

# Beyond the Fear of Public Speaking: Making the First Pop-Up Debate a Success for All Students

By [Dave Stuart Jr.](#)

***Note from Dave:** Inventing teaching strategies is like playing the lottery: you may have hunches about which will make the biggest impact or (as a writer and PD leader) which will gain the greatest traction with fellow teachers — yet, ultimately, **you have virtually no idea**. Pop-up debate, then, has probably been my winningest lottery ticket: over the past few years, incredible teachers around the USA and the world have used and improved upon it, and this school year I'm studying the pop-up method's effects on character through a national Character Lab [Teacher Innovator Grant](#). It continues to surprise me and make me grateful.*

Every school year, I have students who are **anxious to the point of nausea** about speaking in front of their peers. And, every school year, I have a student or two who goes through a transformation similar to Rebekah's. Let's take a look at her story: ([Click here for video.](#))

I'm not sure if Rebekah's newfound desire for a career in politics is something I should celebrate or mourn, but what I do know is that Rebekah is a zestier, more confident young woman, simply because she was given frequent

opportunities to practice speaking in front of her peers.

So: how do we move students from nausea-nervous to confidence? And how do we do that without dismissing the introverts in our classrooms? First, let's examine the fear of public speaking and why I believe it's worth combatting, and, second, let's look at exactly how I work to make the first pop-up debate a successful one.

## **I. Helping students tame the fear of public speaking**

I was the shy kid in high school. When The Big Speech Unit came up in my freshmen English class, I was sick to my stomach for days. Even today, I'm the last person you should expect to volunteer to speak in a staff meeting or to pipe up when a presenter asks, "Are there any questions?" I'm just not that guy.

(This is, perhaps counterintuitively, a big part of the reason that I started offering [speaking and workshop services](#) to begin with — if I am not facing my public speaking fears, it's difficult for me to expect my students to.)

In other words, I'm an introvert. I believe in the power of introversion. I've experienced firsthand how introversion can help you do things like build the blog you're reading right now. If I wasn't a nerd who enjoys large swaths of time in solitude, it would be way harder for me to sit and do the solitary work of writing.

## **So no, I'm no fan of the Extrovert Ideal**

As an introvert, I have no personal vendetta against introverts. I do not believe that my introversion, or that of my introverted students, has served me poorly in my life. I do not subscribe to what Susan Cain calls “the Extrovert Ideal.”

From Susan Cain's [\*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking\*](#):

*We live with a value system that I call the Extrovert Ideal — the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight. The archetypal extrovert prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt. He favors quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong. She works well in teams and socializes in groups. We like to think that we value individuality, but all too often we admire one type of individual—the kind who's comfortable “putting himself out there.” Sure, we allow technologically gifted loners who launch companies in garages to have any personality they please, but they are the exceptions, not the rule, and our tolerance extends mainly to those who get fabulously wealthy or hold the promise of doing so.*

And yet — and yet! — I cannot allow my introverted students to leave my class with the belief that public speaking fear is an unconquerable peak. In my experience, being an introvert certainly does not mean that one cannot speak in front of others — it just means that the prospect of doing so is scary and exhausting.

**But yes, I believe all**

## **students should be guided past a debilitating fear of public speaking [1]**

I don't know if it's possible for every person to completely rid themselves of a fear of public speaking. Last week in prior to speaking to a high school staff in Semmes, Alabama, my heart was racing uncontrollably as the principal introduced me; I still don't sleep great on the eve of an engagement. And this is after speaking at over 50 sessions and events in the past three years.

Yet I do teach every school year with the belief that it's possible for all of my students to get to a place where the fear no longer rules them. I believe that all of my kids, including the sick-to-their-stomach Rebekah's, can use a year of pop-ups to learn how to speak better in public (specifically) and how to overcome inner obstacles (more generally).

### **1. Speaking better in public**

Every year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers conducts a survey asking employers to answer questions about what skills they desire in college graduates. Toward the top of the list each year are verbal communication skills. [2] If I were to only students to engage in a pop-up debate once per semester, my kids wouldn't get to work much on public speaking skills because public speaking would still be this huge, special deal — not a normal thing.

Erik Palmer, author of [my favorite teaching speaking book](#), argues that the only method for helping kids get better at public speaking and, in particular,

poise (part of [PVLEGS](#)), they need to be given experience.

From Erik Palmer's [\*Well Spoken: Teaching Speaking to All Students\*](#):

*A key to developing poise is experience. The more they speak, the better students will be at leaving out the head flicking and shirt tugging [i.e., distracting, unconscious behaviors bred from nervousness].*

This first pop-up debate, as you'll see in Part II of this post, is all about getting over the debilitating nervousness; every pop-up debate or discussion after that will be about improving elements of our speaking game.

## **2. Overcoming inner obstacles**

Overcoming the fear of public speaking helps my students with much more than public speaking. Let's imagine that Rebekah completely changes her career aspirations; she no longer wants to be in politics, but instead wants to be [insert the most non-social job ever here]. Even if this happened, I would not consider a single second of Rebekah's pop-up experience in my classroom to have been wasted.

Why do I believe that all students deserve classrooms where public speaking is normalized? Because overcoming a powerful fear like public speaking teaches us that the things we fear don't kill us. After Rebekah stood up for the first time and spoke in a quavering voice with a flushed face, she sat down, watched and listened as others stood and spoke, and started to realize that the viscerality of the fear she felt before standing up didn't make it true.

Through frequent pop-ups, Rebekah and classmates like her learn that fear,

too often, is an internal construction, and that conquering it is likewise an internal, winnable game.

I believe this serves her no matter what career she chooses; I believe this will help my students build better marriages, families, careers, friendships, cities, and lives.

With all those things said, let's dive into the specifics for that first pop-up debate.

## **II. The first pop-up debate of the school year**

It's critical to note that my first pop-up debate doesn't happen until about three weeks into the school year. This is because, in order for every other pop-up debate of the year to work, I *need* as many kids as possible (read: all of them) to stand up and speak during Pop-Up Debate #1.

(In case you're curious, this year's first pop-up debate is scheduled to be: Which lifestyle is preferable — that of hunter-gatherers or that of modern Americans? We will have read and studied these topics during our initial unit in World History.)

### **Objectives of the first pop-up debate**

**Every student stands up and speaks.** For the Rebekah's in your classroom, this is a huge goal. Once this happens, you can begin to work on specific skill improvement — until this happens, all they can see and

experience is fear.

**Every student shares a claim.** It won't be students' first exposure to claim (that starts on [Day 1](#)), and it won't lead to a very exciting debate (or even a debate at all; imagine 30 students standing up, speaking a claim, and sitting down again — that is not a debate).

**Students honor the pop-up structure**, which is:

- Every student must speak at least 1 time, at most 2 times.
- To speak, simply stand up and speak. The first person to do so has the floor; when more than one person stands up, cordially and smoothly yield the floor. The teacher doesn't serve as "Who gets to speak" referee.
- For the sake of keeping the debate as lively as possible, the teacher may, at any point in the debate, call upon students who haven't spoken yet or open the floor up to all students, even those who have already maxed out their speaking turns.

## **Scaffolds for the first pop-up debate**

**Prior to the first pop-up debate, my students have three weeks of Think-Pair-Share** (which [I wrote about last week](#)). Randomized calling during the Share mode of Think-Pair-Share serves a crucial role: it teaches shy students that they don't die when their voice is heard by the whole class.

**To help students who don't know what to say, there's only one content requirement:** make a claim. Prior to the debate, all students write a full paragraph explaining their answer to the debate question, and they then

underline the claim sentence. All students are given the option at this point to read their claim directly from their paper.

**To help students organize their thinking, I provide sentence templates.** Many kids are afraid of public speaking because they don't want to sound dumb. Simple templates like those in Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* allow my students to package their ideas effectively.

## **Management tips for the first pop-up debate**

**No cross talk.** It's critical for our nervous students that pop-up debates are well-managed affairs — and this means that students only speak when they've stood and gained the floor.

**No winners.** I haven't experimented extensively here, but I've done enough tinkering over the years to know that A) when I select a winner, at least a few kids grumble their way out of class at the end of the period, whereas B) when I don't select a winner, most students are reliving great moments in the debate or arguing about who won. I like the outcomes of B) better, not because I think competition is evil, but because I want my students to do as much arguing as possible.

**Interrupt only a handful of times and only to point out great moves.** As the year progresses, interrupt with critiques. But for this debate, point out only positives, especially those positives that get at skills you hope all students will develop by the end of the year (e.g., paraphrasing, poise, beginning-middle-end, disagreeing agreeably).

**Call on students who don't stand up on their own.** Unless your kids are way different than mine, you'll get to the end of the debate, you'll look down at your clipboard, and you'll see that at least a few students haven't stood up yet. Give them a few seconds to do so, but then just call on them: not with disappointment or irritation, but just matter-of-factly. Don't make a big deal of it—you can even be looking at your clipboard as if it is entirely routine for this to happen. The key is, you need those hesitant kids to stand up and speak. Be creative and kind toward that end.

## **After the first pop-up debate: next steps**

Save a few minutes of class time for post-debate reflection. Students can respond, in writing or through Think-Pair-Share, to questions like these:

- What did we as a class do well in this debate?
- What could we do better next time?

Have volunteers share out some answers. This is a critical few moments because what you're trying to do is get the kids to lay out the next few weeks' speaking curriculum. Eventually, kids will say things like, "Well, it was kind of boring," and if you dig into that statement a bit further you'll have them coming up with great future mini-lesson topics like "How to avoid repeating what someone else has already said," and "What makes a boring speech versus an exciting one?"

### **Footnotes:**

1. When I say "all students," I'm obviously not referring to students who

are unable to speak in front of their peers due to medical issues, IEPs, 504 plans, etc.

2. In the 2015 Job Outlook survey, verbal communication skills were desired by 67 percent of respondents. ([Source](#))

*Thank you to [Jerry Graff](#) for sending me down the argument road, several years ago, and to [Erik Palmer](#) for making clear the simple power of normalizing public speaking in our classrooms.*