



You are here: ► University of Vienna (<http://www.univie.ac.at/en/>) ► Teaching Affairs and Student Services (<http://studien-service-lehrwesen.univie.ac.at/>) ► Center for Teaching and Learning (<http://ctl.univie.ac.at/>) ► Infopool besser lehren (/en/) ► Start Page (/en/start-page/) ► Teaching & Learning at the University (/en/start-page/teaching-learning-at-the-university/) ► Handling Stage Fright

Handling Stage Fright

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Overview

1. Definition and Effects
2. Practical Advice for Handling Stage Fright
 - 2.1 Preparing Your Course (Short-term to Medium-term)
 - 2.2 Shortly Prior to First Lesson (Short-term)
 - 2.3 During Lessons
3. Note: Workshop Programme and Practical Coaching

Stage fright is a **widespread phenomenon** among teachers. It particularly affects **new teachers**, but they usually suffer less stage fright as they become more experienced – i.e. by continuous confrontation with the anxiety-causing situation. ^[1] Stage fright can escalate **from light nervousness to full on fear** (e.g. at the start of the semester). This entry introduces various techniques to **counteract this anxiety**. Since stage fright does not generally disappear entirely, the entry's second objective (besides anxiety reduction) is to help you master your course and **perform well** in the classroom **despite experiencing various degrees of fear**.

1. Definition and Effects

Stage fright is defined as "**inner tension** just before a situation wherein one must succeed."^[2] The body often tenses up prior to an appearance in front of a group, which is usually an unpleasant experience. However, stage fright can have positive effects as well. Unlike being relaxed, it can raise

your levels of **attentiveness** and **concentration**,^[3] leading to a better performance.

The fear of speaking in front of a group of people is often the result of a simple process in which **negative thoughts** play a dominant role. If teachers perceive a teaching situation negatively, it can lead to **physical and emotional changes** (e.g. pounding heart, trembling and sweaty hands).^[4]

Speech irregularities such as stuttering, fast talking or an excessive use of filler words (uhm, so, somehow, in principle, etc.) can occur.

When teachers experience these changes and start to think about their consequences (e.g. "*Now my students will sense that I am nervous and won't take me seriously*"), these physical symptoms intensify and anxiety increases, which leads to thoughts about further negative effects. When this condition sets in, teachers find themselves in a **cycle of fear**^[5] that constrains them (see entry "Perceived Self-Efficacy"). However, there are ways to break out of this cycle. A number of techniques – from breathing to thought-control exercises – can **reduce anxiety** and/or help **handle it better**.

2. Practical Advice for Handling Stage Fright

Try to find out what improves your **self-confidence** and help you to **find and define your role as a teacher**. For some, a specific style of clothing or an appropriate form of address (formal/informal) help them to feel comfortable in front of an audience. Depending on your personality, you will find some of the following tips more suitable than others. Try the ones that appeal to you as you read them and think about what supports you best in dealing with stage fright.

2.1 Preparing Your Course (Short-term to Medium-term)

Prepare carefully and practise - practise - practise

- You should always **prepare the first lesson of the semester carefully**. In addition to your students, you will benefit from being prepared, particularly if you suffer from stage fright. A **detailed agenda** for the first class meeting can provide you with a sense of security. Meticulous preparation increases your ability to perform, which in turn reduces your stage fright. Most of the time, students experience their teachers as being confident, and do not notice their nervousness.
- Practise your first **introduction (especially the first 10 minutes)** or the important elements of your lecture in order to get a feeling for which terminologies you would like to use. If you feel that you **judge yourself much more critically than others do**, ask colleagues, friends or family members to give you feedback on your performance (the way you speak, body language). This will help you reduce discrepancies between your own (negative) perception and an outside perspective, and thus counteract your own negative self-judgment.^[6]

Think through your lesson

- Many teachers find it helpful to go through their lessons in their minds: "How will students react? How will I react to their reactions?" Think about all possible scenarios and assure yourself that they are all manageable, and that you have the **appropriate measures ready** at your disposal.^[7]

Do not exaggerate the significance of mishaps

- Dreaded situations, upon closer examination, often **do not turn out to be as bad as anticipated**. Finish your thoughts and ask yourself: What will happen if you **cannot answer a question, lose your train of thought** or cannot finish a **convoluted sentence**? Would that really be so bad?
- Be aware that this can happen to anyone, but that you are very knowledgeable and that a mishap doesn't mean that your entire lesson was bad. If you find yourself uttering a convoluted sentence, just abandon it and start anew.
- These realistic thoughts can help you put the significance of mishaps in perspective in order for you to **escape the cycle of fear**.

Recognise that dreaded scenarios are very unlikely

- Teachers with stage fright often focus on **possible extreme situations**, and overestimate how probable it is that their fears will come true.^[8]
- Therefore, reflect on how probable it really is for your dreaded situation to occur. If you already have some teaching experience, it can be helpful to recall past lessons and recognise that you would not categorise the majority of them as extreme cases.

Additional medium-term strategies for better handling stage fright

- **Simulations/role plays** can help stimulate your imagination ("*How would I handle a certain/specific situation?*") by acting out your dreaded teaching situations. Participating in an improvisational theatre also trains you to better handle unforeseen situations.^[9]
- **Autosuggestion** is when you find or develop a phrase that motivates you and influences your thoughts about yourself in a positive way, thus having an effect on your feelings and behaviour. Autosuggestion can bring about a positive attitude and self-evaluation, and strengthen your self-esteem.^[10]
- **Practising mindfulness** (e.g. meditation, Yoga, autogenic training) can help you to relax and organise your thoughts. Concentrating on yourself and focussing your attention can improve the way you generally deal with stress. It is important that you do these exercises regularly in order to achieve noticeable results.^[11]

2.2 Shortly Prior to the First Lesson (Short-Term)

Familiarise yourself with the classroom

- Get to know the layout of the classroom (arrangement of tables, chairs).
- A few days before your first session, make sure you are familiar with the equipment in the classroom you intend to use (computer, projector, microphone, loudspeakers, Internet and USB connections).

Focus on positive previous experiences – strengthen your self-efficacy

- Recall positive teaching experiences (**mastery experiences**). Memories of conference presentations or presentations you gave as a student might help if you have not taught previously. Focusing on your successes will help you generate positive self-attitude and **strengthen your trust in your own competencies**.
- Additionally, you can reflect upon methods other successful teachers have used (**vicarious experiences**).
- Both approaches will give you clues on how to best master the teaching situation – since they allow you to internalise a **vivid image** of how you or someone else has succeeded in the past.

Physical exercises shortly before class

- In the 15 minutes leading up to the start of class, adopting a certain conscious body posture can lead to greater self-confidence. ^[12] Before making your way to the classroom, you can, for example, strike a self-confidence pose in your office for one minute (often referred to as a **power pose**). Stand upright, chest lifted, chin raised, shoulders pulled back.
- In order to **relieve tension**, make your hands into fists several times and relax them after each time.

2.3 During Lessons

Take your time – relieve stress

- Keep in mind that even during a lesson you are less under time pressure than you may think. Occasionally, remember to **intentionally breathe in and out**. This will help you to calm down and slow your pulse. ^[13] A **sip of water** during your lecture can furthermore reduce the stress you feel in the situation.
- In courses with continuous assessment, you can decide how long the sequences of you talking will last. **Activating teaching methods** and **interactive elements** (group and individual assignments) in addition to being beneficial for your students' learning process, may also provide you the teacher the opportunity to not lecture. Even if students working actively require your attention and individual students or groups may ask you questions, these sequences afford you some respite, which is particularly important for teachers with stage fright who experience speaking in front of class as stressful. These sequences provide teachers with an opportunity to briefly gather themselves or to read through their notes on the remaining class.
- If you **cannot answer a question** immediately, take the time you need by...
 - repeating the question back to your student (or the entire group),
 - telling your student that you will reply by email, or
 - letting your student know that you will be discussing the topic at a later date.

Focus on personable students (*positive anchor*)

- Focus on students in your class who seem personable and motivated.

Self-confident body language and classroom presence

- Assume an **upright position** and stand with both feet planted firmly on the ground.
- If you don't know what to do with your **hands**, hold a pen or your notes. If you fear that holding a piece of paper in your hands makes it easier for your students to see your hands shake, simply leave your papers on the table.
- Many teachers benefit from asserting their presence by **moving around the classroom** as they talk to their students. Moving around can loosen you up and underscore your role as instructor. However, don't feel obligated to do so if you feel more comfortable behind your table. Rely on your preferential behaviour in natural situations to help decide what position to use.^[14]

Deliberate introduction (introducing yourself, form of address)

- A well-planned introduction to the first class meeting can strengthen your self-confidence. Use your **welcoming address** and **self-introduction** to create an atmosphere in which you feel (more) comfortable from the very beginning. Tell your class about your interests, your research topics (e.g. your dissertation topic) or your thoughts that went into planning this course – including your enthusiasm for the subject (see also entry "Getting to Know One Another (<https://infopool.univie.ac.at/en/home-page/teaching-learning-at-the-university/getting-to-know-one-another/#c311244>)"). New teachers who suffer from stage fright tend to introduce themselves unfavourably (i.e. as someone who has never taught before) and simply forget to provide other information about themselves.
- It is possible, however, that **revealing their inexperience** is precisely what gives new teachers a better sense of security when teaching. Some people experience relief when they admit to being nervous.
- During the introduction, establish whether to use the **formal or informal form of address** in the classroom. Making a decision that feels right to you can improve your self-confidence and contribute to finding your role as a teacher.

3. Note: Workshop Programme and Practical Coaching

- There are several workshops available from the "Teaching Competence (<https://ctl.univie.ac.at/qualifizierung/teaching-competence/>)" programme that can support you in dealing with your stage fright (see esp. the topic of "Social Competencies, Presence, Language (<https://ctl.univie.ac.at/qualifizierung/teaching-competence/soziale-kompetenzen-auftreten-sprache/>)"). Depending on the workshop, you can practise your performance in front of groups (possibly with the use of video recordings), discuss difficult teaching situations or receive feedback from colleagues on your use of (body) language.
- If you are about to teach your first course, Practical Coaching for Staff New to Teaching (<https://ctl.univie.ac.at/qualifizierung/praxiscoaching/>) can offer you an opportunity to exchange your experiences with other new teachers.

Sources

[1] See Ude, Greta, Holger Prüß, Kirsten Richardt and Sandra Neumann. „Die Angst vor dem Sprechen – eine Untersuchung zur Wirksamkeit des Angstabbaus im Rahmen der Bonner Stottertherapie“. *Forschung Sprache* 3, Nr. 2 (2016): 20-35.

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[3] Sator, Sigrid. *Ist Redeangst das Gleiche wie Lampenfieber?* Satormedia Medientraining & Rhetorik, 2013. www.satormedia.com/ueber-mich/news/details/article/ist-redeangst-das-gleiche-wie-lampenfieber.html [last accessed 10.01.2018].

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- [14] Prost. Rhetorik und Persönlichkeit. [12]

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