



# A CURE FOR BLANKING OUT

What research found down memory lane.

By Matt Abrahams

**F**orgetting parts of your presentation when standing before an audience can have dramatic and traumatic implications. Consider politicians and how memory gaffes can damage their credibility. Exhibit A: Texas Governor Rick Perry, who suffered a long memory lapse during an early November 2011 nationally televised debate among U.S. Republican presidential candidates. Perry's painfully awkward stumble provided endless fodder for political observers, media pundits — and stand-up comedians.

Then, just days later, fellow U.S. presidential candidate Herman Cain suffered a similar memory lapse when newspaper journalists asked him about U.S. relations with Libya.

The public speaking students I teach, the executives I coach and the people I interviewed for my book *Speaking Up without Freaking Out* have all told me that their greatest fear about speaking

is forgetting their content. Thankfully, memory research offers some very specific advice for effective remembering — tips that can reduce speaking jitters and help us avoid embarrassment.

## **Take care of your body and your memory will follow.**

This sounds like what your parents told you: Eat well, exercise and get plenty of sleep. Unfortunately, with a big presentation deadline looming, people often fail to heed this simple advice. Paying attention to how you treat yourself can alleviate your anxiety and improve your memory. In the wake of Perry's and Cain's "brain-freeze" moments in the presidential race, scientists noted that anxiety, fatigue, stress and time pressure can all affect the brain's ability to retrieve information.

▶ **Eat a balanced meal.** Anna Miller, a nutrition professor at De Anza College in Cupertino, California, suggests eating

a healthy meal or substantial snack one to two hours before speaking. The meal or snack should "consist of healthy carbs, lean protein, healthy fats," says Miller. "Balance matters." Complex carbohydrates, nuts and oils help in memory formation and retention. So, like an athlete before an event, you might want to carbo-load when preparing an important presentation.

▶ **Choose your drinks carefully.** Caffeine facilitates creativity and productivity, but it also can bring on jitters, dry mouth and flighty memory. So it makes sense to go for an energy drink like Red Bull when preparing a speech, but it's not a good idea just before delivering it. As for alcohol, remember: Although alcohol might be tempting as a relaxation tool, laboratory evidence suggests it causes forgetfulness and "loosens the tongue," which might lead to undesirable outcomes.

▶ **Get physical.** Exercise can improve memory and reduce anxiety. Exercise physiologists and psychologists have found that people with lower percentages of body fat and lower average resting heart rates handle stressful situations better than those who are not as fit. Additionally, physical activity increases lung capacity and bolsters mental focus, two very important components for competent speaking. Finally, exercise allows for the release of pent-up anxiety and stress. Going for a walk, swim or bike ride prior to writing or practicing a speech can really help

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reduce anxiety and improve performance. The calming effect that results comes not just from getting outside and distancing yourself from your stress, but also from your body’s release of natural endorphins.

▶ **Catch a few Zs.** Research shows that high-quality, deep sleep is involved in memory formation. So a good night’s sleep helps you feel refreshed and remember more. Dr. Arjun Chatterjee, a Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Disorders specialist, reports the importance of sleep: “The two major activities in sleep are restoration and organization. Your memories get organized in reverse order — the last thing experienced gets dealt with first. Thus, to maximize your rest and restoration as well as your memory organization, try to get lots of sleep the night before any major presentation.” Additionally, sleep helps with creativity and energy. So a good night’s sleep gets your brain

ready to learn and consolidates your new memories so that you can recall them more easily.

### **Where you learn is as important as what you learn.**

The location where you practice your presentation should be similar to where you will present it. This concept is called *state-dependent learning*. The context in which you learn helps you remember. For example, if you are going to give a speech in a small room with several windows, where people will presumably be quiet and attentive, you should

practice giving the speech in a small room with windows. Practicing in a place similar to where you will be presenting will facilitate your ability to remember. Also, you will be more confident because you know what to expect from the setting.

### **Consider the what, when and how of remembering.**

According to Palo Alto (California) University Social Sciences Professor Mark Healy, “You can change how you approach preparing and practicing your presentation, but your brain never changes its approach to organizing information and consolidating what it knows.” Over the past decade, those who have done academic research on remembering have changed their suggestions for the best ways to study.

Researchers are finding that, instead of relying on lengthy cramming sessions, varying what you study and taking breaks while learning helps in remembering your content. Further,

this approach reduces anxiety because you are not constantly feeling the heavy weight of time pressure. Next, self-testing appears more effective than repetition. For speakers, this new research suggests that you should focus on learning the content of your speech in multiple blocks of time — say 20 minutes each — with breaks in between. These breaks help with long-term remembering and allow the onslaught of stress hormones to abate.

While learning, you should practice different portions of your speech, rather than fixating on one part until it becomes fully memorized. Healy states, “Breaking your presentation into manageable, cohesive chunks helps your brain organize itself around your presentation.” Then, rather than simply saying your speech multiple times, you should test your recall of the content by asking yourself questions, such as “What is my central message?” and “How do I support my third claim?”

With help from memory research, you *can* maintain your poise. By eating properly, exercising, sleeping well, and focusing on where, when, how and what you practice, you will reduce your anxiety, improve your memory and avoid blanking out. **T**

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