Stress Test Your Speaking Skills

Practice for pressure presentations by writing your speech in one hour.

By Nathan Magnuson M.A., CC

Bang, bang-bang, BOOM! It was 3 a.m. and our military base – named Freedom – was under the attack of small firearms and mortar fire for the umpteenth time that chilly night in North Carolina. No matter that this was a field-training exercise and our U.S. Army Special Operations unit was deployed to the fictional country of "Pineland." We were undergoing a military "stress test" that tested us to the extreme. We once again jumped from our cots, threw on our gear, grabbed our M4 carbine rifles and rushed out to secure the perimeter of the base.

When we finally did get to sleep, fireguard duty awaited. When it was over, I counted a total of two hours and 50 minutes of sleep in three days. I played football in high school, but this was the worst pain I had ever felt.

"What better place to 'practice' a stress-test project than in your Toastmasters club?"

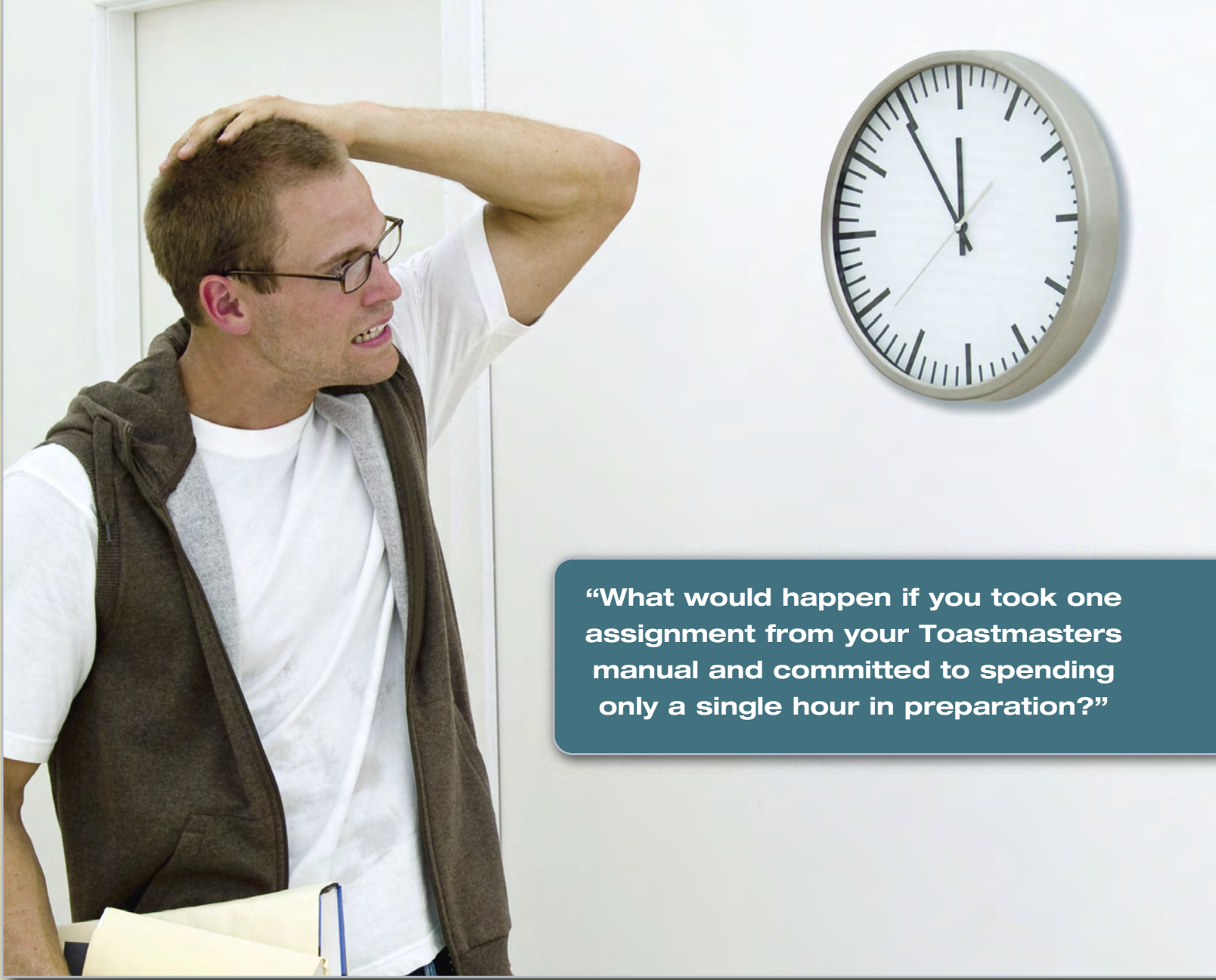
The military has long realized the benefits of "stress testing" in a training environment. The training is designed to push your body past all bounds of reasonable limits, so that if a live mission demanded it, your body could withstand the pressure and – more importantly – your mind would know you could handle it.

Several years later, I was on a bus ride with my unit, heading to another base. My training sergeant looked at me and said, "Sergeant Magnuson, Sergeant Tomlinson isn't going to be able to make the trip. We're going to need you to give the 30-minute ethics brief to the battalion when we arrive. And FYI, I wouldn't count on being able to use a slide projector."

Gulp. Thirty minutes? The entire battalion? No slides to hide behind? *And only an hour or so to prepare?*

Add Some Stress to Your Speech Preparation

When I was taking "Intro to Public Speaking" in college, our professor told us that good speakers will spend an hour of preparation for every minute of their speech. Furthermore, in a Toastmasters demonstration meeting I attended recently, one seasoned member admitted it had taken him 10 years to finish his *Competent Communication* manual – or, one speech per year. Unfortunately, in professional settings, situations often



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arise in which we are simply not afforded one year of preparation for a speech or one hour per minute of speaking time. I'd like to suggest an intrusive, yet effective solution: Rather than crumble under the impending pressure, initiate your own speaking stress test!

What would happen if you took one assignment from your Toastmasters manual and committed to spending only a single hour in preparation? It might feel as irresponsible as a student waiting for the last second to cram for an exam, but the rewards of learning to construct a sufficient presentation without the benefit of adequate preparation time might far outweigh the cost of apprehension, especially if your professional reputation is ever on the line.

If you think spending only an hour in preparation is extreme, visit a college debate. Many of the debaters only have minutes to prepare for their next speech, furiously preparing their arguments while dealing with the added distraction of their speaking opponents, the judges and the audience. I'm not suggesting that everyone become a debater, nor am I suggesting that you try this strategy with every speaking project, but why not invest in one stress-test project and see how it turns out? And what better place to "practice" than in your Toastmasters club?

Strategies to Guide You

Following is a game plan to keep in mind, especially when preparing for a speech that must be delivered when time is of the essence. Instead of wondering, *"What am I going to do with the short time I have to prepare?"* these tips can serve as a checklist to get you moving quickly!

1 Answer the Key Question. Each speech or presentation has a purpose or an objective, and your very first job is to discover it. Think of the key question as the "main idea" of the speech. More specifically, ask the question,

"What do I want my audience to think, know or do as a result of my speech?" This clarifying question brings incredible focus to the subsequent period of prep time, essentially putting a fence between all of the relevant and irrelevant information you will be contemplating. As ideas pop into your head, you will be able to reference your objective and quickly decide to engage or dismiss them. The beauty of nailing the key question is that it makes efficient use of the rest of your prep time.

2 Ace the Outline. Some speakers use outlines to speak from and some do not, but if you are giving a presentation with minimal time to prepare, you need a way to organize your content – and quickly! Don't worry about getting each point and sub-point just right. An outline is designed to save time and eliminate stress, not add to your problems. Use a top-down approach, beginning with the key question, to uncover at least three main points. Ask yourself, "In light of the purpose of my speech, what are the three things my audience *must* know?" Then record them as simple statements. Once you have your main points, take one at a time and give yourself a chance to find the "key supporting content" for each point. This can be easily summarized in a word or short phrase, giving you the chance to move on quickly.

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3 Make It Personal. Your notes may only contain a few short sentences and phrases, yet they will serve as the basis for your whole speech. What your outline lacks, however, is a personal touch. You have information, but now you need an emotional appeal to act as a catalyst. As a general rule of thumb, it is often helpful to add a personal anecdote at the beginning of your speech and again at the end. This is your chance to be creative, given your time constraints. You could use a personal example from your life, or an observation, and relate it to the lives of your audience members as a way to introduce or press home your topic. As you conclude, share how your main points worked out well for you or someone in some way. Perhaps an illustration for one of your main points or sub-points will come to mind and you can use that as an example. You may utilize these in your outline or notes with a simple "tell ____ story here."

4 Become Comfortable with Elaboration. Finally, your speech is complete on paper and ready for you to deliver. Your notes are fairly light, just a rough outline of points and illustrations. You have all the necessary content, but need to quickly assess your speaking personality. This tip about elaboration is more of a speaking "posture" than a preparation tool. To "elaborate" simply means to "develop" or "express in greater detail." We have all encountered "death by PowerPoint" presentations where the presenter quoted the bullet points verbatim from the slides. A good speaker is able to read between the lines and tell the story behind each slide rather than just droning information. This skill of reading between the lines will be especially important in this case, since you will not have time to memorize anything! Your outline will serve the purpose of breaking up your presentation into a handful of smaller speeches that you should be able to handle.

Believe it or not, the less a speaker is prepared, the longer he or she will usually end up speaking because of the tendency to ramble. And the only thing worse than saying nothing is taking a long time to do it. This makes the stress-test preparation process invaluable, because it adds focus to every part of your speech. As you sharpen your ability to quickly organize thoughts and information, your lack of preparation time will become less and less evident to your audience and maybe even disappear altogether.

Finally, in the U.S. Army Special Operations, as with the rest of the Armed Forces, it is true that once a mission starts, even the best-laid plans may have to be promptly revised if the situation calls for it. So, if all else fails, you can always fall back on the impromptu skills you learned in Table Topics! T

Nathan Magnuson, M.A., CC, is a member of the Bennie Bough Toastmasters Club in Springfield, Virginia. He is a leadership coach and consultant. Reach Nathan at **nathan@visionchampions.com.**