

How to Use a Microphone

By George F Greene

If you can't be heard, you won't be listened to!

You are not a rock star, so it's understandable that you might not know how to use a mic. However, your primary goal is to communicate, so this is a skill you *must* have.

Consider that you may be speaking in a noisy area or speaking to senior citizens where voice clarity and volume are essential. Consider a debate where one candidate can be heard loudly and clearly, while others sound weak and unintelligible. If you learn to use a microphone properly *you* will be heard and you *will* be listened to!

Gear

Nothing will improve your microphone skill more than actually using one. I highly recommend that you buy a good mic that brings out the best in your voice, as well as a little practice amp so you can practice at home. You can make all your mistakes in the privacy of your own home.

A salesperson at a local professional sound and music dealer can help you audition a mic that picks up and shapes your voice to sound as good as it can. Test mics by speaking normally (don't be embarrassed -it's like karaoke without the booze!). Don't scrimp; \$50, but no more than \$150 should get you a quality mic. A little practice amp can be had for \$50-75. If you don't buy a setup, then at least borrow a mic and amp so you can practice.

If you buy a nice mic, you may also want to bring your mic to speaking engagements and request that they let you use it.

Understanding microphones

Imagine the mic has a balloon attached to it as in the picture below.



The balloon is something called a “pickup pattern”. I like this picture because it lets you visualize **where in space you should speak -namely just inside the balloon!** The diagram shows the very common "cardioid" or heart-shaped pattern which is sensitive in front, but not so much in the back (to reduce feedback from nearby speakers).

Addressing the mic

Now imagine that the microphone is an ice cream cone (as in the picture at right above). Hold it no farther than six inches away and hold it a little below your mouth or off to the side so people can see your face and, importantly, so you don't breath on it. Heavy breathing is... shall we say, inappropriate in political speech and people will be distracted by your breathing and not hear your words.

When practicing, adjust the amplifier so you can hear yourself. If you hear feedback, put the amp farther away from you. Speak in a normal, comfortable voice. Try moving the mic around. Can you hear how your voice virtually disappears when the mic gets farther than eight inches from your mouth (i.e., outside the balloon)? Take it off to one side and the other. Can you hear it fade out as you do this? Now get right up against it; can you hear how full and boomy it sounds? Keep doing these things until you have a good sense of where the mic should be.

Be aware of how you are holding the mic and check yourself while practicing. If you turn your head as you speak, remember to turn the mic along with it. If you tend to hold the mic pointed out at your audience like a pointer or at your side like a suitcase you'll need to practice. Do not wave it around like a sword either -you are NOT a Jedi Knight (sorry).

Plosive and sibilant sounds

Plosive sounds often come from words beginning with "P" or "B". The rush of air from your mouth hits the mic and causes a popping or booming sound that you may not hear, but your audience will —and that's *all* they'll hear. Words with "S" or "T" are “sibilant” and make hissy and whistle-like noises; sound equipment amplifies this and it can be very annoying and distracting to a listener. Foam is often put on the mic to mitigate plosives and sibilants, but it is usually not very effective. Make these sounds so you hear what it sounds like. Then practice not making them. If you are not be able stop making plosive or sibilant sounds, your best option is to minimize it by repositioning the mic slightly to one side and, if necessary, a little farther away.

Proximity effect

You might wonder why some performers (especially solo singers and comedians) seem to be positively swallowing the mic. They are using the proximity effect. If you get really close to a mic,

the bass reproduction goes way up and treble gets crispier (try this on the mic you just bought). The loud bass helps comedians call attention to a punchline. Lotsa bass + crispier treble = a "warm" tone and that's great for singers- and *maybe* you: if your voice is thin or weak you can get closer to the mic to bring out some richness and warmth. Here's a link where you can [hear the proximity effect](#) .

Wireless lavalier mics

At some venues, especially when you will be on TV, you will likely have a very small wireless "lavalier" mic clipped to your clothing. The sound tech will know exactly where it should go, but it will likely be on your lapel or shirt. Do not allow clothes or your hands to brush against the mic. Lavalier mics are very small and connect to a little belt pack clipped under your clothes or behind you where it can't be seen. Be aware that *the wire snakes up under your clothes*; avoid embarrassment (and viral cel phone videos) by putting it on *before* everyone arrives.

CAUTION: Remember, always treat any mic as if it's "live".

This is really important with a lavalier because it's small and you stop noticing it. If you walk away after an interview or go to the restroom for a moment, *your mic is probably still on*. You may also forget to return the mic; get in the habit of curbing your more colorful utterances until you are *at least a few blocks away from the venue*.

At the gig

Get there early and bring a friend, preferably the same person every time so they become trained to look for problems. Both of you should case the joint. Make the venue turn off the mariachi music playing over the ceiling speakers (a common problem in hotel ballrooms). See if you can turn off ceiling and floor fans (you don't notice them, but the mic will). Close doors to hallways and minimize any other extraneous sounds. Ask where you'll be speaking. If you are the first one at a panel discussion, see if you can choose a middle position! Choose a non-squeaky chair.

Positioning

Sit or stand in a comfortable position. Move a desk mic closer, so you won't have to lean forward. If the mic is on a stand, it is perfectly fine to reach over and adjust the height of the stand. Set it so you can comfortably speak into the balloon without having to lean in or bend over. Be sure the mic and/or stand does not block your face. If you are having problems kicking the stand or you feel yourself leaning forward, ask for a "boom" stand. A boom extends horizontally away from the base to get the mic closer to you and allow room for your feet..

If you are at a podium with a little bendable stick mic, make sure it is pointed at your mouth and not somewhere else. If you are short, you may need a box to stand on; if you are tall, you may need to raise the mic or even the podium if that is possible. You'll want to avoid touching the mic or pounding on the podium with your fists to make a point. Podiums are notorious for making big

booming sounds that you might not hear, but your audience will. Again, distracting sounds are annoying and draw audience attention away from your message.

Sound check

Ask to meet the sound tech and request a sound check. Be nice to the sound tech; they can make you sound great (or terrible). If you have your own mic, ask if you can use it, but be OK with it if the tech says no. During the sound check be attentive and do what the tech asks. Speak into the mic with a little bit of your elevator speech and speak at your normal volume. You do not have to force sound into the mic. The tech will adjust your volume to match that of the other speakers.

Be aware that you may not be able to hear yourself very well because the loudspeakers will be out in front of the mics and pointed at the audience. If you cannot hear yourself or the interviewer or opponents, ask if stage monitors are available and make sure they are positioned so you can hear everyone (on TV you may get a small earpiece, especially if you are not in the studio with everyone else). Ask to do a monitor check so you can be *sure* you can hear everyone.

What you hear is NOT what they get

Understand that what you hear on stage and what the audience hears will be completely different. You cannot hear what the audience hears, so don't bug the tech about how it sounds "out there" unless your assistant, who is out there, thinks something is wrong.

Have your friend in the audience listen as you speak and flag you at sound check *and during the speech* so you'll know if you are slacking in your mic skills. A few simple hand signals like thumbs up (be louder), thumbs down (softer). Two hands coming closer together (get closer to the mic, and vice versa) are essential. Have your helper speak to the tech if you are consistently too loud or soft.

If you remember nothing else, remember these four things:

- Remain calm and comfortable.
- Speak normally, inside the balloon.
- Minimize distracting sounds that draw attention away from your message.
- ***Microphones are always live!***

So few people know how to use a mic that chances are you may be the *only* speaker at the venue who does. Remember -the candidate that can be heard is the one who gets listened to!

