

How To Master The Monsters Of Public Speaking

When You Know The Rules, The Monsters Have To Behave

By Kendall C. Wright, President of Entelechy Training and Development, Inc.

It's amazing how the lessons from my childhood represent an inexhaustible reservoir of solutions and wisdom. Today I face challenge after challenge. These challenges show up in both my professional dealings and personal relationships. I'll admit it, initially; many of these challenges feel overwhelming. But, after a moment of reflection, I'm usually able to find a wonderful, practical, and relevant experience in my past from which to draw. There frequently seems to be something from my childhood that correlates or clarifies most confounding circumstances, if only I take the time to introspect. I'm willing to bet the same is true for you.

Many people are panic-stricken by the privilege of public speaking. Public speaking is purported to be the number one fear of North Americans. Can you imagine - public speaking ranking as the number one fear? Well, that may be reality for many people, but not for me. I've been a North American all my life and I can recall a few things that were exponentially scarier than making a speech - even before a crotchety crowd of critics.

For my brother, my sister, and me, our home was a virtual "land of monsters." As children, we would tease and taunt each other about the type of calamity that might befall us before sunrise. From the time I was four years old until the ripe old age of fourteen, there were "monsters" living in every room, in every closet, behind every door, and of course, in basement of our home. In my overactive imagination I pictured our basement as the MCC - Monster Conference Center. In my youth, I would have avowed, on all that was sacred, that movies like *The Exorcist*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Night of the Living Dead* and *Jaws* (just to name a few) were all filmed, on location, in my house. At least, those were my thoughts at bedtime.

Today, many people are as intensely afraid of public speaking as I was of the Sleestacks from *The Land of The Lost*. For many, standing before a lectern, in a pulpit, or near a microphone is a terrifying, even horrifying experience. Perhaps to put this in the proper context, their discomfort would be equivalent to my being chased by Frankenstein's Monster, the Werewolf, or the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Over the years I've gained more insight, knowledge and wisdom regarding the monsters of my childhood. I've used that information to master my fear of my childhood monsters and you, too, can master your monsters of public speaking.

I have discovered a never-before identified possible root cause of these fears. Here's a quick test. When you were a youngster, wanting to sneak up and frighten someone, what one word would you have most likely used? "Boooooo!" Even Casper the Friendly Ghost said "Booooo" occasionally. Here's the insight, for most "speakers," - novice and professional alike- what is the most dreaded and feared of all possible audience reactions? Of course, it's to be "booed!" What a freighting coincidence. This is true whether the booing is verbal or in the form of caustic written critiques.

What are some of the key insights to help you master your monsters of public speaking? Below is what I've learned:

The monsters use your imagination as an incubator

A co-opted imagination is fertile ground for horror sequels. The imagination is often misused to conceive and nurture the fears of our worst case scenarios. The imagined and imputed power of monsters to devastate and dismember is the same power we "give" to our audiences. Audiences are our allies not our adversaries. It's far more empowering to use our imaginations to prescribe, preview, and pre-play the audience's appreciation for our presentation than to envision them waiting to ambush us. Most members of the audience want us to succeed. Don't use your imagination as a monster incubator.

The monsters are more bark than bite

As fearful as I was of the creature features of the horror parade, at some point I realized the monsters were more bark than bite. As a public speaker, you will also discover that audiences too are more bark than bite.

The first impressions of an audience can be intimidating. Metaphorically, the audience may be viewed as a hollowing, rabid, unconquerable ogre, but the shrieks of terror will soon give way to roaring applause. Don't let a bark prevent you from delivering your best.

The monsters all have weakness

Every monster has an Achilles' heel. Whether it's garlic, silver bullets, wooden stakes, or sunshine to exterminate Count Dracula, or Holy water to exorcize an evil spirit, every monster fears something.

The monsters of public speaking are repelled by preparation and practice. As you "own" your material and grow increasingly more comfortable with your own style, the monsters will lessen and loosen their grip. Knowing the weakness of the ghouls is a step toward taking control of your life. Knowledge is indeed power.

The monsters must honor contracts

I learned to negotiate to achieve my goal. Often the goal was as simple as going to the basement to get a roast from the freezer for my mom. It wasn't unusual for me to make deals with my imaginary nemeses. I would insist that no one could chase me until I was in the doorway of my room (just a dive away from the safe zone of my bed.) Create your own terms and conditions of engagement as you approach your audiences.

Contract to focus on meeting and exceeding the needs of the audience and your anxiety will abate. Create a contract with yourself to focus on giving your very best each time. By focusing on what you can control, you immediately move from a position of reactivity to a position of pro-activity.

Your unilateral contract will give you the power to take those ever so important first steps. I've found that this contract can't be breached or broken by any mummy, salt sucker or swamp thing.

The monsters of public speaking can be tamed. No longer am I held prisoner, or prey, by the monsters of my childhood. Frankenstein, Bariums Collins, and the Humpback all have been put to rest. Whether battling the monsters of childhood or conquering the present-day monsters of public speaking, this truth stands - monsters are tamed by preparation, information, and wisdom.

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