It is widely believed that Thomas Jefferson was terrified of public speaking. John Adams once said of him, “During the whole time I sat with him in Congress, I never heard him utter three sentences together.” During his eight years in the White House, Jefferson seems to have limited his speechmaking to two inaugural addresses, which he simply read out loud “in so low a tone that few heard it.”

I remember how relieved I was to learn this. To know that it was possible to succeed in life while avoiding the podium was very consoling—for about five minutes. The truth is that not even Jefferson could follow in his own footsteps today. It is now inconceivable that a person could become president of the United States through the power of his writing alone. To refuse to speak in public is to refuse a career in politics—and many other careers as well.

In fact, Jefferson would be unlikely to succeed as an author today. It used to be that a person could just write books and, if he were lucky, people would read them. Now he must stand in front of crowds of varying sizes and say that he has written these books—otherwise, no one will know that they exist. Radio and television interviews offer new venues for stage fright: Some shows put one in front of a live audience of a few hundred people and an invisible audience of millions. You cannot appear on The Daily Show holding a piece of paper and begin reading your lines like Thomas Jefferson.

Of course, it is possible to just write books and hope for the best, but refusing to speak in public is a good way to ensure that they will not be read. This iron law of marketing might relax somewhat for
fiction—but even there, unless you are J.D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon, remaining invisible is generally a path not to the literary firmament but to oblivion.

Fear of public speaking is also a fertile source of psychological suffering elsewhere in life. I can remember dreading any event where being asked to speak was a possibility. I have to give a toast at your wedding? Wonderful. I can now spend the entire ceremony, and much the preceding week, feeling like a condemned man in view of the scaffold.

Pathological self-consciousness in front of a crowd is more than ordinary anxiety: it lies closer to the core of the self. It seems, in fact, to be the self—the very feeling we call “I”—but magnified grotesquely. There are few instances in life when the sense of being someone becomes so onerous. The experience is analogous to having a pain in your gut that lingers on the margins of awareness but seems impossible to pinpoint or describe—until you are supine upon an examination table with a doctor probing your abdomen:

“Does that hurt?”
“No.”
“How about there?”
“Not really.”
“How about—”
“Ow!”

Yes, that’s where it hurts. For one who is terrified of public speaking, standing in front of a crowd exploits the cramp of self in a similar way. Yes, that is the problem with being me. Ow… The feeling that we call “I”—the ghost that wears your face like a mask at this moment—seems to suddenly gather mass and become the site of a psychological implosion.

Of course, many people have solved the problem of what to do when a thousand pairs of eyes are looking their way. And some of them, for whatever reason, are natural performers. From childhood, they have wanted nothing more than to display their talents to a crowd. Many of these people are narcissists, of course, and hollowed out in unenviable ways. Where your self-consciousness has become a dying star, theirs has become a wormhole to a parallel universe. They don’t suffer much there, perhaps, but they don’t quite make contact here either. And many natural performers are comfortable only within a certain frame. It is always interesting, for instance, to see a famous actor wracked by fear while accepting an Academy Award. Simply being oneself before an audience can be terrifying even for those who perform for a living.

Needless to say, I am not a born performer. Nor am I naturally comfortable standing in front of a group of friends or strangers to deliver a message. However, I have always been someone who had things he wanted to say. This marriage of fear and desire is an unhappy one—and many people are stuck in it.

At the end of my senior year in high school, I learned that I was to be the class valedictorian. I declined the honor. And I managed to get into my thirties without directly confronting my fear of public speaking. At the age of thirty-three, I enrolled in graduate school, where I gave a few scientific presentations while lurking in the shadows of PowerPoint. Still, it seemed that I might be able to skirt my problem with a little luck—until I began to feel as though a large pit had opened in the center of
my life, and I was circling the edge. It was becoming professionally and psychologically impossible to turn away.

The reckoning finally came when I published my first book, *The End of Faith*. Suddenly, I was thirty-seven and faced with the prospect of a book tour. I briefly considered avoiding all public appearances and becoming a man of mystery. Had I done so, I would still be fairly mysterious, and you probably wouldn’t be reading these words.

I cannot personally attest to most forms of self-overcoming: I don’t know what it is like to recover from addiction, lose a hundred pounds, or fight in a war. I can say from experience, however, that it is possible to change one’s relationship to public speaking.

And the process need not take long. In fact, I have spoken publicly no more than fifty times in my life, and many of my earliest appearances were for fairly high stakes, being either televised, or against opponents who would have dearly loved to see me fail, or both. Given where I started, I believe that almost anyone can transcend a fear of the podium. (Whether he has something interesting to say is another matter, of course—one that he would do well to sort out before attracting a crowd.)

If you have been avoiding public speaking, I hope you find the following points helpful:

1. **Admit that you have a problem**
   No one is likely to drag you in front of a crowd and force you to produce audible sentences. Thus, you can probably avoid speaking in public for the rest of your life. Even if you are one day put on trial for murder, you can refuse to testify in your own defense. If your mother dies and your father asks that you say a few words at the funeral, you can always retreat into your grief. Bill Clinton didn’t speak at his mother’s funeral, and he is famously at ease in front of a crowd. Everyone already knows that you loved your mother. So, yes, you can probably keep silent until you get safely into a grave of your own.

   But the fear will periodically make you miserable, and it will limit your opportunities in life. Thomas Jefferson aside, the people who currently run the world were first willing to run a meeting, deliver a speech, or debate opponents in a public forum. You might feel that you haven’t paid much of a price for avoiding the crowd, but you don’t know what your life would be like if you had become a competent public speaker. If you are in college, or just beginning your career, or even somewhere near its middle, it is time to overcome your fear.

2. **Get some tools**
   You can do many things to improve your ability to speak in public: You can read books on shyness, anxiety, the art of giving presentations, and other relevant topics. You can take classes in public speaking, acting, or improv, or join a group like Toastmasters. You can discuss your fears with a psychologist or a psychiatrist, and ask the latter to prescribe medications—beta-blockers, for instance—that might reduce your stage fright. I especially recommend that you learn to meditate. Like getting enough food, sleep, and exercise, meditation helps with almost anything in life. And the feeling of self-consciousness can be directly undermined through meditation.
I wouldn’t discourage you from experimenting with all of these things—but let me discourage you from doing any of them in lieu of taking the next opportunity that arises for you to speak. You cannot afford to live your life as if it were a dress rehearsal for some future life. By all means, do whatever seems likely to make you more comfortable in front of a crowd, but not as a way of delaying the next step.

3. Agree to speak when the opportunity arises

As has been said of many other problems in life, the only way out is through. You must now accomplish a belated forward escape through the birth canal of your own mind. It is time to actually arrive where you currently stand. Yes, you can convince yourself that you’re not ready, or that the next opportunity to speak is best declined for reasons that have nothing to do with your fear. That might be true. I am not suggesting that you should agree to take the roll for your local branch of the Ku Klux Klan. But when given the chance, you should address any sane audience that will listen to you. By all means start small, and don’t wait for a formal invitation: If your friends are giving toasts over dinner, offer one as well. If you attend a lecture, stand up and pose a question at the end. If you’re asked to deliver a presentation in school or at work, agree without hesitating. Are there any volunteers to lead next week’s journal club? From now on, your answer is “Yes.”

4. Accept your anxiety

No matter how nervous you feel while speaking in public, you are likely to have an exaggerated sense of how nervous you appear—and this will tend to make your anxiety worse. Watching yourself speak on video can reverse this vicious circle: because discovering that your nerves are not as visible as you fear can lead you to feel increasingly comfortable on stage.

You can also strip the symptoms of anxiety of their psychological content—by experiencing them as purely physical sensations, like a pain in the knee. In fact, the feeling of anxiety is nearly identical to excitement or some other state of arousal that is not intrinsically negative. You can choose to feel it as a mere influx of energy and even use it as such. This is liberating—and your freedom does not depend on getting rid of these sensations.

5. Prepare something to say

I have been in every state of readiness when speaking to large crowds, ranging from having prepared nothing in advance to having committed every word of my lecture to memory. In my opinion, neither of these extremes is ideal. But you should definitely err on the side of preparation. If an event is worth doing, it is usually worth preparing for.

Some people avoid writing and rehearsing a talk as a way of avoiding their fear. But taking the stage in the hope of giving a brilliant extemporaneous performance is generally a mistake. Granted, for those who know their subject deeply and naturally speak well, this approach offers a feeling of freedom—but at the expense of structure and content. When I speak off the cuff, I often fail to cover important points.

Most speakers have learned that PowerPoint should be restricted to interesting images and other graphical aids, with a minimum of text. A few seasoned academics are holding out, however, and still oppress their audiences with walls of words, often in random fonts and terrible colors, so that they can turn their backs at regular intervals and consult a full set of notes. Do not do this.
A decision to use slides has other implications. Some topics require visual data, of course, and the question becomes not whether to use slides, but how many. However, slides always divert some of the audience’s attention away from the speaker. If you are afraid of your audience, this has an obvious benefit—but it also comes at a price. Imagine Martin Luther King, Jr., using PowerPoint, and the price will be clear: To truly connect with an audience, you want their attention on you. To change slides every thirty seconds is to be rendered nearly invisible by the apparatus. Having too many images can also force you to race to the end of your talk. A final flurry of slides and apologies depresses everyone.

6. Prepare to say it

Although too much preparation can pose problems of its own, if a talk seems especially important, I sometimes memorize it. For instance, when I spoke at TED, where time limits are enforced down to the second, I knew in advance every sentence I would utter. There is a power in this, of course—it allows you to say exactly what you intend—but it forces you to spend most of your mental energy remembering the script that you have written. This is not the same as thinking out loud on stage, and the difference sometimes shows. When walking such a mnemonic tightrope, any digression, no matter how clever or important, can lead some fatal distance from your text. Without notes, you may never regain your footing.

Another problem with a performance that relies entirely on memory is that it becomes just that: a performance. I tend to be uncomfortable with this aspect of public speaking. I cannot shake the feeling that there is something dishonest about knowing exactly what one is going to say to an audience. Of course, it is still possible to “own” memorized lines upon delivery. At TED, for instance, I almost burst into tears when describing the practice of “honor killing.” I knew that I was going to talk about fathers who murder their daughters for the crime of being raped, and I knew exactly what I was going to say about them. But I hadn’t known that my own daughter would take her first steps the morning of my lecture. When delivering my lines exactly as I had rehearsed, I suddenly awoke to the reality of what I was talking about.

The middle realm of preparation entails having some notes, or even the entire text of your lecture safely on a lectern in front of you. The option of wandering the stage with sheets of paper fluttering in your hand should be declined. What appears to be a thoughtful silence at the lectern can seem like free fall to terminal velocity when one is shuffling pages in full view of the audience. If you want to roam the stage, you need to memorize the structure of your talk, or remember enough of it to be cued by your slides. And while you generally needn’t memorize your talk verbatim, it’s good to know how you will begin and how you will end.

The shorter your talk, the more you can rehearse it. But even an hour-long lecture can be rehearsed many times before you finally deliver it. In fact, rehearsing a talk is part of writing it, because one inevitably finds new things to say in the process. One also discovers that certain words or phrases that read well on the page are awkward to actually speak.

It is also extremely helpful to find someone you trust to give you feedback. This can be intimidating at first, because it requires speaking formally in front of one person, and perhaps not doing such a good job of it. Rather than attempt to deliver your lecture while looking intently into this person’s startled eyes, look into the depths of an imaginary crowd. If this feels odd in the presence of your friend, turn your back and pretend the audience is in the other direction. Do whatever you need to do
to accomplish your goal—which is to speak the way you intend to speak at the event itself. Talking as if to only one person is not a good way of doing this.

I am aware that by recommending the aid of a critic, I’m asking you to surmount a large portion of your fear at the outset. In fact, many novice speakers worry most about the presence of friends and loved ones at public events. If your anxiety is made worse by the thought that people you know will be at your event—and it is not a wedding or some other social function—by all means banish them. It is, nevertheless, a very good idea to find one person you can practice your talk with in advance.

And make this practice as realistic as possible. Allow yourself a few false starts, perhaps, but thereafter pretend that you are at the event itself: If you make a mistake, you cannot just quit and start over. Once you have gone through your talk a few times, and your friend has heard the worst you can deliver, an important transformation will have occurred: You will be impervious to embarrassment. Provided you can trust this person’s judgment regarding tone and content, he or she will be an indispensable resource for you when preparing talks in the future.

7. Say it

If you’ve done your work beforehand, the event itself should hold few surprises. Needless to say, it is much better to arrive at the venue early, and pass the time in the green room or at a nearby coffee shop, than to be late and flustered. I recommend that once you finally take the stage, you speak to your audience as if you were having a real conversation—not like Pericles singing the praises of the Athenian dead. Admittedly, this opinion makes a virtue of necessity, because I am no Pericles. Speaking in a tone and cadence appropriate to a normal conversation will never produce great oratory: You will not sound like Martin Luther King, Jr. (or Hitler). For this reason, you are unlikely to elicit shouts of jubilation from your audience or inspire a riot. And while an informal mode of speech may be good in a hall, it often lacks some of the energy that people expect on television. Long pauses, for instance, can be effective in person but boring on video. Nevertheless, speaking naturally allows one to stand free of all pretense.

In any case, you will probably feel less like MLK when you appear on stage than like yourself under pressure. Many novice speakers apologize to their audience for being nervous. I recommend that you not do this. It takes the audience’s attention away from whatever it is they came to hear you say—and the less time the audience spends worrying about you, the better. As I’ve said, people rarely appear as nervous as they feel. I once witnessed a speaker produce what seemed like a gallon of sweat over the course of a scientific presentation. At the end of the hour, he looked like had been sprayed with a hose. But I can remember marveling at the fact that he didn’t seem nervous. I suppose he must have been terrified, but his talk was entirely lucid and quite interesting. I left the hall wondering whether he had some problem regulating his body temperature. Had he announced that he was nervous at the outset, however, the subsequent hour of waterworks would have been harrowing to behold.

Finally, it is worth remembering that most audiences are extremely supportive. With some obvious exceptions, the people you are speaking to want to understand what you have come to say. They want you to give a good talk. They are not waiting for you to fail. Recall why you took the stage in the first place: You have something that you believe is worth communicating. What might have once seemed like a high wire act is, in the end, quite simple: You are merely having a conversation with your fellow human beings.