

## Improving Public Speaking with PowerPoint Karaoke

**Derek J. Stiles, Rush University Medical Center**  
**Kimberly A. Skarupski, Johns-Hopkins University**

### Authors' Contact Information

*Derek J. Stiles*  
*Rush University Medical Center*  
*600 S Paulina St., Chicago, IL, USA, 60612*  
*Phone: 312-942-9967*  
*Email: [derek\\_stiles@rush.edu](mailto:derek_stiles@rush.edu)*

*Kimberly Skarupski*  
*Office of Faculty Development,*  
*Johns-Hopkins University, 2024 E Monument St,*  
*Baltimore, MD, USA, 21287*

### Abstract:

*Junior faculty arrive at their positions with varying levels of comfort presenting in front of an audience. Many graduated from doctoral programs that did not provide training in public speaking. However, the ability to effectively and confidently present their research in front of an often skeptical audience is a vital skill for an academic. Unfortunately, colleges and universities may provide limited opportunities for faculty members to develop public speaking skills outside the purview of conferences. We are sharing our experience using "PowerPoint karaoke" as a method of developing confidence in public speaking among junior faculty.*

### Key Words:

Junior faculty, presentation skills, public speaking, confidence.

### Introduction

Rush University Medical Center offers a mentorship program for junior faculty at the institution. The Rush Research Mentoring Program (RRMP) was established in 2006 to prepare junior faculty members to lead funded programs of translational research. The program relies on two primary pillars - facilitating mentoring relationships and providing a comprehensive range of research-related resources, such as statistical analysis, data management, professional grant writing and manuscript editing, graphics and oral presentation consulting, research assistance, monthly track meetings, weekly mentee writing groups, an annual retreat, and regular workshops and seminars on a variety of research-related and grant-writing topics. The program has documented positive outcomes. Mentees have published more than 330 peer-reviewed publications and have been awarded more than \$42 million in external funding as principal investigators

since joining the program - half of the awards were from the National Institutes of Health<sup>1</sup>. As part of its programming, we offered a PowerPoint karaoke event as both a way to socialize and practice public speaking.

PowerPoint karaoke, also called “PowerPoint improv,” involves participants improvising a presentation to slides they have not yet seen. Presentations are generally 5-10 slides in length. They can be slides from an actual presentation from a different discipline or slides that were created for the event. The novelty of the slides frees the presenter (and audience) of any expectations of expertise on the topic. The presenter may interpret the data in a completely unorthodox manner without fear of confrontation from an audience member. Thus, the exercise focuses on presentation style and mental agility. Presenters try to appear as though they are experts on the topic; consequently, they must monitor and adjust their mannerisms and speech to meet this end. This allows presenters to identify some of the strategies upon which they may be relying when they present. Similarly, the audience members are able to identify strategies used by a series of presenters that they may later choose to adopt themselves. The more times a person participates in PowerPoint karaoke, the more facility they develop in adopting these presentation skills.

During the Rush event, we polled participants about their public speaking anxiety and nervousness. We found that participants came to the event with a range of anxiety levels. Some reported being very comfortable with public speaking whereas others reported high levels of anxiety. After their karaoke presentation, presenters were asked to rate how nervous they felt and how nervous they thought they appeared during the presentation. Audience members were also asked to rate how nervous the presenter appeared. Participants with high anxiety levels rated themselves as appearing more nervous than the audience rated them. Participants with low anxiety levels rated themselves as appearing more confident, as did the audience.

Finally we asked for feedback on whether the PowerPoint karaoke experience was useful as a tool for improving public speaking skills. Participants were asked to reflect on their roles as presenter and as audience member. Participants reported value in the presenter role, one stating that she found the exercise “good for confidence building” because her core presenting skills became apparent “when talking about something I knew nothing about.” Without the pressure of presenting her own research, she recognized her aptitude for public speaking. Participants also identified bad habits and indicated an intent to avoid these during their own presentations (e.g., glossing over slides, flipping back and forth between slides). Participants also enjoyed the chance “to practice in a safe place.” As audience members, participants reported seeing the benefits of avoiding text-heavy slides and appreciated “how some people are skilled at condensing text-heavy slides in their talks.”

Overall, the response to this exercise was very positive, and we plan to continue to provide the opportunity to our junior faculty. In future sessions, we will add guided

---

<sup>1</sup> Kimberly A. Skarupski and Ali Keshavarzian, “Investing in Academic Medicine Research Mentoring – Low Cost but High Return,” *Gastroenterology* (in press), accessed March 19, 2013, doi: 10.1053/j.gastro.2013.01.064.

interactions between the presenter and audience in order to support the development of public speaking skills and confidence.



We have attached an example PowerPoint slideshow for you to try out. Remember that the goal of this exercise is to work on presentation style. The information on the slides can mean whatever you want it to mean; your job is to make it sound eloquent and convincing. We would love to hear back from you about your experiences with this exercise. We would even encourage sharing recordings of your karaoke presentation so that we can all enjoy the learning experience.

Sample PowerPoint is located here:

[http://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/Transformative%20Dialogues/TD.7.2.9\\_Stiles&Sharupski\\_Improving\\_Public\\_Speaking.pptx](http://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/Transformative%20Dialogues/TD.7.2.9_Stiles&Sharupski_Improving_Public_Speaking.pptx)

**Figure 1. One of the authors presenting on a topic he knows nothing about.**