

Jaymiah Stanton

Professor Sloggie

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### The Hell of Public Speaking

From a young age, I have never been one to want to stand out or speak up in my home or academic environments. My family has always instilled in me that anything is possible with dedication and hard work; yet, finding my voice has been a hurdle that I still struggle to overcome. Over the years, writing has been able to amplify my voice stronger than when I try to communicate through presentations.

As a child, my family has always encouraged me and my siblings to strive to be our most authentic selves, aim to succeed, and always give our best efforts no matter what we do. I grew up being the shy and awkward black girl who would go out of her way to not be in the center of attention, yet I always wanted to prove myself academically. I pushed to get straight A's every grading period which caused for the constant name calling of "teacher's pet" every year. It was always expected for me to bring home the grades that my family could boast about to whomever they chose; when you get praised for excelling in subjects such as in writing and science, sometimes that feeling can "blow one's head up" as my mother would say. Even though my writing skills were great during my preschool and middle school years, public speaking has always been my downfall.

Without fail, reading and writing are always said to go hand in hand. In school, our teachers have constantly stressed the importance of knowing how to write out our thoughts and read between the lines of what authors expect us to grasp from essays and whatever works of art they present. But the focus on public speaking will forever make me cringe. In my years before high school, oral presentations may come maybe once or twice a year per grade level, but it was never graded harshly in my opinion. That being said, it was easier to procrastinate and wing presentations since the bulk of a project would be based on what we created to present rather than how well we presented what that object was. I soon learned that was not the case when I entered the International Baccalaureate Program (IB).

This program stressed the importance of all subjects including learning a foreign language, but also the importance of being able to convey your thoughts from a simple piece of paper to an entire audience. My confidence when walking into this program was high; I thought that, of course, the classes would be a bit difficult, but I had done fine on past assignments and that nothing would be too hard if I prepared myself. I quickly learned that it was indeed going to be a tough four years. The one instance where I felt I had hit rock bottom with my confidence academically and mentally was during my sophomore year of English class. By this point, I had realized that oral presentations were a mandatory factor of the program; however, I had thought that maybe I could make my way through them the same way that I had done in the years prior. That was one of my first mistakes. I had been given an assignment to research a country of my choice, write an essay on my findings regarding the cultural, historical, and economic aspects, and to then prepare a short presentation to share with the class. The presentation only had to be roughly three minutes long since it was our first major presentation at the time; still, it was a daunting task. I had researched over the span of a week for details to use in my essay, I was

incredibly intrigued since I picked a country that I was not familiar with. I found that writing about the Ivory Coast came almost effortless given that everything I had found through research was brand new. I even found videos to watch of the various cultural dances and described the frilly costumes full of bright orange and yellow fabrics to include in my paper. Nevertheless, when it came time to present my findings, I stood at the front of the classroom with one sole notecard containing four bullet points. As soon as I opened my mouth to speak, I choked. My hands were shaking as I kept looking down at my notecard for guidance, only to draw up blanks. It was awkward; especially since I had only talked about where the Ivory Coast was located, and then quickly went over the types of dances performed within their culture. In that moment, I was struggling to realize where I went wrong in preparation. In hindsight, I had spent so much effort in perfecting the written portion of my paper, I barely took any time practicing on what to say for the actual presentation. In the end, I received a C for the project. The feeling of being at a loss of words and tripping over myself in front of my classmates was not new to me, but the feeling of disappointment not just from my teacher but also from myself made that feeling hurt a lot stronger. This moment was a crucial turning point in my life because I knew that there would be more presentations to come later into my years in IB, and that those presentations could last up to twenty minutes if the project called for it.

After this moment, I started to understand that my writing skills may have been good enough to suffice in the past, but my writing needs to amplify my voice, not cover up any insecurities that I may have when speaking. Today, I have used my writing experiences to support how I prepare for oral presentations. I break down many of my essays by their introduction and body paragraphs, and I try to organize my notecard in the same fashion. Simply having too many words on a card becomes confusing, but not including enough causes me to

stumble over my own thoughts when speaking. Even now, it can be hard to have the same tone in my writing as I do when giving a presentation, which can be because of many factors. Those being that I do not talk in the same fashion as I do when writing and that I code switch often in public spaces. An example of how my presentation skills have developed from my time in IB can be seen in my presentations that I have done throughout college. At William and Mary, I had an anthropology class that was heavily structured around oral presentations. To prepare, I followed the steps that I spoke about previously, and I studied various words that I could use to effectively convey my thoughts out loud like how I did on paper. I received a good grade on that assignment due to my preparation; however, in this moment, I feel that my struggles that I had in high school are the reason why I put as much effort into my presentations today.

Overall, my experience with public speaking has shown that it will always relate to my writing skills in the end. Not only did I learn how to organize my thoughts more efficiently due to my IB experiences, but I also learned, despite my fears, the beauty of speaking as a literary art.