

Mistakes to Avoid When It's Your Turn at the Lectern



In comedy skits (like *Saturday Night Live*), sometimes the camera opens on “the naked lectern.” It stands alone. There is no person behind it. It just looks...silly. Why?

It sends the message that no one is in control.

Many people do not recognize good lectern etiquette--consciously, that is. However, when it is absent, the unconscious message conveyed is a lack of professionalism and control. When lectern etiquette is present, the opposite is conveyed.

To help YOU appear in control, here are some tips on lectern etiquette.

- **Never Leave the Lectern Unattended**

Stay at the lectern until the person you call arrives and shakes your hand. Think of it as playing “tag.” You don’t move from the lectern until someone has “tagged” you with a handshake. Step back from the lectern to allow the approaching person to step in front of you.

This doesn’t mean that you can’t move away from the lectern while you are in control. Many speakers set the lectern aside while they are “performing.” When finished, however, stay put until the next person to resume control arrives and shakes your hand.

- **Don’t Lean on the Lectern**

The lectern is there to hold your notes. Period.

- **Do Lead the Applause**

When a program calls for the audience to applaud, you lead by applauding first.

The following article is reprinted with permission from author and Toastmaster John Stesney, CTM. Nova Toastmasters, District 52.

Lectern vs. Podium

So what's the most embarrassing thing you can do as a Toastmaster? Blank out, in mid-sentence? Blur out a four-letter word? Discover you have spinach between your teeth? Leave your fly open? No, the most embarrassing thing you can do as a beginning Toastmaster, or even as an experienced one, is to mistake a lectern for a podium.

I suppose it would be a good idea to explain the difference between the two, since mistaking them is supposed to be a Bad Thing. A lectern is "a reading stand for a public speaker." A podium is "an elevated platform for an orchestra conductor, lecturer, etc." (The definitions are from the American Heritage dictionary.)

Speakers confuse lecterns and podia all the time, with appalling results. I remember one speaker who thought a podium was a lectern. She placed her notes on the podium and had to squat down every time she flipped a page. When looking down, she had to noticeably squint to read her notes. (I'm sure her high heels didn't help) She accidentally stepped on her notes too.

I also remember the time a rather bulky male Toastmaster mistook a lectern for a podium. When he stood on the lectern, it collapsed. So did the table it was set upon. The Toastmaster took a trip to the emergency room (to treat his concussion) and never gave a speech again.

Admittedly, these were extreme cases, but even the garden variety "It feels great to be behind the podium" causes embarrassment. Without fail, an old-school Toastmaster will be around, and will bark out "It's not a podium, it's a lectern." (Toastmasters really are a supportive bunch, and heckling is NOT encouraged, but for some reason, calling a podium a lectern prompts this knee-jerk reaction from the old-schoolers.) Then everybody rolls their eyes and looks uncomfortable. You see this, and suddenly you start to worry about spinach in your teeth, your fly, and the like.

So avoid it! A good idea is in all cases to say "lectern." Forget the word "podium" ever existed. This works because just about every Toastmasters club has a lectern, and virtually none have a podium.

Another approach is to immediately correct yourself:

--"I'm not used to being at the podium especially since this is a lectern."

--"Don't grip the podium or this lectern, either."

--"I'm feeling more comfortable behind the podium in an alternative Universe."

Finally, for you advanced speakers, don't use a lectern when you speak! Not only will you not be tempted to talk about the darn thing, you will connect better with your audience.

Just don't call a lectern a podium, unless you're trying to distract your audience from the spinach caught in your teeth.