

Microphone Magic For Public Speakers

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How loud is your voice? Well the question is rather academic when it comes to the use of microphones. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can just shout and make yourself heard that way. You probably won't be heard by everyone and your voice will very likely give out.

The microphone is a speaker's friend; it not only enhances the volume, but it can pick up the faintest of nuances in the voice and make your vocal quality much more effective.

So, when does a public speaker really need to use a microphone? It really depends on a lot of differing factors; for instance: How large is the room? How high is the ceiling? When you start speaking will it be filled with people, or is the audience going to be sparse? Are there a lot of windows with drapes; and is the floor bare or carpeted?

If you are not sure if you will really need a microphone, the safe option is to use it anyway. Trust me, it is much better to prepare to use one and find you don't need it, than to find you do need it and one isn't ready. It is too late then, and your voice and your professionalism will suffer.

Reluctance to using a microphone is often due to lack of knowledge and lack of practice.

What Types of Microphones are Available?

There are a number of microphones of differing types available and we may be able to make a choice, or we may have to accept what is available. Knowing what types of microphones there are, and their benefits as well as their problems, is essential for us to make informed choices.

Fixed Microphones

The first type that we may come across as a public speaker is the Fixed Microphone on Stands or Lecterns. We have all seen these; sometimes with goosenecks they are attached to the lectern and we are fixed in place by the inflexibility of the equipment.



The benefits include our ability to have our notes laid out in front of us, plus we may be lucky enough to be able to operate all the buttons and switches to bring lights up or fade them out.

However, we are unable to use body language, and we know that often our credibility is measured by the effectiveness of our body language. It also means that we may be anchored to the lectern, which is often placed to one side, which then takes us out of our central control position to a less effective one.

Here are some techniques which may help you avoid the fading in and out while speaking, when turning the head or moving the body.

You must have a proper try out before you begin to speak. The differing capabilities of the various equipment mean that you will need to position yourself at the proper distance that will both capture and carry your voice properly.

The microphone needs to be positioned at a comfortable height slightly below your mouth, so that you speak across the microphone rather than into it. As well you will need to ensure that you stand straight, with the head and chin held up. This will avoid the 'chin droop' that causes the dreaded 'popping' sound, which is an outcome of speaking directly into the microphone rather than across it.

Don't crowd the microphone. You are not a pop singer, and what works for them, will not work for you – you are using the equipment for a different outcome. Your microphone is designed to capture sound that flows over and across it; and if you get so close that you could easily take a bite out of it, you will find that it will also amplify every intake of breath, and every sniff or 'tsk' 'tsk' that we often involuntarily make when speaking.

The secret of using fixed microphones is to still use the vocal techniques we have learnt in our public speaking and to talk directly to the audience rather than the microphone. But we also need to realise that we cannot move as freely as we would if we were speaking without one. The distance between the microphone and our mouth is critical and if that changes so will our ability to be heard. So when we need to look left or right we need to remember that our mouth must still be in a direct line to the microphone; which means we need to move the body – by doing this we keep the microphone directly in front of us at all times.



And finally, if you do have to move the gooseneck microphone, try to do so while you are speaking as the sound of your voice should cover any squeaking sound caused by the mike's movement.

If you are using a fixed microphone on a stand, then you will need to have the stand's height adjusted so that the microphone sits at the proper level – and get this done before you are introduced. The chances of you getting it just right when you are trying to get out your opening remarks and fix the stand's height at the same time, is none existent.

Plus some stands have the awkward ability to separate into two parts – usually in your hands – right after you have started speaking.

If you are confident that you can remove the hand held microphone from its stand, you can increase your ability to move around the speaking area to engage with the audience. But do not do this unless you have practised it first. Because sound engineers often choose complicated wire twisting to keep loose wiring safe; and you are also going to have to put it back on the stand – smoothly – at the latter part of your speech when you should be focusing on building to a conclusion.

Types of Fixed Microphones

When you reach your speaking venue, you might be faced with having to use a hand-held microphone, and these can often be the fixed microphone – minus the stand or the lectern. Here you are merely handed the microphone, shown where the on/off switch is and expected to know what to do with it.

But these can be either the **Dynamic** or the **Condenser** type, and chances are you would not be able to spot the difference until you start to use them. And they need slightly differing techniques to get the best out of them.

Dynamic microphones are probably the more robust and the cheapest; but the sound level of this type of microphone is dependent on the volume going into the microphone, which is determined by the distance you hold it from your mouth. A very small change of distance between the mouth and the top of the microphone can have real effect on the sound level.



To avoid non-amplification of your voice, do not turn the head without following the movement with the microphone. Like the fixed lectern microphone, you will need to keep it directly in front of you at all times; or you will find that your audience will not hear parts of your speech.

The Condenser type microphones are much more expensive, but more adaptable for speakers who like to move around the speaking area. They also are far more flexible and changes in distance between your mouth and the mike will be compensated for by this more elaborate microphone.

However, even the condenser mike will not be able to pick up your voice if you are not speaking in the general direction of it.

When speaking with a hand-held microphone of either type, it looks much more professional if you can change it from hand to hand smoothly. This might need practice, but it does add more ability to engage in body language.

Grasp the hand-held microphone with the whole hand, and hold it nearer to the top than to the bottom. Some microphones have antenna projecting from the base, and if you

hold it too close then you may be blocking the signal. So if you find that your microphone keeps cutting out, try moving your hand closer to the top.

Lapel or Lavalier Microphones

The flexibility and freedom associated with these microphones have made them very popular with public speakers. With the microphone clipped to the lapel the speaker is free to move around and engage in confident body language to enhance the audience's engagement.

They are discreet and as long as they are fitted carefully, they offer the public speaker an excellent way of amplification without impacting on the emotional connection created by good body language and vocal variety.

The usual lapel mike consists of a small microphone which can be clipped to the clothing and connected by a thin wire to a transmitter box. Care should be taken with the fitting of both the microphone and the transmitter, and female speakers particularly need to give careful consideration of what clothing they will wear if they are expected to use a Lavalier set up.



They can be either a wired or wireless type, and with the wired type we need a place to put the microphone as well as somewhere to store the transmitter box. The mike works best when placed about 20 – 25 cm below the chin, and ideally in the centre. Closing the top button of a jacket or wearing a tie will position it correctly.

The optimum speaking area is in the shape of a 'V' with the base at the tip of the microphone. The 'V' widens as it reaches the chin and you can turn your head in any way within that invisible 'V' and still be heard. If the microphone is positioned too high you will create 'hot spots' when you turn your head, affecting how well you can be heard.

A good trick for presenters using PowerPoint with these types of microphones is to position the microphone slide towards the side where the laptop is, as you will be looking towards it to check your progress through the presentation.



The transmission box is usually small enough to be tucked into a side pocket; but with the microphone so close to the neckline, it is important that there are no metallic chains or necklaces which can interfere with the microphone. Some long dangling ear rings can sometimes make noises when the head is turned and are also best avoided. Anything that can brush against or hit the microphone when you move will be amplified and transmitted.

A Lavalier mike which is wireless can pose different and difficult problems, as the transmitter pack needs to be attached to clothing at

the back of the body near the waist; so a waist band or a substantial belt will be needed to clip the pack onto. Ladies, a tight fitting dress, or even a jacket will not allow the transmitter pack to be effectively clipped to you without creating ugly bumps or even worse.

Some sartorial disasters have occurred when speakers have not given adequate consideration to what kind of a microphone they will be using.

General Tips for Using Microphones

Ringing ahead will let you know what type of microphone is provided in the venue. This is essential to ensure that you are dressed appropriately to be able to wear Lavalier or headset microphones.

Always make sure you arrive early enough to get familiar with the type of microphone you will be using. You **must** know where the On/OFF switch is located for your own protection. Wearing a lapel microphone to the wash room is a recipe for disaster; there are too many tales of embarrassed politicians for us not to heed the warning.

Arriving early will allow the sound engineers to become familiar with your requirements, and to be able to record the appropriate sound levels to enhance your speech rather than overwhelm it.

When asked for a sound check – please do not **blow into the microphone** and do not **tap the membrane** – just use the usual ‘*For a sound check, testing one two three.*’ If you want to get creative recite a nursery rhyme, but there is no real need to get too fancy.

Practice using the microphone, and if you can manage it have someone check the room; that means moving around the room to check for volume and look for where you may create feedback spots.

Feedback is caused when the microphone picks up the sound from the speakers and attempts to re-amplify it. It merely creates wild wailing from the sound equipment and gnashing of teeth from the listeners.

As it occurs mainly under or close to speakers, it is best to avoid these spots, which is why walking through your sound check is a valuable experience. Some speakers take chalk with them and mark out spots where feedback occurs, so that they can avoid that area during their presentation.

If you are a victim of feedback during your speech – just reverse your movement until you are out of range and move away from that area. For instance, if you are walking forward towards the audience when feedback attacks – then walk back, away from the audience until calm returns then move sideways, away from the problem spot.

If you have the opportunity to watch earlier speakers you may be able to predict areas which may cause trouble from their performance and avoid them when you stand up to speak.

Another cause of feedback could be another live microphone in the vicinity – often the person who introduces a miked-up speaker can forget to turn their microphone off, before the speaker begins. Results- sound like live cats on stage.

Conclusion

At some time or other in a speaking career, you are going to be faced with having to use a microphone. If you understand the types of microphones available at venues, and some of the practical issues that you may face, you should have the confidence to use the microphone with ease.

A microphone is a speaker's friend; it picks up and amplifies our voice, and enhances the vocal quality. By learning how to work with a microphone we can ensure that our audience has the best possible chance of hearing what we have to say, and being able to understand our carefully created speech or presentation.

In public speaking our goal is always to reach out to our audience, and being able to be heard has everything to do with achieving that goal. But any microphone is only a tool. No microphone can transform a poor presentation into a good one. But we can turn our good presentation into a great one, by the correct use of a microphone



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