

How to Improve Public Speaking

[by Elizabeth Smith]

Although the Socratic Method helps law professors teach students how to analyze case law and legal issues, many students and practicing attorneys discover that they have very limited public speaking skills. Fortunately, there are numerous ways that legal professionals can improve these talents. The following group of legal professionals offer a myriad of helpful tips.

Yale Law Professor John Pottenger, who runs a variety of different clinics for his school and has taught trial practice and many other legal courses, offered several suggestions for law students seeking to improve their public speaking skills. He said, "The most important thing they can do is take part in a law school clinical program. Students should also take at least one trial practice course and take part in a moot court or similar program offered by their law school. Finally, students should consider taking a drama class on their main university's campus or accepting a part in a play. All of these activities can help them improve their skills."

Dr. Kathy Kellerman, who holds a Ph.D. in Communication from Northwestern and works for Trial Behavior Consulting in the firm's Los Angeles office, said that her group focuses on helping lawyers express themselves as effectively as possible when speaking with clients or in front of judges, jurors, and arbitrators. She said law students and practicing attorneys can improve their public speaking skills by "taking advantage of every opportunity they have to speak in front of clubs, churches, or other groups in their communities." She added that "they can even work on enunciating words more clearly by reading the newspaper aloud each day and concentrating on matching your voice's emotional tone with the content of the material."

Dr. Kellerman also stressed how lawyers should daily practice using "vocal variation, analogies, and concrete and visual language when speaking with others." She went on

to say it's extremely important for all legal professionals to learn how to "gain their audience's attention, hold that attention, and then clearly relay their information."

According to Dr. Kellerman, both law students and lawyers alike can benefit from joining a group such as Toastmasters International, which provides members with numerous opportunities in their communities to make speeches and otherwise sharpen their public speaking skills.

Kelly Murphy, who works at Toastmaster's headquarters in Santa Margarita, CA, said that she believes that many legal professionals benefit from joining Toastmasters. One lawyer told her that one of the group's sessions has really helped him "improve his impromptu speaking skills--which has directly helped him improve his cross-examination skills." Ms. Murphy said that she knows of at least one Louisiana judge who continues to be a member of Toastmasters and that a number of schools have Toastmaster clubs in their cities.

Barry E. Fields, who is a partner in Kirkland & Ellis' Chicago law office and serves as a Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago Law School, offered additional ways law students and attorneys can improve their public speaking skills. Like the other professionals, he supports the idea of taking trial advocacy classes in law school and "becoming involved with moot court or mock trial programs." Mr. Fields also said that law students can benefit greatly by "participating frequently in law school class discussions so they can become

comfortable speaking in large groups of their colleagues." Mr. Fields also advised lawyers to avail themselves of the many excellent programs offered by the National Institute for Trial Advocacy. Mr. Fields said that he believes he learned of a very helpful book written by David Ball from NITA entitled *Theater Tips and Strategies for Jury Trials*.

One other expert shared his advice for legal professionals seeking to improve their public speaking skills. Dr. Richard Waites runs an organization known as *The Advocates*, which helps attorneys improve their legal skills and trial techniques. Dr. Waites said, "It's very important for lawyers to improve their public speaking skills, since judges, jurors, and arbitrators make their decisions based on a complex set of factors." He said that attorneys contact his group to help them "minimize the weaknesses of their cases and maximize their strengths."

In his book entitled *Courtroom Psychology and Trial Advocacy*, Dr. Waites tells lawyers how they can interact more effectively and persuasively with others. He said that all attorneys need to enhance their communication skills, whether they most frequently appear in court or in private meetings with judges, clients, opposing counsel, or arbitrators. Dr. Waites specifically instructs his attorney clients to "first try and understand the playing field and the rules that govern how people think. Next, they must consider what they're trying to accomplish. What facts are they trying to persuade others to believe? The final step is to test out alternative arguments by getting together with others who



will provide objective opinions.”

When asked to address what steps law students can take to improve their public speaking skills, in addition to taking trial advocacy classes or becoming involved in clinical programs, Dr. Waites made the following recommendation. “They might try and sign up for a public speaking class on a neighboring undergraduate campus.”

While no one approach will work for every legal professional, acting upon several of the tips provided above should help most law students and attorneys improve their public speaking skills so that others can more readily follow their arguments and be persuaded by them.