

# Behavior Analysts to the Front! A 15-Step Tutorial on Public Speaking

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**Abstract** Mainstream prominence was Skinner’s vision for behavior analysis. Unfortunately, it remains elusive, even as we approach the 110th anniversary of his birth. It can be achieved, however, and there are many routes. One that seems overlooked in many (most?) behavior analytic training programs is what I call the front of the room. The front of the room is a very powerful locus for influencing people. Mastering it can turn a commoner into a king; a middling man into a mayor; or a group of disorganized, dispirited people into an energized force marching into battle. The most powerful members of our species had their most memorable moments at the front of the room. If so much is available there, why is mastery of it in such short supply, not just in behavior analysts but in the population at large? In this paper, I address why, argue that the primary reason can be overcome, and supply 15 behaviorally based steps to take in pursuit of front of the room mastery.

**Keywords** Public speaking · Anxiety · Avoidance · Escape · Fluency

Skinner viewed behavior analysis as a generic science that would be seen ultimately as widely relevant to all human behavior. As we approach his 110th birthday, his vision remains unrealized. To his credit, and that of the 1000s of behavior analysts that followed in his wake,

behavior analysis has flourished in one tail of the normal distribution, and the importance of its perceived role for the persons who reside there (e.g., persons with developmental disabilities) is quite large. Unfortunately, behavior analysis has not fared as well under the dome of that distribution, and its perceived role for persons who reside there (i.e., persons in the mainstream of everyday life) is still relatively small. There are many routes leading to mainstream prominence, and one that seems overlooked in many (most?) behavior analytic training programs is what I call the front of the room.

The front of the room is a very powerful locus for influencing people. Mastering it can turn a commoner into a king; a middling man into a mayor; or a group of disorganized, dispirited people into an organized, energized force marching into battle. All this and more are available at the front of the room. The most powerful members of our species had their most memorable moments at the front. Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and Franklin Roosevelt’s “Nothing to fear but fear itself” proclamation come to mind. Absent their front of the room skills, Hitler and Mussolini would likely not even warrant a footnote to history.

If so much opportunity is available at the front of the room, why do so many people, behavior analysts included, avoid it? One major reason is fear. Most people are very afraid of public speaking. Since being listed as the number one human fear in the 1977 *Book of Lists* (Wallace et al. 1977), it has consistently resided at the top of most ranked lists of human fears. Apparently, the front of the room contains stimuli so aversive that, when

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queried, many people report fearing it more than death itself. Why this is the case is a subject for another paper. That it is the case is one of the main purposes for this paper.

Nonetheless, the actual obstacle to mastering the front of the room is not fear itself (*pace* Roosevelt); it is what people who are afraid do in response to their fear. This is actually true for almost all psychological problems. Which means that, despite all of the sophisticated psychologizing about psychological problems conducted over the past century, their essence involves mere behavior. As a clinical psychologist, I do not work with people's psychological problems, although my clients talk about those problems abundantly. I work with the behaviors they employ to solve those problems. For example, the psychological problems reported by depressed persons are almost always highly aversive thoughts and feelings. The behaviors they employ to solve those problems always involve unhealthy changes in sleeping, eating, and activities whose functions in the short term are avoidance and escape from the aversive thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, for depressed persons, these behaviors lead to greater suffering in the long term. For example, some people feel so depressed they lose all interest in their jobs. But, their true problem is not the depressed feeling; it is that they do not go to work which has a harmful effect on the quality of their life. The primary psychological problem of anxious people is chronic fear of nondangerous objects, events, or activities. They solve this problem with extreme avoidance of those objects, events, and activities, and this avoidance, rather than the fear, is what actually diminishes the quality of their lives. For example, some people are terrified of flying. Their true problem is not the terror; it is the fact that they simply will not fly. By not flying, they limit their access to a broad range of reinforcing experiences.

More specific to this paper, most people are afraid of the front of the room and avoid it as much as they can, a tactic that has an adverse effect on their lives. For example, some people are so terrified of speaking in front of others that they will avoid any event, activity, or occupation that poses even a remote possibility that it might happen. This solution dramatically reduces their options for employment, relationship, and social and professional participation. To be sure, the abject terror resolved only by extreme avoidance that I describe here represents a clinical condition and is not typical. Most people are merely afraid of the front of the room,

experience substantial discomfort at the prospect of speaking there, avoid it as much as they can, and suffer through it when they cannot. The strategies most frequently used by this group are avoidance or, if a speaking engagement cannot be avoided, attempting to eliminate all fear before they take the stage. These strategies are doomed to fail, largely because fear of something makes avoidance of the thing feared negatively reinforcing. The best way to thwart the negative reinforcement process is to stay in the presence of the stimuli that set the occasion for its occurrence. The results of doing so are well documented in lay and behavior analytic literatures. From a lay perspective, it involves a variation of the saying "you have to get back up on the horse that threw you." From a behavior analytic perspective, it involves a variation of operant and respondent extinction (Friman 2007). For extinction to reduce the reinforcing properties of avoidance of a feared activity, fearful persons must remain in the presence of features of the activity (e.g., stage, podium, and audience). In other words, learning to manage fear of the front of the room requires being at the front of the room while afraid. Those whose primary strategy is to forgo the front until their fear of it is gone may have to wait a very long time.

Rather than waiting for the fear to retreat on its own, some people attempt to move it along by using medications whose purpose is to interfere with or mask the biology of fear (e.g., Ativan and Xanax). This strategy also has its detriments, the most notable of which are side effects such as slowed thought processes, speech, and reaction time, all of which affect functions critical to effective speaking. Another problem with medication is that it artificially reduces the experience of fear and this impairs the fearful person's capacity to learn to manage that experience when he or she is not taking medication.

So here is the hard news for the fearful: learning to eliminate fear before going to the front of the room is not a viable option. The only way to master the front of the room is to be at the front of the room. And the only way to learn to manage fear of the front of the room is to be afraid while there, because the goal is not to be fearless; few have trouble speaking under that condition. The goal is to learn to speak effectively while afraid (Friman 2007, 2012). Achieving this goal has at least three advantages: First, it reduces fear, although again, that is not the goal; the goal is effective speaking regardless of how one feels. Second, when fear is channeled into performance, rather than escaped or

avoided, performance improves (cf., Brooks 2013). Third, learning to speak while afraid normalizes the experience. There is a widely held yet patently false belief that fear of public speaking is abnormal. The primary meanings of the word normal are expected, typical, or most likely to occur (Soukhanov 1992). Given the widespread fear of public speaking, it seems safe to say that not being afraid may actually be abnormal.

Pertinent to this last point, there is another obstacle to effective public speaking and although not nearly as prevalent as fear, it is just as real and paradoxically it resides on the opposite end of the spectrum from fear. For lack of a convenient technical term, I shall call it overconfidence. In the first of the 15 steps described below, I refer to speakers who report they never rehearse a presentation. These speakers are likely candidates for this latter condition. Rather than avoiding public speaking these individuals seem to seek it out. And they are either impervious to or bereft of experiences with critical audience responses. This condition is not so much a problem for them as it is for their audiences. Absent the motivation to practice (which is born of exposure to aversive feedback, real or imagined), these speakers subject their audiences to presentations that have not received the benefit of practice or any corrective modifications. Presumably, most or all readers of this paper have sat through talks by speakers whose favorable opinion of their own performance is virtually the opposite of the opinion of the performance held by the audience. I am not as concerned about overconfidence as I am about fear as an obstacle to effective public speaking because so many more people are afflicted by fear. I merely mention overconfidence as a way of communicating that following the steps made in this paper could benefit all prospective speakers, not just those who are afraid.

The steps to which I refer (and which are discussed at length below) are drawn from my own experiences and from numerous commercially available books, videos, tutorials, seminars, and workshop whose aim is to help people master public speaking (e.g., Atkinson 2005; Carnegie 2014; Goodman 2006; Reynolds 2008; Sarnoff 1972; Silvia and Feldman 2012). Most of the advice offered is quite good, and the best advice, not surprisingly, is often essentially, if not ostensibly, behavioral. There are exceptions to the typically high quality advice supplied, however. For example, one of the most popular pieces of advice is to imagine the audience naked. Its origin is uncertain although one

early book attributes it to Winston Churchill (Sarnoff 1972). His extraordinary rhetorical successes notwithstanding, this is actually a bad idea for most mere mortals (e.g., you and I) because doing so can disrespect the audience. The idea behind this advice is to mentally demean the audience by imagining images that make its members look foolish. This, it is presumed, will make them seem less threatening. But even if it did reduce the threat, which seems unlikely, it would probably damage the relationship between speaker and audience. The audience has assembled to hear the speaker. Its attention is on him or her, and its members expect to be taken seriously. If the speaker imagined the audience as looking silly or foolish, it would be hard to hide that fact. But you need not take my word for it; you can test this assertion yourself. Merely have a conversation with someone and imagine them naked as you converse. Note that the effect of doing so has on your part of the interaction. This should tell you all you need to know. Fortunately, most of the commercially available advice on mastering the front of the room is not so problematic. In the remainder of this paper, I will supply 15 steps toward becoming much more effective at the front of the room, each drawn from the commercial sources I cited above and my own experience as a speaker and trainer of speakers.

*1. Prepare, Prepare, Prepare* If ever you hear someone say that they never rehearse a presentation, I recommend making a mental note to not emulate that person, at least insofar as presenting is concerned. Excellence is born of practice, not talent. Alternatively, it takes a lot of practice to be truly talented (cf., Gladwell 2009). So, practice your presentation over and over. In particular, practice the first and last 5 min (Friman 2012). The first 5 min is when the speaker is most nervous, and fluency born of repeated practice is a tonic for nervousness. The last 5 min is when a speaker's most important points are made (or when they should be made). It is when the talk moves from the particular (e.g., "These data suggest that task repetition increased fluency of performance.") to the universal (e.g., "Ultimately all talent owes a tremendous debt to simple practice."). From a behavioral perspective, practice produces fluency and fluency underlies mastery (cf., Lindsley 1992). From a neurobiological viewpoint, practice produces myelin, and as myelin accumulates in the neural networks underlying a specific performance, the efficiency of those networks increases and the quality of the performance improves

(Carlson 1994). Driving on dry pavement is a myelinated skill in most adults; driving on icy pavement is not. The former can be accomplished while talking on the phone or eating a sandwich. The latter requires both hands on the wheel and eyes riveted on the road with all other senses tuned for any loss of control. All great performers practice (or lie about it). For example, Ernest Hemmingway rewrote the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times. Roald Dahl, author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, famously rewrote his stories at least 150 times before he finished. Jerry Seinfeld is well known to revise and practice a single joke for years (Weiner 2012).

An effective method for practice is a version of cross-training first used by Demosthenes, a prominent statesman of ancient Athens. As a young man, he stammered, was easily winded, and had a weak voice. But he badly wanted some of the power available at the front of the room. So he practiced speeches with pebbles in his mouth (to overcome his stammer), in competition with waves pounding on the shore (to increase his volume) and while running up and down sand dunes (to expand his lung capacity). The result of his practice is that he became one of the most effective orators in his day and remains one of the most famous in recorded history.

*2. Study People Who Are Good in Front of the Room* I do not want to waste space detailing the research documenting the benefits of watching someone who possesses a skill that we ourselves are trying to learn. So I will just talk about my left hand instead. I am teaching myself to perform several skills with my left hand that I can perform easily with my right hand (I am right handed). I have found that the best way to do this is to perform the skill with my right hand and then quickly attempt it with my left. In effect, my right hand is modeling for my left. This method has worked with numerous mundane skills (e.g., shaving, opening doors and containers, and writing). I use a similar method to develop my skill as a speaker; I watch people who do it well and emulate them. And I can think of no better group to watch than Sunday morning televangelists. They are routinely terrific at the front of the room. They have no slides, notes, or props (other than a bible) and yet they hold audiences in thrall, sometimes for hours. Or, if you would prefer something live, there are several excellent speakers who regularly present at behavior analytic conferences. I recommend watching them and emulating anything you like and can reproduce. When working with Edward

Christophersen as a graduate student, I taped all of his public presentations and then listened to them repeatedly, “borrowing” any lines, concepts, and logical progressions I could reproduce. Initially, I sounded like him when I talked (although I could never reproduce the celerity of his wit or perfection of his timing), but I gradually developed my own distinctive style.

*3. Prepare the Room (and Yourself in the Process)* Go to the room where you are to present well before the presentation (I usually go the night before, if I can get in) and get to know the room from every angle. Imagine the audience as you do so. Get comfortable with the room and the imaginary audience. If you do not like the room setup, rearrange it until you do. The people who set up the room will not be on the stage, you will. The room should be set up to serve you, not them. Go to the front and stand where you will be standing during your talk. Look out at the chairs and again imagine the audience. If you are alone, give the imaginary audience the first 5 min of your talk and then give them the final 5 min. If you are not alone, do this mentally. As you do it, move your attention from left to right, spending a few moments with chairs to the left, in the center, and to the right—and then start over again. Test the microphone. If a wireless microphone is available, use it. Mobility increases presentational flexibility. If you will be using any media, from simple PowerPoint to complex video, test it and then test it again. Leave nothing to chance. When you arrive for your presentation, you want all your attention on what you have to say—not on mechanics and logistics (also see number 12 on having a backup plan).

*4. Capture Their Attention* Audiences are fickle. Their attention cannot be taken for granted. To be effective, a speaker has to capture it early or risk not obtaining it at all. In many chains of events, what happens early determines the outcome. For example, sensitive dependence on initial conditions is the foundational assumption in chaos theory (Gleick 2008). Its apocryphal yet illustrative metaphorical statement “The flapping of butterfly’s wings in the Western Hemisphere can cause a typhoon in the Eastern Hemisphere” is in wide circulation. Similarly, a popular assumption in conflict resolution literature is that most conversations end on the emotional note that was present when they began (Endress 2009). Early determination of ultimate outcome is also true of presentations. What happens at the beginning of

a presentation can exert a strong influence on its conclusion. Which leads me to the ironic yet existentially accurate claim that effective presentations do not begin at the front of the room, they begin at the back. The role of speaker should be assumed and inhabited the instant the speaker enters the room. And speakers typically do not enter the room from the front, they enter from the back.

*4. Make the Journey to the Front of the Room Count* The journey from the back to the front is part of the show. Speakers should not just enter the room; they should make an entrance, moving to the front with purpose, poise, and dignity. They should attempt to draw attention as they move and bring it with them as they arrive. The ideal outcome, not easily or regularly obtained, is to have all eyes on the speaker when he or she turns to face the audience. If that happens, the presentation can commence. If it has not, speakers must make it happen. There are a variety of ways to do this, the most typical of which is to borrow from high school teachers and merely say “may I have your attention please.” There is nothing wrong with this approach, although it does not fit my style (you must discover your own). My own method is to arrive at the front, turn and face the audience, and silently embody the qualities I mentioned above. I smile and focus all my attention on its members making eye contact with as many as possible. I wait until the room has quieted before I begin.

*5. Take Control of the Introduction* For many presentations, the information above on recruiting the audience’s attention mentioned in step number 4 will be moot because someone formally introduces the speaker; getting the audience to pay attention is that person’s job. I recommend taking control of this as much as you can without being rude or appearing ungrateful. Despite its time-honored position in history of front of the room events, most presentations would benefit if the formal introduction were cut, for several reasons. First, the audience has assembled to hear from, not about, the speaker. Second, the material in the introduction is usually readily available elsewhere (e.g., the program booklet). Third, in most cases, a formal introduction puts the speaker in an awkward position. Persons producing the event usually ask the speaker for a bio sketch which is then usually read (or recited) wholly or in part by the person doing the introduction. Social decorum dictates

that the speaker thank that person for their kind and flattering remarks even though they have been actually written by the speaker him or herself. Fourth, formal introductions sometimes contain inaccuracies which can be distracting for the audience and the speaker. Fifth, the introduction sets the tone for what is to follow. If there is a mismatch between the tone of the introduction and the tone planned for the presentation, the speaker has to either adjust the tone or let the disparity stand. Sixth, formal introductions take time. Presentations are rarely open ended; the schedule assigns a set beginning and end. If a speaker prepares remarks to fill an assigned interval that is subsequently abbreviated by a lengthy introduction, he or she must either abbreviate their prepared remarks or go over the allotted time.

Thus, my general advice is to take charge of the introduction and make it work for your presentation. One way to do this is to ask your sponsors for permission to introduce yourself. I prefer this option over all others because it solves virtually all of the problems mentioned above. Most importantly, perhaps, is that this strategy allows the audience to get to know you quickly and in the way you want to be known. For example, most introductions exaggerate the speaker’s accomplishments, reputation, and influence thus elevating audience expectations. Unfortunately for the speaker, the higher the expectations, the harder they are to meet. By taking control of your introduction, you have a greater chance of setting audience expectation at a level you can actually meet. You can also emphasize qualities you seek to embody. You may prefer to be thought of as friendly and well informed rather than as highly accomplished and really important.

I do follow my own advice by always asking if I can introduce myself. If the people that invited me prefer to have someone do a formal introduction, I request that it be kept short and low key. If that person goes beyond short and low key, however, for example by reading my bio sketch, when they conclude I thank them for their gracious and flattering remarks, act as if it was actually hard to take in, and then in “stage whisper” to the audience say that I actually wrote the remarks. The upshot of all of this is that the initial moments of a presentation can have a significant influence on how the audience responds to the presentation as a whole and you as a speaker. As indicated in the section on capturing audience attention, outcomes are sensitively dependent on initial conditions. The introduction is one of those conditions.

*6. Dress for the Occasion* The first thing most audience members will notice is clothing, so I recommend dressing for them. Aim for a level of dress slightly better than the average audience member. This communicates respect. You dressed up for the occasion. In addition, the slight increase in level of dress draws attention. It is one indication that you have an elevated role in the room. If you dress down, you convey disrespect for the audience; you didn't care enough about them to dress up. Additionally, you draw attention but quite possibly the wrong kind. You run the risk of appearing not to belong in the room (e.g., "What is that guy in jeans and the Grateful Dead T-shirt doing here?"). If you dress up too much, you risk drawing attention to your clothes rather than to yourself. The basic goal is to have your clothing communicate respect and convey that you have an important role in the room. Ideally, audience members should identify the speaker the moment he or she enters the room, and the clothing selected for the occasion can assist them in doing so.

*7. Stand up Straight and Smile* The nonverbal parts of your presentation are quite possibly more important than the verbal parts (Mehrabian and Ferris 1968). For example, your posture has stimulus functions, make them work for rather than against you. Stand up straight. Doing so will improve your confidence and sense of purpose. If you do not believe me, experiment—right now. Stand up and introduce yourself to an imaginary person first while slouching and then while standing straight. I am certain you will notice a difference. How you stand also has an effect on the audience. You can be sure all its members have been told to stand up straight many times in their life. If the person in front of them is slouching, then on some level, possibly beneath awareness, the audience will sense that person is doing something wrong. Conversely, if the person is standing up straight, there will be a sense they are doing something right. Additionally, an erect posture seems to suggest confidence and strength—ideal qualities for a speaker.

Your face also has stimulus functions. As with posture, make them work for you rather than against you. There is merit in the anonymous quote "Smile and the world smiles with you" and its converse "Frown and the world looks down." There are actually multiple benefits that accrue from smiling, many of which pertain to the speaker himself or herself. For example, and directly pertinent to being in front of the room, smiling reduces the experience and biological markers of stress. It also

releases pleasure hormones such as endorphins and serotonin (Jaffe 2010; Lewis and Bowler 2009). Stress is a correlate of fear and pleasure hormones exert a reductive influence on fear. Recall that public speaking is one of the things people fear most. Simply smiling can help speakers manage (reduce) their fear of being at the front of the room. Smiling also has beneficial effects on the audience. In fact, the positive effects smiling has on others (viz., the audience) is as well, or possibly more, fully documented than the positive effects it has on the speaker (e.g., Jaffe 2010). Smiling makes one appear more physically attractive and likeable, recruits more helping behavior from others, generates more trust, and increases cooperation. It even enhances memory retrieval of your name by the recipients of your smile. At the risk of stating the obvious, each and every one of these salutary effects of smiling would benefit a presentation.

*8. Your Voice Is a Sophisticated Instrument: Play It Well* Another powerful source of nonverbal communication is your voice. Think of it as having three knobs or dials the turning of which creates meaning and controls attention. The knobs are linked to volume, tempo, and tone. Each of these qualities can be manipulated to draw attention or convey a message. Raising your voice can do both. It draws attention and suggests something really important is being said. Lowering your voice can also do both. It draws attention and suggests what you are saying is confidential, just between you and the audience. Tempo affects attention and conveys messages too. Up-tempo can suggest the speaker is moving rapidly toward an important point that he or she is really excited for the audience to hear. Down tempo can suggest that each word is important, and the point the words are leading to is not to be missed. Stopping cold and saying nothing for a moment will typically draw every eye to the speaker. If you employ this tactic to produce that result, however, it is important to reward the attention with something funny, meaningful, or satisfying. Finally, tone can transform the meaning of almost any word or phrase. The political perspective on the word "no" notwithstanding, it is possible to say the word no and have it mean "yes." As another example, think of the various meanings that can be drawn from the phrase "that is a nice dress." Said with a straightforward tone, it can mean the speaker thinks the dress is actually nice. Said with a sarcastic tone, it can mean quite the opposite. Or said with a seductive tone, it can mean the speaker finds the dress alluring or provocative.

*9. Show Up* This is a subtle, mostly nonverbal, yet very important task. Distilled down to its essence, it merely means being fully present in the moment, available to the audience, and prepared to present your material. Unfortunately, most speakers are not fully present, available, and prepared; they are preoccupied with the potential quality of their incipient presentation and concerns about audience judgments of it and them. Colloquial terms for this include being self-conscious or being “in one’s head.” But when speaking to a group, consciousness of self is grossly misplaced and one’s head is simply the wrong place to be. The right placement of consciousness is on the material to be presented and the audience. The goal is to get out of one’s own head and into the heads of the audience members.

I learned about the power of showing up years ago during a karate match. It was my first contest and I was terrified. As I stood across from my opponent (a formidable fighter named Ross), my thoughts were not on the fight, they were on the pain and shame I was likely to experience when he was done with me. I was very much in my head and that is the wrong place to be when someone nearby is intent on doing you harm. Then, for reasons I will never understand, my pants fell down, all by themselves. It was as if they thought “We will go down before he goes down.” I stood there for what seemed like an eternity. The large audience laughed. Teammates and opponents laughed. The announcer made fun of me (“Ladies, if you would like this man’s phone number it will be available after the match”). No one seemed to notice how helpless I was. I had fighting gloves on and I could neither pull up nor tie my own pants. Finally, the referee and my coach simultaneously recognized my plight and pulled them up and tied them for me. All of this produced a remarkable effect. It brought me completely out of my head and fully into the room. It was as if the worst was behind me and now I was ready to fight. The referee started the match and in the first few seconds I bounded across the floor and struck Ross square in the chest with a full front punch and knocked the wind out of him. He never recovered and I won the match. I won no others. I was really not very good at karate. I am persuaded I won the match with Ross simply because the pants episode set the occasion for me to show up fully (in retrospect, it may have had the opposite effect on Ross).

So, I recommend that speakers find or invent exercises to bring them out of their heads and into the room so they show up fully when in front. When I am working

with speakers and they appear to be self-conscious, I conduct such exercises with them. For example, I might teach them the words to the Montana state song (I am from Montana) and we sing it loudly together. As another example, I might have them say something silly (e.g., “Do not let me catch you brushing that dog’s teeth with my toothbrush!”) over and over again until it is clear they are doing it without reservation and are no longer in their heads. The general rule is to do anything to move consciousness away from the debilitating self-evaluations that compromise performance and toward the material to be delivered and the recipients.

*10. Have a Backup Plan* As suggested in the section on room preparation, leave nothing to chance. Said slightly differently, assume Murphy’s law will operate on your presentation (i.e., anything that can go wrong will go wrong). So, have a backup plan. For example, I rarely use audio or video clips but when I do, I have in mind some well-rehearsed verbal material to substitute when the AV systems will not work. I also always have a paper copy of all my slides to use as a backup when the projector breaks down, PowerPoint acts up, or the computer fizzles out. True, only I would see the paper version, but I would be able to deliver my presentation just as completely as I would have if the slide show had worked.

*11. Use Slides—Do Not Let Them Use You* If you use slides, remember they are only a supplement. You are the show. The slides have three functions: two that operate throughout the presentation and one that operates only periodically. The former functions are (1) to provide sequenced cues (for you) that set the occasion for the delivery of your talk and (2) to give the audience some supplementary material to look at as you speak to them. The time-honored elementary school activity “show and tell” is a rough but reasonably apt metaphor. But, the emphasis must be on the *tell*, not the show. I will say it again: *you* are the show. There is one exception and it involves a periodic but very important function of slides: supplying data-based evidence to support a claim. Although it is possible to describe data verbally and have the description supply the evidence needed, as the time-honored cliché states, a picture is worth a thousand words. However, there is rarely a cogent reason to go over the data depicted in meticulous detail. Data slides are still supplementary not primary. *You* are the show. Merely display the slide, make the

claims the displayed data support, and let the audience connect the dots, so to speak.

I learned the supplementary role of slides in graduate school. I attended an NIH site review of the grant that funded the Bureau of Child Research at the University of Kansas. This was the grant that funded the primary research operations of Montrose Wolf, Don Baer, and Todd Risley and several other investigators including Edward Christophersen, the person I previously mentioned as a model for my early attempts at speaking. Millions of dollars were at stake. The atmosphere in the room was solemn and tense. Ed Christophersen was doing a presentation on his research and he put up a data slide. It was upside down. The atmosphere quickly became even more tense until Ed, without missing a beat, said “that’s alright, if you don’t understand the data backwards, you wouldn’t understand them forwards.” This was followed by a brief silence and then prolonged laughter, and he went on and described the data on the slide verbally. All members of the site review team seemed satisfied, and all components of the grant were ultimately funded.

Also, do not read your slides. Actually, when slides are well designed there is not enough verbal material to warrant reading them, more about which I will say below. The members of your audience are well educated; they can read (and they do not want you to read for them). If you use a humor slide, do not explain the joke. A joke that has to be explained is no longer a joke; it is a failed attempt at humor. Merely put up the humor slide, make the point the humor is intended to support, and let the audience make the connection. For example, when speaking about enuresis, at the end of my talk I sometimes show a slide of a psychotherapist sitting at the head of a couch upon which his patient is lying. The caption says “You’re a bed wetter? Get off the couch!” While the audience is looking at the slide, I tell them that with effective behavioral treatment, the furniture is more at risk than the bedwetting child.

The design of slides is important. I use lots of pictures and very few words. Space consideration prohibits me from supplying examples of well-designed slides (but see Reynolds 2008). So, I will merely remind you that slides are supplementary, not primary. They cue you and provide the audience with something to look at while you talk. The message the talk is intended to convey comes from you, not from the slide. So, tell them verbally; do not write it all out on your slides. A few key words will suffice. The pictures should pertain to the

point you are making. I recommend against showing a slide that does not pertain to your talk merely because it is interesting or funny. During a talk on Behavioral Pediatrics at a national conference I attended a few years ago, a very well-known pediatric investigator showed a slide depicting blood viewed through an electron microscope. He said it had nothing to do with his talk but that he thought it was a cool slide. The audience laughed nervously, and the thread of thematic material that he had been successfully pursuing was temporarily broken.

*12. Tell Stories* People love stories. People compose your audience. Give them what they love. Remember that the audience’s attention is fragile and fickle. Knowledgeable sources estimate that on average a speaker can recruit and sustain audience attention for only about 10 min (Goodman 2006). There are a variety of ways to get back attention that has drifted away from the speaker. A moment of silence will often do it. Shifting topics can work. Asking if there are any questions can perk people up. And insofar as stories are concerned, the moment a speaker says “For example...” eyes that have wandered away from the speaker quickly find their way back. *That* this occurs has been documented well (Atkinson 2005; Goodman 2006). *Why* this occurs is a matter for speculation. To me, it seems plausible that the material that follows those words is much more likely to reinforce listening with understanding than the material that preceded the example. Producing or expanding understanding is the *raison d’etre* for the example. Good speakers intuitively recognize when the material they have just delivered is challenging for the audience for any of a number of reasons (e.g., having been very abstract, complex) and offer an example to make the material more clear and comprehensible. One of the most powerful ways to do this is to use a pertinent story.

Good stories have critical ingredients; strive to include them all. First have a main character that is the source of the action (e.g., “Friman walked to the front of the room”). Second, include something (e.g., persons, places, situations) that will be familiar to the audience or with which it can readily identify (e.g., “The room was full, the only open seats were in the front row”). Third, include something (surprises, sources of conflict, moments of doubt and pain, etc.) that makes the story interesting (e.g., “Suddenly the projector died”). Fourth, include revealing details (e.g., “Although it was cool in the room, he took his suit coat off). Fifth,

include an emotional payoff for the audience's attention (e.g., "After an initial hesitation, he gave his complete talk without slides and the audience responded with rousing applause"). Sixth and finally, make sure the meaning of the story (its relevance to the specific point at hand and the general theme of your talk) is clear (e.g., "Leave nothing to chance; prepare for the unexpected").

*13. Say Something Important* Now that you have the audience's attention, say something important. Important to whom you might ask. Important to *you* is my answer. Presumably, your talk pertains to something important to you, and the purpose of the talk is to create a sense of its importance for the audience. So, before you begin to speak—in fact before you even create your outline or slides—get clear on your fundamental message. For example, my most fundamental message is that most behavior is function of its circumstances, not of hypothetical mental states, and that widespread adoption of this view would make the world a better place. I rarely give a talk that does not have that message at its core. A clarified, fundamental message such as this one has a centering influence on a presentation and a calming effect on a speaker. All the components of the talk pertain and flow to this very important point. When a speaker loses his or her train of thought, merely focusing on the fundamental message can either bring him or her back to the train or set the stage for a relevant substitute. Additionally, when a speaker is acutely aware of a central important message, he or she is less likely to become self-conscious. To the extent attention is placed upon the message, it is not placed on oneself, thus preventing the debilitating effects of self-consciousness.

Once you have decided upon this message and have agreed to deliver a talk that contains it, use language the audience actually understands. Behavior analysis, like any hard science, has its own technical language. Technical languages allow for precise and efficient communication between persons fluent in the languages (e.g., scientists, professors). Very few people on earth are fluent in the technical language of behavior analysis, and thus, using it to communicate in locations other than behavior analytic publications, classrooms, labs, and conferences can quickly lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, both of which are long-standing obstacles to the mainstream relevance of behavior analysis. As emphasized by multiple senior and highly influential behavior analysts (e.g., Bailey 1991; Foxx 1996; Lindsley 1991) and in some of my own

publications and presentations (e.g., Friman 2004, 2006, 2010, 2012), effective communication about behavior analysis to persons outside the field depends upon the use of language those persons actually use and understand (i.e., plain everyday speech).

*14. Do Not Go Over Your Time Limit* We all think that what we have to say is important. But some people think what they have to say is *so* important that they use up all of their time and then some of the next speaker's time to get it all said. Nothing, save possibly directions about how to exit the building if it is on fire, is that important, so do not do it. Be organized enough to fill your time and respectful enough to end on time. If you happen to end early, do not fret. I doubt there has ever been an occasion where an audience was upset because a speaker ended a talk early.

*15. Concluding Remarks* My last piece of advice is to go out and talk. Start right away. Presumably, you would like to get ahead, distinguish yourself, develop as a person, have more influence, confidence and power, be better known, or make a bigger difference. Mastering the front of the room contributes to all of these outcomes and more. There will be no shortage of opportunities. The world is in perpetual need of public speakers. The nature of this need extends from dinner parties needing someone to give a toast to plenary sessions at behavior analytic conferences needing a keynote speaker. Perhaps, elected public office is among your loftier aspirations. There is virtually no chance of obtaining office without first standing at the podium, on the stage, or in front a microphone. A mere glance at political media reveals that elected offices are often gained or lost as a result of successful or failed public presentations. Perhaps something less ambitious, but no less important, awaits—such as a wedding toast, a doctoral or master's defense, or a eulogy. Opportunities such as these arise frequently and I recommend pursuing them to expand your role in your general day to day life.

But, I have something much more specific in mind, the role of behavior analysis. I want behavior analysts to move it deep into the mainstream of everyday life. I want people on the street, so to speak, to view the viability of behavior analysis as a method for addressing behavioral concerns in the same way they do the viability of medicine for medical concerns. As I said at the outset, there are many established routes to the mainstream and effective speaking at the front of the room is one of them. My hope is that all behavior analysts, and

especially students and junior members of the profession, will see that mastering the front of the room will benefit them personally and professionally but also that their doing so will benefit the profession itself. If you do, then I suggest you start practicing now.

I will leave you with this image. If you were to see me in the Omaha International Airport very likely, I would be standing against the window looking back into the airport, not out that window. If you looked very closely, you might see my lips moving. Why? Because I would be giving the travelers in front of me my next talk. I do this silently of course and yet it is still nerve wracking. And, therefore, it is good practice. Recall that the goal is not to eliminate fear; it is to learn to speak well while afraid. I suppose another good thing to remember is something said by Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage.” I invite you to it.

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