1. **Always give the audience something to take home.** Always provide something specific the audience can do almost immediately. No matter how inspiring your message, every audience appreciates learning a tangible way they can actually apply what they've learned to their own lives. Inspiration is great, but application is everything: Never be afraid to say, "Tonight, think of an employee who is really struggling--and then tomorrow, do (this) and (this) to try to rescue them."

2. **Don't defer answering questions.** If a question pops up in the middle of your presentation, that's awesome: Someone is listening! So seize the opportunity. If you would have addressed it in a later slide, skip ahead. (If you've practiced skipping around, it won't throw you.) The best presentations feel like conversations, even if one-sided, so never ignore the opportunity to foster that sense of interaction. Never do anything to disengage your audience.

3. **Ask a question you can't answer.** Asking questions to engage the audience often feels forced. Instead ask a question you know the audience can't answer and then say, "That's okay. I can't either." Explain why you can't and then talk about what you do know. Most speakers have all the answers. The fact that you don't--and are willing to admit it--not only humanizes you but makes the audience pay greater attention to what you do know.

4. **Fuel your mental engine.** Let's start with some preparation tips. Dopamine and epinephrine help regulate mental alertness. Both come from tyrosine, an amino acid found in proteins. So make sure to include protein in the meal you eat before you need to be at your best. And don't wait until the last minute: When you're really nervous, the last thing you may want to do is eat.

5. **Burn off a little cortisol.** Cortisol is secreted by your adrenal glands when you're anxious or stressed. High levels of cortisol limit your creativity and your ability to process complex information; when you're buzzed on cortisol, it's almost impossible to read and react to the room. The easiest way to burn off cortisol is to exercise. Work out before you leave for work, take a walk at lunch, or hit the gym before a speaking engagement. (If you've ever felt more grounded after slogging through a solid workout, you now know why.)

6. **Create two contingency plans.** If you're like me, "What if?" is your biggest source of anxiety: What if your PowerPoint presentation fails, someone constantly interrupts, or your opening falls flat? Pick two of your biggest fears and create contingency plans. What will you do if the projector fails? What will you do if the meeting runs long and you have only a few minutes to speak? The effort won't be wasted because the more you think through different scenarios, the better you can think on your feet if something truly unexpected occurs.
7. **Establish a pre-routine.** Superstitions are an attempt to "control" something we're afraid of. ( Lucky socks don't make an athlete perform better.) Instead of creating a superstition, create a routine that helps center you emotionally. Walk the room ahead of time to check sight lines. Check microphone levels. Run through your presentation at the site to ensure it's ready to go. Pick things to do that are actually beneficial and do them every time. You'll find comfort in the familiar--and confidence, too.

8. **Set a backup goal.** Say you’re speaking to a civic group on behalf of a charity and you realize your presentation is falling flat. In response people usually either try too hard or basically give up. If your primary goal is to land a contract and you can tell you won't succeed, shift to planting the seeds for another attempt down the road. If you see you won't get what you really want, what can you accomplish? Then, when the room doesn't go your way, you can stay positive, focused, and on top of your speaking game.

9. **Share a genuinely emotional story.** Now let's look at unusual ways to instantly improve your presentations. Many speakers tell self-deprecating stories, but simply admitting a mistake is a waste if you only use it to highlight how far you've come. Instead, tell a story and let your emotions show. If you were sad, say so. If you cried, say so. If you felt remorse, let it show. When you share genuine feelings you create an immediate and lasting connection with the audience. Emotion trumps speaking skills every time.

10. **Pause for 10 seconds.** Pause for two or three seconds and audiences assume you've lost your place; five seconds, they think the pause is intentional; after 10 seconds even the people texting can't help looking up. When you start speaking again, the audience naturally assumes the pause was intentional ... and that you're a confident and accomplished speaker. A poor speaker abhors a vacuum; only confident speakers are secure with silence. Take one long pause to gather your thoughts and the audience will automatically give you speaker bonus points.

11. **Share one thing no one knows.** I've never heard someone say, "I was at this presentation the other day and the guy's Gantt chart was amazing..." I have heard someone say, "Did you know when you blush the lining of your stomach also turns red?" Find a surprising fact or an unusual analogy that relates to your topic. Audiences love to cock their heads and think, "Really? Wow..."

12. **Benefit the audience instead of "selling."** Most assume they should capitalize on a speaking engagement to promote a product or service, win new clients, and build a wider network. Don't. Thinking in terms of sales only adds pressure to what is already a stressful situation. Put all your focus on ensuring that the audience will benefit from what you say; never try to accomplish more than one thing. When you help people make their professional or personal lives better, you've done all the selling you'll need to do.

13. **Don't make excuses.** Now let's look at a few things you should stop doing. Due to insecurity, many speakers open with an excuse: "I didn't get much time to prepare";" or, "I'm not very good at this." Excuses won't make your audience cut you any slack, but they will make people think, "Then why are you wasting my time?" Do what you need to do to ensure you don't need to make excuses.
14. **Don't do your prep onstage.** Don't wait until you're onstage to check your mic, your lighting, your remote, or your presentation. Do all that ahead of time. And if there are people running some of those functions, talk to them about what to do if something fails. And if something does fail, smile and try to look confident while you (or others) take care of the problem. When things go wrong, what really matters is how you react.

15. **Don't overload your slides.** Here's a simple rule of thumb: Make your font size double the average age of your audience. Roughly speaking, that means your fonts will be between 60 and 80 points. If you need to fit more words on a slide, that means you haven't tightened your message.

16. **Don't ever read your slides.** Your audience should be able to almost instantly scan your slides; if they have to actually read, you might lose them. And you'll definitely lose them if you read to them. Your slides should accentuate your points; they should never be the point.

17. **Focus on earning attention.** Now let's look at a few things to immediately start doing. Instead of playing the "turn off your mobile devices" game, because no one will (and you'll just look stodgy), focus on earning their complete attention. Make your presentation so interesting, so entertaining, and so inspiring that people can't help but pay attention. It's not the audience's job to listen; it's your job to make them want to listen.

18. **Always repeat audience questions.** Unless microphones are available, rarely will everyone in the audience hear questions other audience members ask. Always repeat the question and then answer it. It's not only courteous, but it also provides you with a little more time to think of an awesome way to answer each question.

19. **Always repeat yourself.** Your audience probably hears about half of what you say, and then they filter that through their own perspectives. So create a structure that allows you to repeat and reinforce key points. First explain a point, then give examples of how that point can be applied, and at the end provide the audience with action steps they can take based on that point. Since no one can remember everything you say, what you repeat has a much greater chance of being remembered—and being acted upon. So repeat away!

20. **Always, always run short.** If you have 30 minutes, take 25. If you have an hour, take 50. Always respect your audience's time and end early. As a bonus, that forces you to hone your presentation—and to prepare to shift gears if your presentation takes an unexpected turn. Finish early and ask if anyone has questions. Or invite them to see you after the presentation. But never run long—because all the goodwill you built up could be lost.