

Volume and the Public Speaker: Be Heard and Be Effective

by [Andrew Dlugan](#)

Published: Aug 19th, 2013

If you give a great speech, but nobody can hear you, does it really count?

Before your message can transform your audience, the sound of your voice must be heard by your audience. It sounds really simple, but I'm shocked by how often I have to strain to hear a presenter.

In this article, we examine **strategies for being heard** and varying speech volume to **improve your effectiveness**.

Goal 1: Be Heard

Your first goal is to be *comfortably* heard by *everyone* in the audience. If they cannot hear your voice, then you cannot deliver a message to them.

Here are several strategies and discrete actions you can take to help your audience hear you better:

Strategy 1 - Minimize noise distractions

Any noise that isn't your voice will be a distraction to your audience. Loud noises will obviously create challenges, but even soft noises can be an irritation for your audience.

- **Close doors or windows** to shut out noisy vacuums, lawn mowers, traffic, or any other external noise. Use common sense, though. If the closed room gets uncomfortable, you may need to deal with the external noise.
- **Don't be the distracting noise.** Avoid nervously clicking a pen. Don't wear noisy jewellery. Avoid wearing clothing which makes noise as you move.
- If necessary, **deal with chatterers.** It can be uncomfortable to police this behavior, but you owe it to those who want to listen.
- **Don't talk over laughter or applause.** It's a very common mistake to begin speaking while the opening applause is still happening. The result? Your audience may not hear the first words out of your mouth — terrible! Be patient, and wait your turn.

Strategy 2 - Minimize the distance to the audience

The physics of sound is simple. If you decrease the distance between you and your audience, you will be louder for them. (Actually, your volume varies as the inverse *square* of the distance, but let's avoid mathematics in this article.)

So, get closer! It can make a big difference.

- **Move your audience closer to you.** When teaching corporate seminars, I'll often move all of the chairs and tables 10 feet closer to the front of the room. It only takes me a minute or two, and it helps me avoid straining my voice for an entire afternoon. (It also gets my audience closer to the projection screen — another benefit!)
 - **Move yourself closer to your audience.** Maybe your audience can't move closer (e.g. fixed theatre seating). In this case, try moving closer to them.
 - **Block the seats in the back.** If you know that your audience is smaller than the number of seats available, block the seats in the back. This gets everyone sitting closer.
 - **Move to a smaller room.** Usually, you are stuck with the venue you are given. But if you have a choice, try to match the room to the size of your audience. Speaking to 30 people in an auditorium creates volume challenges unnecessarily (and makes it less intimate, too). Speaking to 30 people in a seminar room is a better acoustic fit.
- “Before your message can transform your audience, the sound of your voice must be heard by your audience.”**

Strategy 3 - Raise your volume to reach the person in the back row

- **Project your voice.** It's not only about speaking louder, but also speaking with more resonance. It takes practice.
- **Use a microphone.** If a microphone is available at the venue, you should probably use it. Practice if you are not accustomed to speaking with a microphone.
- **Articulate clearly.** It's remarkable how just focusing on articulation brings your volume up considerably.
- **Practice good posture.** Stand tall and lean slightly forward. Your voice will carry farther.

Strategy 4 - Adapt as necessary

- **Ask the audience.** Sure, it's boring, but if you are in doubt, ask the audience if they can hear you. Look for positive feedback from people in the back. It shows you care.
- **Look for non-verbal feedback from audience.** Are they straining forward to hear you? Are they cupping their hand over their ear? You need to speak louder.
- **Microphone stops working?** Act quickly. Get the audience to move in closer, or raise your own volume.

Vocal Delivery Article Series

- [Speech Pauses](#)
- [Filler Words \(um, ah\)](#)
- [Speaking Rate](#)
- **Vocal Volume**
- [Vocal Projection](#)
- [Vocal Strength Exercises](#)
- [Breathing](#)

Goal 2: Be Effective

Okay, your audience can comfortably hear you. Great. But that's not enough. To maximize your effectiveness, you must vary your volume strategically throughout.

- **Vary your volume.** Speaking for any length of time at the same volume (whether loud or soft) puts people to sleep. Just as gestures and body movement create visual interest, varying your volume creates vocal interest.
- **Emphasize target words or phrases** by speaking louder or softer (as appropriate).
- **Mirror emotional content** with volume changes. For example, when sharing a sad story, your volume should naturally drop. Conversely, when sharing a story which has action or surprise, your volume should increase, building to a climax.
- **Finish sentences strong.** Tailing off at the end of sentences is a common mistake made by speakers, often caused by looking back down at notes. The result? Your audience may miss the last word or two at the end of sentences, thus weakening your impact.
- **Start loud.** It's not a strict rule, but generally a good idea to open a notch louder than average. It grabs attention and demonstrates enthusiasm.
- **Finish loud.** Also not a rule, but speaking louder helps create a rousing, confident finish. This is especially true in a persuasive or motivational speech.

This is one of [many public speaking articles](#) featured on *Six Minutes*.

[Subscribe to Six Minutes](#) for free to receive future articles.



[Andrew Dlugan](#) is the editor and founder of *[Six Minutes](#)*. He teaches courses, leads seminars, coaches speakers, and strives to avoid Suicide by PowerPoint. He is an award-winning public speaker and speech evaluator. Andrew is a father and husband who resides in British Columbia, Canada.

Google+: [Andrew Dlugan](#)

Twitter: [@6minutes](#)