on – and what is important to stand and land on. Let your punch lines, point lines, and purpose lines land.

#### **On Doing More with Movement**

Stage movement and the use of your body are major areas of technique that you can pursue to advance your skills. Actors work on these techniques for years and theirs is not a standard I'd ever expect you to meet. For our discussion here, I'll keep it simple. If you want to go further in working on movement and your body, I recommend finding a skilled coach/trainer (go to [HeroicPublicSpeaking.com](http://HeroicPublicSpeaking.com)). This really might be of interest if you speak professionally or frequently, have to give important speeches a few times a year, or have a high-stakes presentation coming up soon.

What are you striving for in how you move and use your body? Movement work was something that made me stand out right off the bat – folks were used to the typical pacing and wandering, which makes weak content look even worse.

Let's start with the optimal posture for your work onstage. You want to be loose and unconstrained, don't you? If so, do a little exercise. Let your hands hang freely at your sides. With your shoulders aligned over your hips and your hips aligned over your ankles, take a deep breath that fills your lungs and expands your ribcage and then, on an exhale, let the tension flow out of your neck-arms-torso-legs-feet. Do this at least ten times. Your muscles will relax with each exhalation. You may even feel your energy increase as you soften your body. When you are relaxed and comfortable in your body, you feel like you can move easily and naturally in front of an audience. In doing so, you will feel more powerful, command attention, and own the room.

As part of your review during rehearsals, self-assess and note the microgestures that will be distracting to your audience and gradually work them out of your repertoire. Do you:



- Thrust your shoulders back military-style?
- Thrust your hips forward or to one side?
- Turn your feet out?
- Tend to lick your lips?
- Repeatedly flip or smooth your hair?
- Hike up your pants?
- Button and unbutton your blazer?
- Find your hands inadvertently wandering too close to the family jewels? (Unconsciously you might be protecting yourself because you feel exposed to strangers.)

Don't beat yourself up over any of these – especially guarding the family jewels. Just take note if they're happening and move on. Do the same after each rehearsal.

#### Costumes, Props, and Media

Moving into rehearsal is about moving through a continuum where you translate ideas and content into movement, voice, and performance. It's a continuum where you will be thinking more visually as you approach the final product of your presentation. That's why I'm introducing the use of costumes, props, and media in this step. These are all visual tools to get your message across and to make your performances more memorable.

Every time you make any public presentation or appearance, the clothes on your back are your costume. In television your clothes are called *wardrobe*, just as in the service business they're called a *uniform*. Your clothing choices for a public presentation of any kind are a representation of your message and brand in the eyes of your audience. They should amplify your personal brand, not distract people from your message.

Is what you wear really that important? Yes. You are playing a character when you perform, a character made up of your best and most useful attributes, and your clothing choices contribute to your character development. By thinking about costume, you're developing the useful skill of understanding how others see you. In most cases, you're still choosing from the narrow band of options available in the business casual to business formal range. I'm sure you can think of many examples of how individual performers find the costume that fits their brand while also being comfortable. Here are a few:

- Comic and actor Chris Rock in his standup performances – edgy, ruthlessly incisive comic speaking truth in variations on black pullover, black slacks, and black comfortable shoes, at times adding a casual black leather jacket. For higher-profile concert venues he may wear a fitted gray or black suit, only rarely with a tie.
- Business advisor, author, and all-around great guy Chris Brogan – gentle hipster digital media sage who is comfortable showing some New England nerd as well: basic jeans or chinos with a T-shirt and comfortable suit jacket, or a comfortable but quality striped button-down.
- Author, marketing and business-development genius, salt-of-the-earth kind of guy John Jantsch – shows midwestern authenticity in his blazer, jeans, and Converse high-tops. You'll rarely ever catch him in a suit and tie, yet he always looks clean-cut and classy.
- Speaker and high-level author for publications such as the *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes* and one of the most likable people I know, Dorie Clark – looking strong, steady, and

intellectual in slacks, blazers, preppy button-down shirts, and her hair cropped short.

- Social media author, major online brand, and most authentic and generous friend to many, Scott Stratten – a grungy, irreverent hipster with a long beard, out-of-control hair, and tattoo-covered arms. Nine times out of ten you'll find Stratten dressed in a black T-shirt and well-worn jeans. Yet he speaks at the biggest business conferences with audiences dressed to the nines in business attire.
- Amy, co-founder of HeroicPublicSpeaking.com – stylish, comfortable clothing. She never looks like she's trying too hard or wants to outshine anyone else. In fact, in some of the photos on our website, she's not even wearing shoes. She says she feels more grounded and it allows her to move more naturally. She looks warm and approachable; a beautiful representation of her brand, which is based on self-expression, power, and play.
- Consultant and bestselling author Daniel Pink – authoritative business guru and super-smart guy with the traditional costume of the approachable consultant: loose-fitting slacks, button-down shirt, and casual blazer, or casual suit with no tie and casual loafers.

You want to rehearse using your performance costume as early as possible so that you have experienced the effect of your costume on your ability to move and express yourself and because it is part of your character – especially the shoes. In choosing your wardrobe, both men and women should keep in mind that you don't want any aspect of your personal presentation to distract the audience from your spoken presentation.

POINTS OF EMPHASIS FOR MEN  
WHEN CHOOSING CLOTHING:

- Do be consistent with brand.
- Do wear shoes with soles that grip and don't make much noise.
- Don't wear too-tight pants, pants that are hiked up too high, or clothes that reveal too much (unless, of course, your name is Adam Levine or Mick Jagger).
- Do pick out a blazer (if that's part of your costume) that gives you good range of movement—too tight in the shoulders won't allow you to lift your arms.
- Don't keep doing and undoing the button on your blazer, it gets distracting for viewers.
- Don't wear busy or clashing patterns—unless that's part of your personal brand.
- Don't wear colors like lavender, mint green, gray, or light blue if you sweat a lot; black or white shirts will hide the pit stains.

POINTS OF EMPHASIS FOR WOMEN  
WHEN CHOOSING CLOTHING:

- Do be consistent with your brand.
- Don't wear clothes that reveal too much (unless that's part of your brand).
- Do consider whether a mic pack (a transmitter) and lavalier (a little portable microphone that attaches to your shirt) will work with your outfit—will you be able to clip the lavalier to your top without ruining the look? And do you have a belt or pocket you can attach the transmitter to?

- Don't wear noisy jewelry like bangles, bauble-heavy necklaces, or large hanging earrings that may be picked up by the microphone. Even if you're not wearing a mic, stay away from jewelry that makes noise because it can be distracting.
- Do be very careful about choosing spiky heels or very high heels. They can make a lot of noise when you walk and can inhibit movement – if the audience thinks you look uncomfortable, you'll look weak and you'll lose some of your power.
- Do keep your hair – if it is long – out of your face for sight lines and so that you won't constantly do the hair flip, which tends to drive audiences mad.
- Do notice how your skirt line changes when you're sitting down.
- Don't wear a short skirt if you're on a stage or platform that is higher than the audience because, well . . . you understand why.
- Don't wear a short skirt if you think you'll keep pulling it down because it rides up your legs.
- Don't wear dresses that are too long because they may trip you, and even if they don't, if the audience thinks you might trip, it will make them uncomfortable and distract them from listening to you and your message.
- Do be mindful of how the light affects your clothing because some clothing, especially sheer pieces, can become see-through under the lights.

### Props

Props can at times be more powerful to an audience than a verbal description. They have a unique power in being tangible objects that your audience can see and feel and, if appropriate, touch. Though be

sure to ask yourself: is the prop truly useful to illustrate a point for the audience? If not, skip it. However, don't underestimate the potential of a prop for small group performances such as meetings or deal pitches. There are three ways to use a prop effectively:

1. To transform ordinary objects into make-believe things to demonstrate a concept or tell a story. For example, using a pen as a ruler to demonstrate how your third-grade teacher rapped on your knuckles when you spoke out in class, or as a chopstick to tell the story about meeting your wife at a restaurant in Chinatown, or as the knife that cut your finger when you were slicing bread.
2. To control timing, in the way that comedians sharpen suspense during a performance by using their bottle of water after a particular line takes off with the audience to let the moment ride for an extra beat or two.
3. To create an unforgettable image to illustrate a point in a way you can't by just telling it. A few examples: Jill Bolte Taylor uses an actual human brain during her TED talk about her massive stroke and the insights into life that she gained from it. The prop is effective because it gives the audience a visual, memorable sense of the basic structure of the brain, which is key to the rest of the talk. Vice President Al Gore made television history in 1993 during an appearance on *The David Letterman Show*. Gore was there to draw attention to his role in auditing wasteful spending in federal agencies – a painfully dry topic to explain. He demonstrated that the feds actually bother to test the shatter point of U.S. regulation “ash receivers” – glass ashtrays – by smashing an ashtray with a hammer on Letterman's desk. Bill Gates used a prop brilliantly during

his 2009 TED talk about eradicating malaria, a disease whose seriousness is overlooked by the West, when he surprised the audience by releasing a jarful of mosquitoes into the auditorium (he immediately said they weren't carrying malaria, something the audience needed to hear). One of my students, Beth Allen, brings a toilet onstage (yes, an actual porcelain toilet), among other props, because she teaches DIY home repairs for women. It works brilliantly.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING PROPS:

- They should be large enough to be seen easily in the room or auditorium where you're presenting.
- Once your speech is "on its feet" and well blocked, rehearse with your prop every time.
- If the prop is even partially mechanical or electronic, double-check that it is working before you go on.

**Slide Decks and Other Media**

Here's the typical question folks ask themselves about the use of projected slides to accompany a presentation, whether through PowerPoint, Keynote, or another slideware app: should I go with slides or without slides? But we can do better because to use slides or not to use slides is not the question.

Instead, I recommend asking: how can I use slides and other media in a unique way that will stir my audience emotionally or cement a major point with a strong visual? And expand your thinking beyond slides to consider video and audio. Only include slides or other media if your choices will be visually powerful, creating more contrast and providing the element of surprise with images or audio that are new to your audience.

Among some iconic presentations that meet these three standards: Check out Randy Pausch's last lecture, given at Carnegie Mellon University in 2007. The year before, Professor Pausch was given a diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer. In a powerful twist on a popular ongoing lecture series tradition where professors are asked to think deeply about what matters to them and give a no-holds-barred lecture summarizing their strongest arguments and views, Pausch gave what was pretty much the last lecture of his life, one that he aptly titled, "The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams."

Pausch gave an upbeat, generous, and honest lecture (he was still healthy, did pushups onstage, used lots of humor, such as leading the talk saying he had experienced a deathbed conversion and bought a Macintosh computer) that became an Internet sensation and led to a book deal. His lecture uses a blend of text, video, and audio that illustrates his narrative, offers visual contrast, and delivers lots of delight and surprise through examples of his students' groundbreaking use of computer animation, among other things. Pausch passed away in 2008 but left several great legacies, including his last lecture.

There's another lesson in Pausch's speech. It wasn't technically perfect. He relied heavily on his notes and spent a fair amount of time referring to them, sometimes even reading from them. Yet because he was so open, honest, and vulnerable, and because he built in lots of contrast and offered an incredibly well-thought-out and organized speech, he connected with millions worldwide. I've mentioned this before but it bears repeating: Perfection is largely unattainable. It is often the enemy of good. I don't expect you to master every single piece of technical advice I share with you. Even changing or improving a few things or increasing your skills in a few areas can help you nail a performance with style and grace.

When I deliver my *Book Yourself Solid* keynote, I rarely use slides. One of the greatest compliments I've ever received was from



someone who shared on Facebook that he thought Seth Godin and I were the two greatest speakers he'd seen: "Seth because of his ability to use more than 150 unique slides during a presentation and Michael Port because he can keep an audience on the edge of their seat for 90 minutes without using one slide." For the record, as much as I appreciate the sentiment, I don't believe it for a second. Knowing Seth, I'm sure I can speak for him as well when I say that we are *not* actually the two greatest speakers *in the world*. I only use this example to demonstrate that, once again, there isn't one right way to deliver a presentation.

In *The Think Big Revolution* keynote I use lots of different media, but not in the way that you might think. Before the section entitled "Stand for Something, or Someone Will Stand on You," I show a one-minute video that includes dozens of five-second clips of my students, each on their own in their homes, standing up, hands on hearts, declaring what they stand for. It's powerful and something that I ask my audience to do as well. I also show pictures of me as a husky kid during the section where I talk about my issues with food that track back to childhood. Additionally, I perform scenes where I talk to voices played through the speakers in the theater. It's a dynamic that audience members have likely never seen at another keynote and it creates a lot of contrast at a business conference, along with a compelling novelty factor. To see these examples and more, you can watch a short excerpt of the keynote at [www.MichaelPort.com](http://www.MichaelPort.com).

When Amy and I perform *Steal the Show, A Keynote in One Act*, we use both visuals and audio to help tell the story. Our keynote takes place on and off an airplane. Sometimes the visuals are simply black slides with white text to set up a location for a particular scene ("a coffee shop on Thursday") or to fast-forward time ("three years later"). We use the sound of an airplane seatbelt *ding* to represent transitions on and off the plane. We also show a one-minute

video that I shot and edited of Amy as a little girl getting scolded by her mother. Amy's daughter, Ruby, plays Amy as a young child and Amy plays a fictitious version of her mother.

You're only limited by your imagination and what you think is expected. A few years ago, a conference organizer asked me when I was going to send in slides for my *Book Yourself Solid* keynote. I let her know that I didn't need them; however, she insisted I use them because "good presentations have slides." I was surprised. After all, she'd seen full-length videos of my keynote and had engaged me for the event, so she was familiar with my work and performance style. I took the time to talk to her about why I didn't need them for this presentation so that she'd understand and hopefully support my methodology. She did support me, I didn't use slides, and she subsequently hired me to present at numerous other events.

It's important to stand up for your work and style so that you can provide the best possible experience for your audience. If you've done the work and know what works, then stick with it. Don't change on a whim because someone has an unnecessary or unrealistic expectation of what you *should* do. Remember, speaking is performing and performing is an art and there isn't one way to make art. You're working toward a breakthrough performance that changes the world and your life; don't settle for anything less than your best. Trust yourself.

Keep these tips in mind when deciding to use PowerPoint or Keynote or other slideware:

- Don't use slides as cue cards – if you need your slides to remind you what to talk about next, more rehearsal is in order.
- Use slides that add to or reinforce what you say but do not repeat it or you risk making yourself redundant.

- Stay connected with the audience when you show slides (don't look at the screen unless it's a choice to make a point or highlight an idea or something else).
- Don't use stock images, or at least try to avoid them – you're using visuals to create a sense of time or place, create emotional connection, or add humor or contrast to your performance. Stock images are generally impersonal.
- If you do use slides, you don't need to point the remote at the screen. The screen doesn't actually advance your slides; that's the computer's job. Moreover, the remote broadcasts a wide signal so you don't usually need to point it at your computer either. Try to make the remote an extension of your hand rather than an object that you have to interact with to advance a slide.

#### ***Step 4: Improvisation***

Improvisation is one of the most powerful secrets from the actor's trade that all successful people employ to some degree. Improv involves the ability to listen in the moment, trust your intuition, collaborate, accept and respond to feedback, revise, and rehearse or perform again. Improv works – and it's neat that by adding an “e” it becomes *improve*, because that's just what it does.

In *Steal the Show*, I'm addressing improv in two dimensions that are applicable to you: improv during a rehearsal, and improv during a performance to save difficult moments or to seize an opportunity for humor, fun, or a connection with your audience. In this step, I'm going to focus on the uses of improv during rehearsal and not address the entire subject, which is introduced in Chapter 7, where

you read about the improv technique of *yes, and . . .*, and is covered in depth in Chapter 14.

During rehearsal, improv is all about making choices about your content, blocking, and delivery. It's about trying on different objectives as you go through your script. You use improv during rehearsal as you're working through your script out loud, hearing the words. This is often where I see folks make big improvements in their content. Some of us, no matter how hard we try, still write the way we were taught to write, not so much the way we talk. In preparing for a speech, you're seeking to find your public voice as a performer. Improving the moments in your script that feel forced or stilted can yield gold.

Improv also perks up your blocking: as you try a movement that doesn't work, you improvise different ideas, find one you potentially like, and then revise and edit your blocking and content map. Then, do it again: improvise, rewrite, and improvise some more. You may be telling the same story for the umpteenth time during your rehearsals, but when a fresh detail comes out of an improvisation, it can click as the killer moment that makes your story really land.

There are two ways you can improvise your content:

1. Use **an outlined structure**. If following an outlined structure, make the materials work inside that outline. Then respond and perhaps even reorganize your material based on what's happening in the moment. This is why rehearsal and knowing your material well matter so much.
2. Use **a scripted structure**. If you decide on a scripted structure, you can still bring a spontaneous, improvisational feel to it. You can go off script, as long as you know when to pick it back up. Perform as though it's unscripted – the first time you've ever said it. It's the difference between feeling like

the content is fresh and spontaneous and feeling like you are plodding along and regurgitating the material.

### ***Steps 5 and 6—Invited Rehearsals and Open Rehearsals***

At this point, you move into the crucial phase of live rehearsals. You can get better when you rehearse by yourself, certainly. But you can get exponentially better when you rehearse in front of others. **Step 5** to rehearsing successfully is the *invited rehearsal*. This is where you invite a select group who will serve as your audience and offer feedback. As you perform your invited rehearsal, keep in mind that this is not a run-through; you can always stop and start. I advise you to choose the key or troubling passages, perform them first, and ask for feedback.

Start holding invited rehearsals before your entire speech is ready. In fact, it shouldn't be ready, since you are still rehearsing and tweaking. Think about it this way: it's better to bring people in early than to write an entire speech and only then get feedback that it doesn't work. Even if there are only a handful of people present, you can speak to a whole room. And it's important that you make no assumptions about their responses, or lack of, while rehearsing in front of them.

**Step 6**, the protocol for *open rehearsals*, is almost the same, except if you have a large group, you may want to provide some type of quick and simple printed form to get each attendee's feedback. And, of course, with an open rehearsal you're going to give the greatest weight to the observations of trusted mentors and peers.

- **Choose the right people (invited rehearsal).** Focus on selecting the right people to attend when you rehearse. Why? Because you can be thrown off if the feedback isn't in the direction that you're going in. The people you choose should

be good at giving supportive feedback and believe in what you're doing. In other words, find people who are sincere in their desire to help you. They shouldn't try to assert their own agenda. If you hear the phrase "Can I give you some constructive criticism?" and it's said in a snarky way, thank them, but show them the door.

- **Teach your invited guests how to take notes when you are performing.** This is crucial because it will help you after the rehearsal to digest and absorb the feedback. If you're showing them a short part of your presentation, then ask them to watch the first time through and take notes during subsequent runs. Have them write their notes in this format: "When you said 'xyz', it was unclear to me," or "I noticed that . . .," or "I felt that . . ."
- **Ask them to note when they see an issue.** Help your guests by giving them a few things to watch for as you present your speech. For example, you could tell them, "If you see I've left a hole in my argument, when it occurs, could you find a way to object?" Or, "If I use absolutes, weak language – like *basically*, *sort of*, or *kind of* – or if my stories feel too detailed or don't have a resolution, please write that down." Additionally, ask them to offer you feedback on your body language, wardrobe, or hair.
- **Ask your guests to write down what's really good about your presentation too so you don't cut the good stuff.** Is your body language resonating with them? Is the way you use your voice – the pacing, rhythm, or timing – keeping them engaged and connected? Are you making good eye con-

tact? What do they think of your overall presence? Which stories are most compelling?

- **Once they've seen the whole presentation, ask if they get the big idea.** Ask them point-blank to articulate the main idea or theme of your presentation. Was the content clear and did you deliver it well? Did they get the big idea? Can they clearly articulate the promise of the presentation? Do they think you delivered on the promise? It is important to get as much feedback as possible so you can decide what to incorporate into your final presentation.

Now that you have the feedback, how do you translate and incorporate it into your speech? This is tricky because you'll find that while someone will say that something is not working, he may be unable to tell you how to fix it. It's up to you to interpret what your invited guests are telling you. The way to do that is to know well what I'm teaching – then you can start interpreting. If an audience member is having trouble figuring out what you mean, it's because what you're saying isn't what you really mean. That's the vexing reality of public speaking. You have to be able to say what you mean *and make it clear so the audience knows what you mean.*

Whatever feedback you receive, take it onboard and see if you can address it. If the audience thought your story didn't work, then revisit the three-act structure or sift through the details and see what needs to be cut and what needs to be clarified. If they tell you that they had trouble hearing you, it may be time to do some voice or speech training. If they say you're not making eye contact, were you looking at the floor, or at the entire audience and not just at them? (Looking at the whole audience would, of course, be a good thing.)

### ***Step 7: Tech and Dress Rehearsals***

#### **Dealing with Rewriting and Memorization**

Most people I meet are awed by the actor's need to memorize plays, scripts, and so forth and find it somewhat intimidating. I can reassure you that by following my method, memorization will be much easier than you might think. By undertaking regular rehearsals, you will remember large chunks of your speech or pitch. The more you rehearse out loud, over and over again, the better you will know every piece of content. Still, my best advice is, when you head into tech and dress rehearsals, having your script and blocking pretty well memorized really helps. Again, that doesn't mean you have to script your presentations. Rather, it means you need to memorize structure, key points, essential details, and flow.

A few tips for making memorization easier:

- Keep everything you planned to do or say in the right order – avoid last-minute rewriting unless absolutely necessary.
- Go through your material, out loud, whenever you can, particularly during physical activity—while taking a shower, doing housework, riding an exercise bike, or taking a walk. Most neuroscientists agree that movement and cognition are powerfully connected. Amazingly, the part of the brain that processes movement is the same part of the brain that processes learning.
- Note how blocking movements ties to key passages in your text – the movement itself will help your memory.

The polished, passionate presentation you arrive at will hold up over time and can be repurposed for different uses. By the time you



reach dress rehearsal, you will only want to make light edits so as to preserve the entire flow and structure. If you deliver your presentation a number of times and you receive similar comments about a particular passage, stage business, or factual error, then of course you should change it.

Tech and dress rehearsal is a simple, straightforward concept. Don't wait until the last minute to rehearse in the clothes that you'll wear during the presentation. Rather, spend as much time performing in those clothes as possible, especially the shoes. This way, you'll ensure that your clothing choices work for all elements of the performance and you'll feel comfortable during showtime.

Tech rehearsal is also often left until the last minute. However, the earlier you bring the technical elements of your presentation into rehearsal, the more comfortable you'll be on the big day. Easy management of the technical aspects is a sure sign of proper rehearsal. An audience knows you've worked hard on your presentation when they see you smoothly handling the tech pieces. If they see you masterfully moving through your slides, they're impressed. An audience loves to know that you've taken the time to prepare for a speech, meeting, or job interview, for example. They are giving you their time, and they want to know you've spent even more time in preparing for the occasion. It's a sign of respect. And it makes a difference in how they evaluate your performance.

**CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS:  
PLAY (AND REHEARSE) WITH  
PEOPLE WHO HAVE YOUR BACK**

In closing this chapter, I want to raise one last important question. If you're making the commitment to realize your individual potential as a performer, what about the other people on your team, in your company, or associated with your small business who will work

with you during rehearsal or on the next big performance, whether that is a speech, pitch, deal, or media event? You will inevitably encounter speaking opportunities where you work with a colleague.

First, have anyone you know who may join your “cast” read this book and learn my methodology. It’s important that you speak the same language of performance. If they don’t know what you know, they may not be able to sync with you, or worse, they may hinder your ability to perform. But there will be times you’ll need to co-present, and by showing your own commitment, you’ll motivate your partner to step up his game.

And there’s a more serious issue to keep in mind. You want, to the extent possible, to perform with people you like, trust, and know how to work with productively. When that is the case, you will also discover the exponential benefits of sharing in a cohesive, trusting ensemble.

You know some of the people in your life and work who have your back. You may also want to inventory who else fits this role—and who doesn’t. Additionally, you’ll find yourself facing business and performing situations with clients or associates you don’t know well. Regardless, developing a stronger awareness about whom you’d rather have in the conference room, around your small business, and on the stage with you when the lights go up will give you the confidence to steal the show.

Playing with people who have your back means you will, wherever possible, stop working with people who wouldn’t make that jump with you, who don’t bring out your best, or who have conflicting interests to yours. In *Book Yourself Solid*, I used the metaphor of a red velvet rope to capture how entrepreneurs and independent professionals exercise good judgment when taking on clients. You will be more successful and productive, I argued, if you dump the clients who don’t bring out your best and instead work only with cli-

ents who energize and inspire you and, most importantly, allow you to do your best work.

*Book Yourself Solid* has been published in multiple editions and dozens of languages and has taught the concept of the red velvet rope policy countless times. I've been told more often than I can remember that readers find the red velvet rope policy one of the most powerful and confrontational concepts in that work. It can be hard to say *no* to someone when he is saying *yes* to you. But, if it's not someone you're meant to work with, there's usually little right in the relationship and it can quickly turn to conflict and strained relations.

The initial objection some of my readers and students raise about the concept is a good one: we often can't decide whom our colleagues and/or particular clients will be. I agree that within an organization you don't always get to choose with whom you work, and as an entrepreneur you very well may need to form a strategic alliance or stage an event with someone you don't know well or someone who makes you slightly uncomfortable.

First let's recognize that being uncomfortable with a colleague may change when you get to know him; this happens all the time. But it is also a fact that if you are setting out to deliver a significant performance or product and your colleagues or co-participants don't have your back or simply lack the right chemistry with you, the outcome will suffer. That is a significant risk, and therefore, taking a calculated gamble in pushing to form the team that is right for you doesn't seem like such a stretch. If you don't, you might end up being stuck in a role you were never meant to play.

Remember, the people you rehearse with and share the spotlight with, whether in a presentation, a pitch, or a personal event, are an expression of you and they will have an impact on your performance. Think about the person you are when you are performing optimally,

when you are with all the people who inspire and energize you. Now think about all the frustration, tension, and anxiety you feel when you work with colleagues or clients who are less than ideal – not so good, right?

To return to the red velvet rope analogy, think about how much you control the rope: you can make it tighter or looser depending upon the circumstances – but you should always have one. When you rehearse and perform with colleagues, partners, and teammates you like and trust, you'll truly enjoy and maybe even love the entire process. And when you love the work you're doing in the spotlight, you'll give even better performances and also bring out the best in others.

### **SPEED REVIEW**

Effective rehearsal is the best way to keep your nerves at bay and to achieve all the potential you have for a particular performance. Adopt the seven-step protocol of:

1. Table reads: ease into your rehearsal by hearing your work out loud.
2. Content mapping: mark up your script for the spoken word by noting important words, lists, and other vocal patterns.
3. Blocking: create your plan for the intentional movements you will make during your performance.
4. Improv: experiment with your material by improvising on sequences that don't work.
5. Invited rehearsal: include a coach or peers because you will want actual training and well-informed feedback.

6. Open run-through: hold a run-through for people in your target audience (the equivalent of previews in theater).
7. Dress/tech rehearsal: make sure you are comfortable in your clothing and are easily able to handle all the technical aspects of your presentation.

And, where possible, work with people who have your back.