ASK THE SONIC COACH (Q&A)
Career Advice for Aspiring Health Researchers
May 2008

From a Student Heading for Engineering: I'm graduating this year and will be going into Engineering in September. I have to take at least one Arts course and I'm worried about the essays. I've never been good at writing. Can you help?

SONIC Coach: You show a lot of foresight in wanting to improve your writing skills during your undergraduate studies, for they will be an important part of your life as a professional engineer. Even if you never publish a scientific paper, you will prepare laboratory, technical and research reports, proposals for funding, and (eventually) performance reviews for your staff. All of these require specialized skills. So again, “well done” for thinking ahead and requesting guidance.

Every university offers assistance to students who are interested in improving their writing. This may take the form of FAQ sheets, advice files, workshops, courses, drop-in sessions lead by upper year students, or individual appointments with writing specialists. I encourage you to take full advantage of the programs and services available to you; seek out people who can offer you specific feedback and useful suggestions for improve your writing, in a safe, confidential environment. Even when your abilities improve and confidence increases, you can continue to use these services to further refine your skills. Check out the “writing centre” or “learning commons” at your university before you arrive; you may even discover that they have an online workshop to help you understand what university learning is all about, for example <http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/investing_in_excellence>.

From a Nervous Public Speaker: Whenever I have to give a presentation, I’m so nervous I can hardly speak. Even when a group of us is presenting and I know my part perfectly, my mind seems to go blank when I stand up in front of my classmates to speak. It’s humiliating. Is there something I can do?

SONIC Coach: It’s completely normal to feel nervous when speaking in front of an audience, especially when your performance is being evaluated. In fact, public speaking is one of the most stressful things we can do. But, like writing, it’s a skill you can learn and develop.

The thing to remember is that, in any presentation, you need to tell a good story. You need: (1) a strong “opening,” to capture the audience’s attention, spark their interest and introduce your topic, (2) a well-organized “body”—the “meat” of the talk in which you present your key points or arguments in logical sequence—and (3) an effective conclusion that summarizes the main point(s) of your talk and brings your story to a satisfying end, so your listeners won’t feel you’ve left them...
hanging. Whether you’re making a presentation for Biology class, speaking on behalf of a community club, or proposing a toast for a friend celebrating a special birthday, the format is the same: opening…body…conclusion.

There are many important aspects to effective speaking that you’ll want to learn. Seek help and support through the programs and services offered by your academic institution and local community. You may even wish to investigate Toastmasters, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people develop their speaking and leadership skills <http://www.toastmasters.org/>. With practice and helpful feedback from others, your skill and confidence will improve, your nervousness will decrease, and you will be effective in communicating your ideas.

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