

FEAR BEGINS HERE

FEAR of THE
Talking
HEAD

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FEAR

Fear of the Talking Head

Anyone in the tech world has taken a class and experienced it—the talking head trainer. You know the one—they stay glued to their chair while showing you how to click here and enter there. As a trainer, it's a somewhat necessary evil that you face becoming (if you do any type of software training), and especially if there is any type of online or PowerPoint component. And as a student, it can be mind-numbing and has the impact of making students want to do anything to make it stop, from incessant email checking, texting their mothers, to head knocking holes in the walls of their cubicles.



This article covers situations and strategies to combat talking head syndrome. They don't totally solve the problem but they do help, provided you are proactive in looking for opportunities to try them out.

General Training Tips

1. **Up Your Energy Level.** Walk briskly around the building, or say something like a poem until you can say it 10x faster and then walk in or sign in and start your training. You'll notice that you sound better, happier, and more energetic.
2. **Smile.** When you smile, it makes your voice sound better.
3. **Get up out of your seat from time-to-time.** If you are online, no one will know but it will show in your voice. If you're in a class room, walk around the room and change where your voice is coming from so people will need to move to see and hear you.
4. **Have clear goals and objectives and check in with students to make sure you are on target.** Are you going too fast or too slow? Are you on track with your materials? If you aren't then you're losing students who are trying to figure out where you are and where they should be.



Live Instructor-Led Training

Whether you're in a class room, a large office, or some other large room, if you embed with your students and then talk through a situation on your own monitor, here are some things you can do to improve your image so students don't label you as a talking head:

1. Make sure you use a tool that allows you to share screens so people don't have to gather around you to see what you're doing. If people can't actually see what you are doing, your "training" session is pretty useless and people will check out quickly.
2. Stand up. If you are doing training, get up from your seat and get a podium, high table, or something that lets you separate yourself from everyone else so you can be seen and heard.
3. If you are sharing PowerPoint slides, walk around between slides. "Human beings are portable," my gym teacher used to say, so start moving. But whatever you do, don't turn your back on the class.
4. Make sure your voice can be heard at the back of the room. Sing out! If they can't hear you, they'll surely zone out.

5. **Wear something interesting.** I always try to find something colorful or asymmetrical to wear when I teach a class. It gives my students something to look at that is out of the ordinary.
6. **If you are teaching a class that includes online work, get up and check your students work.** Walk around and look at their screens. People love individual attention and the opportunity to ask private questions.
7. **Check everyone's progress before you move on to the next subject.** If someone has an issue outside the scope of where you're wanting to go, tell them you'll talk to them at the end of the class but make sure your class is with you.
8. **Ask students if you are going too fast or too slow.** They like having the opportunity to provide that kind of input. Most instructors forget to ask this simple question and it will show up when you get those student review sheets.
9. **If the class is a long one, give students a break every 1 ½ hours or so.** Even a stand up and shake it break is appreciated and sometimes those can lift the energy of the class.
10. **Create opportunities for the class to break up into small groups, teams, or partners and do some social work.** People like to be social and it lets them get to network or make new friends while in a class their company is probably forcing them to take. Just because they have to be there doesn't mean it can't have a little bit of fun while they're there.

I used to manage and audit the quality of courses for the largest tax software company in the US and we liked to see our students enjoying the class. If the instructor was a good one, the students liked them, learned more, and ultimately retained more of what they learned. The retention is the biggest issue employers have. Employers want to make sure the education they pay for is useful and students will more likely use it to the extent that it makes a difference in their performance if they like the instructor and the best instructors are confident, knowledgeable, and know how to make it fun while teaching.



Instructor-Led Online Training

Oh, it is sooo much cheaper to facilitate online training. That's why companies love it and are willing to put their employees through it even though they run the risk of boring employees to tears—because of its softer bottom line impact. But talk about talking head training—this type of training can be brutal to students, especially if the trainer has a voice that can be tonal in quality. While there isn't much we can do about what nature gives us, there are some things we can do to help make the experience a better one for students.

Some of these suggestions depend on the functionality of the online training tools you use. For instance, Adobe Connect is one tool that offers break out sessions so that people can break into small groups. It also offers great polling and other options that might not be as robust on the lower end tools. So, depending on your conference or training conferencing tool, take on any of these suggestions that you can:

- Provide as much interactivity as you can—by polling, using short quizzes, and asking questions that give your students the opportunity to provide feedback. If you only have chat capabilities, you can have students use it to answer questions. You're really only as limited as your imagination allows you to be.
- Provide comic relief and bring some fun to your classes – after an intense training session, I've been known to loop a funny cat video while people break and everyone comes back refreshed and in good humor, ready to tackle the next session. Just be careful of your video choices. You can't go wrong with funny cat or dog videos you can find on YouTube but stay away from political humor or anything that could be considered subjective. I also have these kinds of videos available in case of technical difficulties. They take the pressure off of you while waiting for a fix to happen.
- If you can't do breakout sessions, have people work on a problem (even while they are only connected by computer and phone) and then come back prepared to discuss their findings. This will cause a discussion on their results, and depending on how well you are at eliciting responses from people, this can get lively, and thus no longer boring. You lose your talking head label when you pull it off well.
- Bring in other types of media in your training. Just because you're conducting an online training, doesn't mean you're tied to the software interface or a PowerPoint. Bring in a video, an audio recording, or maybe even a special guest presenter who calls in from another location. It needs to be relevant but I've never either designed or trained an audience who didn't appreciate breaks in the action. That's what blended learning is all about!
- Take breaks! Make sure that you provide bio-breaks, coffee breaks, and others. They can be short, but give people a chance to get up and stretch their legs. You don't want to interrupt your training at a vital point but when you can, give the class a break!



Last Words

Who says training—even technical training—can't be fun while being educational. And who says that software or online training means that students have to endure a session of talking head teaching? If you are present to the impact you have on students and want to make a difference in your courses, following the advice above will make a huge difference in how you impact your students and likely in your trainer ratings.

You absolutely can shed the talking head image and become a sought-after trainer, public speaker, or any other kind of front person you desire. It just takes an intention, practice, some imagination, and a spirit of fun and adventure in learning.

If you still feel like you're stuck, ask to take a class on being a trainer. Many people get into the field of training without any training themselves and end up responsible for things they haven't been trained in. There are excellent courses and certification programs that can help make you a better trainer if you feel that tackling it on your own is too much to take on. The American Management Association has a Train the Trainer course, and there are other resources to get the confidence and skills you need to become a great trainer.

You can also take some classes on improv. Years ago, I met a speaker who was so comfortable in public speaking that I had to ask her what she did to get *that* comfortable. I wanted what she had. The answer: Improv classes. I went out and found the same teacher and ended up taking two 10-week courses. It made a huge difference in my confidence as a speaker as well as my approach to any kind of speaking or training. Not to mention that it was a lot of fun! Since then, I've met several others who've done the same thing. Those people always seem to stand out in terms of comfort in being in front of a large group of people. It won't take the place of subject knowledge, but it absolutely helps with any case of the nerves and will make you more popular and sought after. Have some fun with it. If you aren't having fun, you can guarantee that your class won't be having any fun either.

About Lin Laurie



Lin is an experienced trainer, instructional designer, motivational speaker, and Adobe Technical Training Partner who has years of experience speaking, training, and developing training. She's been a long-time member of the Society of Technical Communicators, where she often speaks on subjects of interest to a technical writing audience. She also teaches courses on gratitude to promote her book, *That Gratitude Attitude*, and does contract work in the Seattle area.

For more information, you can connect or learn more by clicking on the following links:

- Web site: www.linlaurie.com to learn about her latest articles, classes, or other endeavors
- www.ThatGratitudeAttitude.com is her web site related to gratitude work.
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