

# Confidence rules, OK?

Public speaking need not be a minefield. Stay calm and be prepared, writes **Sophie Toomey**



**P**UBLIC speaking. Those two words are enough to make many people break out in a cold sweat. They strike terror into the hearts of otherwise confident and assured socialisers.

James O'Loughlin hosts radio and TV programs on ABC radio as well as doing regular stand-up comedy gigs. He comes across as the most confident and assured of public speakers. O'Loughlin has decided to share the secret of his gift with would-be and have to be public speakers in his new book, *Ummm*.

O'Loughlin believes that public speakers are made not born, and that even the least gifted can learn to mesmerise — or at least keep an audience with some practice and some practical advice.

According to O'Loughlin, it is not nature

but method that makes a public speaker. "Familiarity helps too. Familiarity breeds comfort with any form of public performance. Beyond that there are ways to make sure that you do it well."

So what is all the fuss about public speaking? What exactly do we think is going to happen when we get into that job interview, on to that podium, take up the mike to MC that conference dinner or to pitch for that account?

O'Loughlin says the answer is quite simple. "We fear judgment. Humiliation. We fear that people will think that if we are boring we must be a boring person. We fear that people will sum us up on how we speak."

Sydney-based performance consultant Melissa Bruce coaches nervous public speakers, TV hosts, executives and other professionals on how to speak better in public, covering everything from writing to dealing with anxiety and preparing for performance.

"The specifics of what people fear is often defined by the message they are most afraid of receiving, or that they have most often received. A common one is 'they will think I am not clever enough'."

O'Loughlin believes the difference between caving into your fears and performing well is quite simple. According to O'Loughlin, what a good public speaker has is confidence and content. He stresses that confidence does not have to be yours to begin with, but can be self-endowed.

"The first element of confidence is knowing your topic inside out. You need to know more than them." That is obviously easier with some topics than others. "If the topic was your life so far you would feel naturally confident. But with any topic if you are utterly prepared you will feel at ease."

Research is the answer. "Don't be wondering about anything to do with your topic. Arrange your information and be prepared."

The next trick, says O'Loughlin, is to tell a story — to make your topic palatable. "People pay good money to see stories told. Every movie is a story. The *Godfather* story may be more interesting than 'the story of our company', but every topic can be presented in a way that is interesting if it includes tension, humour and emotion."

Bruce advises starting your research and your speech building with a clear premise.

What is the main point of what you are trying to say? If you could write it in one sentence what would it be? "Write the speech as a mission statement and then after brainstorming focus it to find its essence. You can develop details from there."

O'Loughlin agrees that finding your point is crucial. "The most important thing you need before you start your speech is to know why you are there. Get rid of anything that doesn't fit with your reason for being there."

O'Loughlin believes a good speech is like a good wine: best developed over time. "Walk around with it for a couple of weeks going round in your head. Jot down bits and pieces. Have it uppermost in your mind and then when the time comes to write, it will crystallise."

He advises reading it back to see what it sounds like when spoken. "What looks good written down is not always the same as what makes a good speech. It needs to be the way you

would talk. Try to make it sound like you."

Once you have your speech on paper it's time to turn your mind to delivery. For many people this is where the going gets rough. O'Loughlin believes that once again confidence in delivery comes down to a few simple factors including the tone of your voice.

"It is very important. A monotone is going to turn anyone off. If you sound like you care — sound excited and enthusiastic — people will be curious; they will pick that up."

Bruce says a good opener and closer are also crucial. "It's also good to introduce your topic early and address the people you are talking to." Bruce cites her list of what makes a good public speaker: "confidence, clarity, focus, directness, generosity, passion for the topic and sensitivity to your audience."

O'Loughlin adds humour to the list. "Good humour is relevant to the situation. An ice-breaker can be fantastic. Listen to what's going on around you before you go on. You will always hear someone say something that can be turned into the perfect ice-breaker. A little anecdote or joke will connect you with the audience." O'Loughlin says a good joke will trap any audience. "They'll be with you for the next 10 minutes. But don't play a joke up. All good comedians play down and keep talking once they've made the gag. Don't stop and wait for the laugh in case it never arrives." If a joke goes flat, don't be fazed. "Acknowledge it was a fizzer. Something like 'gee that went well'."

There are things that O'Loughlin and Bruce agree should be left out at all costs. Says Bruce, "Ummms should go. Leave out the bad jokes and never say, 'unaccustomed as I am to public speaking'." O'Loughlin says leave out anything self-indulgent or self-centred: unless of course the topic is you! While emotion is a good thing in your audience, your own self-indulgent emotion is never good. "Watching you get hysterical is not going to make the audience connect with you. Gwyneth Paltrow's Oscar's speech didn't connect her. No one actually cared!"

When the moment comes to go on and you are riddled with nerves there are a few more things you can do to loosen up and relax.

O'Loughlin says being in the moment is the best relaxation of all. "Imagine the feeling you get when you are totally engrossed in a sporting event. There is nothing in your mind but what you are doing. Try to recreate that. Don't think about the future or the past, just centre yourself where you are now." His next tip is to audit all physical signs of nerves. "If you are breathing fast slow it down. If you are fidgeting then stop it. Trick your body by acting as if you are calm."

O'Loughlin says if you are losing your audience one way to find them is lowering your voice. "Talk softly. People will lean forward and refocus to try and hear you."

Bruce says often the audience will be as uncomfortable as the speaker when things go pear shaped and talking about that fact can be a good strategy. "People can be quite forgiving. It is more uncomfortable for an audience to watch you pretending everything is all right when it isn't. Jokes about the truth, such as the fact you've frozen, lost your line of thought or would rather be in a war zone right now can ease the audience into relaxing till you find your way."

Speaking up: James O'Loughlin believes public speakers are made, not born