

# Activist speaking

**Brian Martin**

Originally written in 1978 to be a chapter in a book published by Friends of the Earth Australia, but the book never eventuated. I revised the text in September 2010, including adding some additional footnotes.

By rights a primer on speaking should be on tape or video, with examples of actual voices. However, here I am in print.

The following is a transcription of a portion of an actual speech — not by me. My comments are in the footnotes.

But first of all I'd like to speak about the Aboriginals, and the Australian — in the Australian context. I think this is a very important question which has often been overlooked — um — by people — by — by the — it's often been overlooked in — in the nuclear debate — um — a but I think it's very important.<sup>1</sup>

The land is a very important part of the Aboriginal culture if — if the Aboriginal people lose their land, they lose part of themselves, they lose their spirit. I'd just like to quote from Gal — Galarrwuy Yunupingu,<sup>2</sup> who's a field officer for the Northern Lands Council — now this is the — um — Northern Lands Council it's the area in which the Ranger deposit and most of the other major deposits being considered at present are found.<sup>3</sup>

"The land is my backbone, I only stand straight, happy, proud, and not ashamed about my colour, because I still have land. The land is the art. I can paint, dance, create and sing as my ancestors did before me. My people recorded these things about the land this way so that I and all others likely —

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<sup>1</sup> *Comment* This seems terrible in print, but didn't sound so bad hearing it in person. Even so, it's often useful to prepare the first several sentences of a topic in detail, to get the speech rolling along smoothly.

<sup>2</sup> *Comment* It's important to be able to pronounce accurately all words one uses in speaking.

<sup>3</sup> *Comment* Rather than give a vague description of incidental information, it would be better to leave this out.

like me may do the same.”<sup>4</sup>

But it’s — mo- most of the uranium in the Northern Territory is found on Aboriginal land, and a lot of it is found extremely close to very sacred sites for the Aboriginal people. But as well as providing a — a cultural and spiritual threat to the Aboriginal people, the — um — uranium mining also constitutes a physical threat to their way of life. Many of the people in this area still live a reasonably — reasonably traditional way of life, and still exist to a large extent on hunting and gathering, especially during the dry season. Now if mining goes ahead in the area — um — this will cause quite serious pollution of the environment, which will make — um — make it unsafe for people to continue to live on the flora and fauna of this area.<sup>5</sup> And I quote again from Yorky Billy, from the Oenpelli mission of the Northern Territory: “I’ve been living off the bush, living off the geese, ducks and fish and all that, and I don’t want them to be poisoned.”<sup>6</sup>

The other threat to the — to the Aboriginal way of life in this area is the fact that it is planned<sup>7</sup> to build a large regional township at Jabiru which is on the border — on the edge of the — ah — Ranger deposits and this town will service the whole mining community in the area. And the people there are very worried about this — this township and the violence and alcohol that it will introduce into the area, and the women particular — women in particular are very worried about the — the large influx of single white male miners with their sexist and racist attitudes.<sup>8</sup> And I quote again<sup>9</sup> from Silas Roberts, and this is from the final submission of the Northern Lands Council to the Ranger Inquiry:

“This is a big place they want to build; we worry about this. It is too close to us and our culture. It will do nothing for us, only hurt us. Drink, and

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<sup>4</sup> *Comment* The use of selected quotes is very effective, especially (as here) when one is not speaking from direct personal experience.

<sup>5</sup> *Comment* This section on the physical threat of mining to the Aboriginal way of life is effective because of its simple yet specific explanation.

<sup>6</sup> *Comment* A pause after this quote (as in the actual speech) effectively denotes the introduction of a new topic.

<sup>7</sup> *Comment* A more specific reference here — for example, “the uranium mining companies plan” — would be better.

<sup>8</sup> *Comment* With a specific catalogue of problems and no-nonsense language, this section is quite powerful.

<sup>9</sup> *Comment* “This time” would be more appropriate than “again.”

men looking for girls, and everything. We want to keep this city a long way from our land and particularly, our sacred sites.”<sup>10</sup>

But to move on from the — the risks to — to Australia from uranium mining,<sup>11</sup> I'd like to talk about more general aspects of the nuclear — uh — nuclear fuel cycle. The first of these is reactor safety ...

Overall, the section of the speech quoted here was not highly polished, but still was most effective. Besides its actual content, it was presented clearly, at an unhurried pace, and in a pleasant tone of voice. Naturally there is room for improvement — but then that's always true. In any case, there's much to be learned — both in terms of what to do and what not to do — by studying this speech and many other speeches.

The occasion for this speech was a public meeting on uranium in Nowra, New South Wales, 26 November 1977. To put it in perspective, the programme was as follows.

- A 20-minute film, *Energy: the nuclear alternative*, which covered the topics of reactor safety, transportation of radioactive materials, and disposal of radioactive waste
- Short speeches from two members of Friends of the Earth and Movement Against Uranium Mining in Canberra

First speaker: introduction, impact of uranium mining on Aborigines, reactor safety (brief), waste disposal (brief),<sup>12</sup> proliferation of nuclear weapons

Second speaker (me): patterns of energy use, alternative energy paths, economics of the nuclear industry, citizen opposition to nuclear power

- Questions from the audience and responses from the speakers
- *The war game*, an hour-long film about the possible consequences of a nuclear attack on Britain

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<sup>10</sup> *Comment* At this point, a one-sentence summary of the issue, covering the major points — the cultural, spiritual and physical threat of mining in general, and of the mining township in particular, to the Aboriginal way of life — might be effective.

<sup>11</sup> *Comment* Referring to risks to the Australian Aborigines, rather than risks to Australia, would be better.

<sup>12</sup> After several such meetings, it was thought by some people that the film *Energy: the nuclear alternative* provided a sufficient introduction to reactor safety and waste disposal, and that the speakers should concentrate on other issues.

In the rest of this article, I will first briefly discuss the need for competence in speaking as part of an activist movement, and then treat two major areas: (1) content: learning what to say; (2) presentation: learning how to say it.

### THE NEED FOR SPEAKING

Church groups, women's groups, school classes, Rotary Clubs, public meetings: these are some of the valuable occasions for communicating the environmental viewpoint (or the viewpoint of any citizens' movement) through public speaking. Speaking on this level is a vital part of any campaign that hopes to go beyond convincing those who are already sympathetic.

Public speaking is often thought to be something that can be done effectively by only a few — an innate ability. This is simply not so. Nearly everyone has the capacity to become an effective speaker — given a commitment to study, to practise and to learn from advice and experience. And it is *important* for as many people as possible in a social movement to become capable of speaking at one level or another, if the movement is trying to avoid elitism and promote widespread participation in decision-making in society. If public speaking continually falls to a small group of experienced “experts,” then that small group of people may exert an undue influence on the direction of the movement.

But while it is important for competence and opportunities for speaking to be broadly distributed, it is also necessary for activist speakers to be *better* than speakers representing the status quo. This is because powerful members of the community — the president of BHP<sup>13</sup> or the Prime Minister — are listened to because of their position and because the implications of what they say affect many people — *not* because what they say is insightful, coherent or attractively presented. An industry spokesperson on environmental matters may be able to get away with a boring speech and evasive replies to questions — the industry's policies will have an impact nevertheless. An environmentalist, on the other hand, is usually without institutional backing, and needs to be interesting, persuasive, and knowledgeable. A tall order!

In spite of these high requirements, becoming an effective speaker is easier

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<sup>13</sup> 2010 note: A mining and steel corporation, Australia's largest company

than most people imagine, though it's certainly harder than potential speakers might wish. Several things may help prospective speakers to persevere. The first is the knowledge that you are promoting a socially valuable cause. The second is that giving a well-organised presentation to an interested audience, answering questions and promoting discussion, is personally very satisfying indeed. These are the occasions that make all the study and practice worthwhile. Third, if the speaking campaign is broad-based, there should be a place for speakers having all levels of knowledge and experience, ranging from speaking to friends or primary school students, to major debates and TV appearances.

## CONTENT

Content refers to *what* you are talking about. Except for a small minority of people, it requires a considerable amount of study and practice to gain and maintain a good grasp of the evidence and the arguments.

### Study

There is no substitute for studying the evidence.<sup>14</sup> And it is important to actually study; 15 minutes per day is more effective than a rare long session (continually postponed).

General reading is important when starting out, to get an idea about how different aspects of the issue fit together. Once a general overview is obtained, it is often valuable to study a particular area in detail. One method I use is to take an area such as proliferation of nuclear weapons (or nuclear waste, civil liberties or economics) and read what is said about it in different books and articles — the Ranger Reports, Patterson, Lovins, Nader and Abbotts, FOE and MAUM leaflets, pro-nuclear

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<sup>14</sup> Quite a few environmentalists — especially those leaning in the direction of the counter culture — have a strong negative reaction to the idea of studying. This almost invariably is due to experiences in school and university. It may be praiseworthy to have rebelled against the straitjacket of academic learning. But it is unwise to throw away everything done in academic institutions uncritically, just because it's done in academic institutions. A critique of study must consider what is being studied, what the purpose of study is, and who is doing the study.

sources, etc.<sup>15</sup> As I go through these, I draw up an outline of important points (such as limitations of the Non Proliferation Treaty and of International Atomic Energy Association safeguards), verify numbers (how much plutonium is produced in a large reactor each year), and take note of valuable quotes (Ranger First Report: “The nuclear power industry is unintentionally contributing to an increased risk of nuclear war.”). I’ve found it worthwhile keeping a record of these points, numbers and quotes in a sort of file — pieces of paper in alphabetical order (index cards would do as well). Often it is only necessary to list page numbers pointing to books and articles with the information. Such a file seemed a lot of trouble at first, but as I have come across more and more things I wished to remember, it has become very valuable.

Finally, it is necessary to keep up with current events, either by reading appropriate newspapers and journals (such as *Not Man Apart*<sup>16</sup> or the *Australian Financial Review*) or keeping in contact with people who do.

### **What to know**

To present a prepared speech, it is not necessary to know more than what you say. (Therefore, speaking at a rally requires more attention to organisation and presentation of material than to study.) But to answer questions it is usually necessary to know ten or more times as much as you are actually asked on any particular occasion. The knowledge needed to answer questions can be divided into four types: evidence, examples, arguments, and responses.

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<sup>15</sup> 2010 note

Ranger reports: the first and second reports of the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry, a far-reaching and influential Australian inquiry in the late 1970s.

Walter Patterson, *Nuclear Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)

Amory Lovins, *Soft Energy Paths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977)

Ralph Nader and John Abbotts, *The Menace of Atomic Energy* (Melbourne: Outback Press, 1977)

FOE: Friends of the Earth

MAUM: Movement Against Uranium Mining, an Australian national network of groups

<sup>16</sup> 2010 note: magazine of Friends of the Earth US.

*Evidence* is more commonly known as “facts.”<sup>17</sup>

*Examples* are used to provide interest and to show what abstract evidence means in terms of people’s experiences.

*Arguments* have to do with the political and social feelings and justifications associated with personal attitudes and values.

*Responses* are needed to handle queries or challenges to the speaker’s role.

#### *Evidence*

- Nuclear power today provides only 1 to 2 per cent of energy at the point of use.
- Nuclear power directly provides energy only in the form of electricity.
- About 30 per cent of energy used today is in the form of liquid fuels.

#### *Examples*

- In the U.S., 1976 cars averaged 27 per cent better mileage than 1974 models.
- With good insulation and windows in the correct direction, the home of Air Commodore James Coward of Canberra has required no heating by fuel in the last four years.

#### *Arguments*

Comment by an audience member: We can’t stop uranium mining, so we might as well not try.

Reply: Of course, if everyone took this attitude, it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. But history shows that it is possible for citizen concern to have an impact on the development of the nuclear industry. Large numbers of reactors have been directly blocked due to citizen opposition in Europe, Japan and America. Furthermore, citizen concern has brought about stronger safety regulations and delays in building

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of “facts” usually connotes knowledge independent of human values and interests; “facts” in this sense do not exist. Human interests always colour the availability, choice, useability, understandability and organisation of facts. Examine these two “facts”:

1. “It cannot be proved that even a single non-worker has been killed due to radioactivity from civilian nuclear power plants.”
2. “It is possible that tens of thousands of people have contracted fatal cancers as a result of the nuclear power programme.”

programmes, both of which have hurt the profitability of the nuclear industry. Several years ago, leaving uranium in the ground would have been unthinkable to most people. Now, stopping uranium mining and export is possible, and it's certainly worth trying.

### *Responses*

Nuclear scientist: You're wrong, you're wrong. The half-life of plutonium-239 is 24,400 years, not 250,000 years. I can see you don't know what you're talking about, which is not surprising since you haven't studied nuclear physics.

Response: Well, we'll leave it to nuclear scientists such as yourself to check on the technicalities — that's what you're paid for, after all. However, the point you've raised is not really essential to my argument, which is that the hazards of nuclear wastes will be with us for much longer than the duration of any civilisation in history. The issues of nuclear power are not primarily technical ones, but involve social and political choices. A moral judgement is involved in deciding whether to accept the risk of long-lived radioactive wastes — a risk in which the benefits go to the present generation and the costs fall on our children's children. A social judgement is involved in deciding whether to move towards a nuclear future, with the associated problems of reactor accidents, terrorism and increased risk of nuclear war, or towards a future based on renewable energy sources, with none of these problems. As the Ranger Inquiry noted, "the final decisions should rest with the ordinary man" — and woman, I might add — "and not be regarded as the preserve of any group of scientists or experts, however distinguished."

(Obviously, there is considerable overlap between evidence, examples, arguments and responses.)

You should look at your own background and understanding to decide whether you need to work most on evidence, examples, arguments, or responses. For example, people with scientific experience often can grasp the evidence more readily than the arguments, while people with political experience often are oppositely inclined. The audience and occasion make a difference too: if you're coming up against Baxter or



Titterton<sup>18</sup> it's important to have prepared particular types of evidence, examples, arguments and responses.

PS. A quite acceptable answer to some questions is, "I don't know, but I'll try to find out for you." This is preferable to blurting and blundering your way through a tedious non-answer.

### **Different answers for different occasions**

In answering a question or making a point, there are usually quite a number of options. The choice made should reflect a feeling for the type and mood of the audience as well as your own type of presentation and line of thought. In some cases "rational," intellectual arguments and responses are appropriate. In others a more "gut" approach may be called for.

**Question** If we don't mine and sell uranium, won't other countries come and get it?

**Answer 1** (appeal to rationality): There is not a single country that needs Australian uranium for its survival (Ranger First Report, page 164). For example, there is enough coal in the world to last at least 300 years.

**Answer 2** (appeal to ideas of economic self-interest): Mr Anthony<sup>19</sup> has said Japan could do this, but the Japanese certainly know better. They are wise operators when it comes to business. They know that military adventures are very expensive, and that there are many cheaper ways to obtain energy.

**Answer 3** (appeal to political authorities): There's no reason to think so. The Japanese government has said it is ridiculous to claim Japan may invade Australia.

**Answer 4** (appeal to xenophobia): In 1938, Australia sold pig iron to Japan. Some of

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<sup>18</sup> 2010 note: Sir Philip Baxter and Sir Ernest Titterton were the two most prominent technical experts supporting nuclear power. See my booklet *Nuclear Knights* (Canberra: Rupert Public Interest Movement, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> 2010 note: Doug Anthony, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and ardent supporter of nuclear power

it came back in the form of bombs. The same sort of thing could happen with uranium.

**Answer 5** (appeal to national pride): Should we sell or give Australian territory to other countries just because someone says otherwise they'll come and take it?

### **Thinking**

It's no good just knowing the evidence and answers to questions in a mechanical manner. It's vital to think through the issues yourself. I find that thinking through the issues — especially the various arguments I come across — is very valuable when doing further reading and study on the issues: it helps me to be aware of relevant evidence and examples. Thinking through arguments is also fascinating — an excellent antidote to what is learned (implicitly) at school and university.

### **Thinking through an argument**

**Argument** We might as well sell uranium because some other country will sell it anyway. Australia can help by putting stricter conditions on uranium sales.

#### ***Train of thought***

1. This is obviously a justification for selling uranium, not the real reason. (What is the real reason? — mainly profit for the companies; the government is motivated by some individual members' direct links with companies, and by the general aim of promoting the interests of large companies. I must find out more about the links between government and business.) How can a justification be exposed? — by finding examples which show clearly the self-serving nature of the argument. What are examples for this case? ... Britain justified its slave trade by saying that if it didn't trade, other less scrupulous countries would do it anyway; selling heroin could be justified similarly. I'll have to think of a way to phrase the comparison so that it exposes the argument effectively.

2. What will be the consequences of Australia not selling its uranium? Will other countries actually sell it anyway? This depends on the supply of uranium (I must look up an analysis.). If there's enough uranium at *some* price, making Australian uranium available will merely reduce the world price. Hence withholding Australian uranium would increase the price, which would definitely have an adverse impact on

the nuclear industry. (However, nuclear opponents in other countries sometimes argue against the breeder<sup>20</sup> by saying there will be plenty of cheap uranium. I must investigate the arguments there, including the government's invocation of the Carter policy<sup>21</sup> — which isn't working, I know that — to justify uranium export.)

3. At what level is the argument pitched? Obviously the economic level. But economic impacts are not the only — or even the most important — ones ... The argument leaves out the psychological impact of stopping export of Australian uranium. It would be a boost to citizen opposition movements overseas, and a blow to the international nuclear industry, which is greatly in need of moral support at the moment. Now how do I phrase these points in a convincing manner?

### **The apprentice system**

In Canberra, FOE and MAUM have adopted an apprentice system for speaking. Those interested in speaking on uranium issues are classified as either speakers or apprentices. The speakers are those who feel ready to face audiences on a full range of issues, and to handle any and all questions. The apprentices are those who want more knowledge and/or experience in speaking before tackling groups alone. (Obviously, there is a range of abilities between speaker and apprentice, and perhaps no one is ever a fully prepared speaker. The distinction is for convenience in learning and practising.)

At any speaking engagement where it is appropriate (schools, public meetings, etc.), we try to arrange for one speaker and one apprentice to attend. The apprentice is encouraged to prepare material in advance and to present as much or little as desired. When it comes to answering questions, the speaker gives the apprentice first opportunity to answer in each case. Also, by taking notes on details of the speaking and question time and by talking over the experience afterwards, the speaker can advise the apprentice on how to improve (and also vice versa!).

In addition, the apprentices meet regularly with one of the speakers to develop their understanding and speaking ability. The meetings sometimes are based around presenting short prepared talks, or around evidence about a particular topic, or around

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<sup>20</sup> *2010 note:* The breeder reactor creates vast quantities of plutonium and was seen as a proliferation risk.

<sup>21</sup> *2010 note:* An anti-proliferation policy promoted by US president Jimmy Carter.

responding to arguments. (For example, we've had sessions on learning basic nuclear physics and on responding to Grover-type arguments.<sup>22</sup>) Information sheets passed out beforehand often are useful in focussing the session.

Incidentally, the speech quoted at the beginning of this article was made by one of our apprentices; she requested to remain anonymous.

If you can't find other budding speakers around to discuss the issues with, it is quite adequate to talk and practise with friends. Indeed, if you can develop a convincing argument for use with friends, you are well on the way to public speaking

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Learning the material on a topic required to be an effective public speaker is not something you can do in a week, but neither is it something only possible for movement experts. What is required is regular study, attention to evidence, examples, arguments and responses, thinking about the issues, and practice appropriate to your level of knowledge and experience. Once you understand the issues, all you need to know is how to present them — which brings us to presentation.

## **PRESENTATION**

### **Conciseness**

The single most important thing you can do in terms of presentation is to make your speech as short and concise as possible.<sup>23</sup> Speaking for too long can destroy audience rapport even for the best speakers. I cannot count the number of times I've watched speakers go on and on and on and on and on — and watched the audience become more and more fidgety and bored, even when the most interesting and important material is being treated. And somehow the speaker never seems to notice.

Many speakers are under the illusion that understanding and learning are things that reside in what is said, and therefore that the greater the quantity of worthwhile material presented by the speaker, the better. This illusion must be

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<sup>22</sup> *2010 note:* John Grover was a prolific advocate of nuclear power, employed by the uranium industry.

<sup>23</sup> There are some speakers who speak with such extreme brevity that this dictum does not apply, and who should expand what they say. Unfortunately, I have not yet met any of these speakers.

resisted. Learning and understanding are things that take place within a person, and are greatly promoted by that person's active interaction with the material, through thinking, discussion and questioning. These are the processes that should be fostered in and by a movement hoping to generate widespread citizen involvement in social issues. A speaker who attempts to dominate a session with superior knowledge will hinder these processes and hence communicate *less* — or, rather, will communicate something not even said, namely the speaker's implicit belief in the superiority of one-directional communication.

From a purely practical point of view, it is much better to say too little than too much. It is considered discourteous to request a speaker to hurry up and get the speech over with, but quite acceptable to ask for more information after a speech is finished.

### **Structuring the speaking environment**

When possible, you should try to choose or alter physical surroundings to promote the aims of the presentation. For activists, these aims include promoting thought and discussion rather than respect for expertise and authority. If possible choose a venue that is convenient to the listeners, has appropriate symbolic properties (public meetings in town halls, a group of nurses in a hospital meeting room), and is a suitably intimate size to foster conversation. (Of course often the speaker has no control over the choice of venue.)

Sometimes I try to promote discussion by altering the physical arrangement of chairs and speaker, for example by putting the chairs in a circle and not using a rostrum and podium I try to arrive early to do this. In an auditorium with fixed seats, walking about or sitting at the side can often free the atmosphere. It takes some nerve to do this if you're used to the typical speaker-audience relationship. I've found that even as simple an action as sitting down while a member of the audience is making a point often encourages further audience participation; standing up symbolically asserts your authority to respond. So it is valuable to observe the relation between your actions and physical position and the group's reaction. What you *say* is not the only thing communicated.

A final aspect of the speaking environment is your personal appearance. Usually it is advisable to dress and groom yourself to suit the audience, or at least to make concessions in this direction. You have to decide *what* you want to

communicate: concern over nuclear power, or concern over long hair (or whatever). It is unfortunate that nonverbal communication deriving from appearance (dress, age, hair style, colour), accent, sex appeal and charisma (eye contact, posture, gestures, etc.) often overwhelm, for some audience members, the substance of what you are saying.

Personally, I believe it makes sense to use these nonverbal communication levels to further your aims — encouraging widespread thought, discussion, concern and involvement with environmental issues and their social and political aspects — and to make concessions in the realm of appearance to do this. An alternative requiring no personal concessions is to choose a different communications medium such as writing or graphic design. Unfortunately, there are constraints on what you can do through these channels if you wish to be most effective — but they do not involve personal appearance.

### **Audiovisual aids**

- Slides
- Leaflets (usually best passed out *before* speaking)
- Posters or maps
- Demonstration materials (such as models of atoms, insulation, selective surfaces, Geiger counters, or a ball the size of the plutonium needed for a nuclear explosion)
- Films

Audiovisual aids are very important. The combination of a speech and a leaflet should be synergistic: the speech encourages reading of the leaflet, and the leaflet is available for reinforcement of ideas after the speaker has gone. But care must be taken in meshing the aids together. We've found that when speaking and showing the film *The war game*, speaking must be first and should emphasise the relation between nuclear power and nuclear war, because after the film is over, the audience is too stunned for a speech to be effective — and sometimes the speaker is too.

### **Technique**

Things to avoid: apologising, umming and ahing, being condescending, fidgeting, holding a tense posture, speaking in a monotone, and talking too softly, too fast or too technically.

Things to do (usually): include an introduction and a conclusion, emphasise the main points of the talk, look around at the audience, use gestures and dramatic pauses and vocal emphases, and have speaking notes and reference materials at hand.

To improve your presentation, the value of *feedback* is paramount. If possible, try to find someone who will give you honest advice. Honest, non-destructive critics of your speaking should be cultivated with great care and regard — they are few and far between. Most people do not listen to speaking in terms of how it could be improved; those who do are usually too polite to say what they think. So don't be misled by all the favourable comments after you speak. Instead, search around for at least one suggestion as to how you might improve. (One approach is to ask, privately after speaking, for comments on your strengths and weaknesses.) This may seem like a negative approach. But just remember all the boring teachers you've had, who have been doing the same thing for years on end. A little improvement each time you speak will do wonders in the long run.

In the absence of an honest critic, self-criticism is valuable. When analysing your own speaking, use mirror, tape and video, if available. These may be embarrassing to use at first.

Lastly, listen to other speakers and learn. And be critical when you listen. Try to become one of those rare honest critics — it's not so hard, but it does contravene conventions of politeness. When you find speakers you like, try to do what they do best.

## **Nerves**

Even the best speakers get nervous; getting nervous is a normal part of speaking.<sup>24</sup> But nerves can be debilitating, and there are several antidotes to prevent being terrified and petrified.

(i) Confidence based on understanding. Knowing and fully grasping what you will be saying, and knowing answers to likely questions, is a fundamental source of confidence when speaking. Remember that this includes understanding of evidence, examples, arguments and responses. Study can calm the nerves, though it's possible to become such a perfectionist that you are never ready to speak.

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<sup>24</sup> Eventually nervousness may be transformed into higher than normal alertness and preparedness, but lack of extra adrenalin before and during speaking probably indicates staleness or exhaustion.

(ii) Practice and experience.<sup>25</sup> Practising in front of friends or the mirror is beneficial to the nerves. If possible go through the whole speech and answer typical questions, several times if necessary. If you have time just before you speak, run through the whole speech then: the actual speech then often becomes an anticlimax.

(iii) Contingency plans. If you are very worried, have a full written version of what you are going to say, and read if necessary. (Notes are always advisable anyway.) Alternatively you could have some diversion planned to tide you over until poise is regained: quotes to read, a request for questions from the audience, a long pause (which may seem interminable to you but be quite acceptable to the audience). And finally, the apprentice system serves to provide a back-up speaker if anything goes wrong.

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Should you try to become a speaker? The best way to find out is to start small and go from there. Study a topic you're interested in — which may only involve reading a short article, such as on the civil liberties implications of uranium mining — and talk to your friends about it. Many of us do this anyway. We've just never thought of it as speaking. One thing can be said for learning to speak better: it will come in handy in many different circumstances. And in the age of mass media, the small group conversation is still vitally important.

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<sup>25</sup> Confidence in public speaking is not fostered as part of the Australian educational system or of upbringing, and as a consequence many — especially women and people without tertiary education — have little or no experience and very low self-confidence. It is important to remember that this problem is not genetic: the ability and the confidence *can* be developed.