

A close-up of a black microphone with a silver mesh grille, angled upwards. The background is dark with several out-of-focus blue stage lights. The text 'FOUR WORDS to Conquer STAGE FRIGHT' is overlaid in the upper half.

# FOUR WORDS to Conquer **STAGE FRIGHT**

by Jennifer Mackerras

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## ARE ANY OF THESE ACTIVITIES A PART OF YOUR LIFE?

- acting
- public speaking
- singing
- playing music in public
- auditions
- presentations, pitches or speeches
- job interviews?

Have you ever struggled with fear or anxiety beforehand, maybe even to the point where it affected your performance?

I think most of us have had the experience of our nerves getting the better of us before a big interview, performance or presentation. And maybe that caused us to do less well than we'd hoped.

But for some people, those pre-performance nerves are not just an occasional nuisance. They can become a crippling fear that torpedoed our best intentions, destroys our confidence, and blights our love of performing.

How do I know?

## Because I was a stage fright sufferer.



Once upon a time, I was a promising recorder player. I was thinking about going to a music college and becoming a professional musician. But there was a major problem. I got so nervous before performing that it was practically crippling. And the more I performed, the worse it got.

So I took a step sideways into my other love, theatre. I found that even though I still got nervous, the fear seemed a little more controllable. After the first few agonising minutes onstage, I could relax and even start to enjoy myself.

My fear of performing music in public was something I just accepted as a given - until extreme symptoms of Repetitive Strain Injury in my arms prevented me playing altogether. When I started studying the Alexander Technique to help me deal with the pain in my arms, I found that it had a curious side benefit.

It started to help me cure my stage fright.

And now I want to share with you the key things that I have learned from the Alexander Technique that helped me cure my performance fears and anxieties.

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS GOING TO DO.

- Tell you what stage fright is - and what it isn't
- Explain the twisty thinking behind stage fright
- Outline four keywords that will help to overcome this twisty thinking
- Give you some key points and ideas on how to tackle it practically
- Suggest ways you can continue to study and improve your relationship with performing.

### A Case study in fear: the acting audition.

I asked my classes of acting students about the sorts of thoughts that they have before they do a big audition. This is the list they gave me.

- Fear of something unexpected happening
- Worry over other people being better
- Fear of failing
- Fear of making a mistake, or getting things wrong
- Fear of being insufficiently prepared

- Worried about forgetting words (or music)
- Fear of rejection
- Worry about not doing as well as in rehearsal
- Embarrassment
- Worry that 'butterflies' or shaky hands will ruin their performance
- Worry that past examples of 'failures' or mistakes will happen again.

Most of these things come down to feeling fear: fear of what might go wrong, fear of what other people might think, or fear that what has gone wrong in the past might go wrong again.

#### ***None of these things have even happened yet!***

Stage fright is a fear based in 'might' – the things that ***might*** happen. It's a form of twisted thinking. But with a little untwisting, we can start to untangle ourselves from its clutches.

# What Stage Fright Isn't

My acting students also mentioned worries around physical signs of nervousness:

- Butterflies in tummy
- Shaking knees or hands - or both
- Sweating
- Heart beating faster
- Slight dizziness
- Breathing faster

They worry that these symptoms are bad, abnormal, and will disrupt their performance. But is this really true?

## ***Physical sensations are normal***

Many people experience some physical sensations pre-performance. They are indications that we have adrenalin in our bloodstream. Adrenalin is the chemical that in primitive times sharpened our senses and sped up our reactions so that we could run away from deadly animals (or catch them for our tea!).

Once adrenalin helped us get through unusual and life-threatening situations. Now it is triggered in our systems when we give an after-dinner speech. The world has changed and become less

dangerous, but our danger-reaction system kicks in anyway.

We are conditioned to think that 'butterflies' are bad. So it is tempting to avoid situations where we might feel them. But this limits our horizons and stops us being effective.

A little nervousness is normal. But if we are feeling fear because our thinking is a little twisty, those physical sensations can be heightened. Or even more cunningly, we can allow our experience of the sensations to be so heightened that we can feel almost crippled by them.

The physical sensations by themselves aren't really the problem. The problem is our reaction to them. And that reaction depends on whether our thinking is straight or twisty.



# Stage fright as twisty thinking

FM Alexander believed that our physical actions and reactions are generated by our thoughts – he wrote of our “habits of mind, with their resultant habits of body.” We can also look on this as a simple physiologic truth: it is our thinking that organizes and controls our movement. So if our thinking is awry, then our actions and reactions are likely to be awry, too.

In my work with actors, musicians, performers, and people giving presentations and speeches, I have noticed that there are certain strands of twisty thinking that are fairly common.

They fit into four main categories.

- Thinking about the past/future instead of the present
- Lack of preparation
- Perfectionism
- Etiquette

***Let's look at each one in turn.***



*“at the back of my mind  
I could hear something –  
not exactly a voice,  
though more insistent than an echo –  
which reminded me over and over  
of what acting means,  
of the terror involved  
in letting yourself down  
and disappointing others.”*

*Ian Holm, actor and famed sufferer of stage fright.*

## LIVING IN THE PAST OR THE FUTURE.

Let's take another look at my students' list of fears when they go to auditions. This time I've colour-coded it. Take a look at the list, and try to work out why I've grouped the fears in this way.

- Fear of something unexpected happening
- Worry about other people being better
- Fear of failing
- Fear of making a mistake, or getting things wrong
- Worried about forgetting words (or music)
- Fear of rejection
- Worry about not doing as well as in rehearsal
- Embarrassment
- Worry that 'butterflies' or shaky hands will ruin their performance
- Fear of being insufficiently prepared
- Worry that past examples of 'failures' or mistakes will happen again.

Can you see the difference between the **blue list** and the **orange list**?

The **blue list** contains fears that are based in the past. My students here are worrying about things that have already happened: their preparation, mistakes that have happened, and failures that have already occurred.

The **orange list** contains fears that are future-based. They are all things that haven't happened yet: making a mistake, forgetting the words, other people being better. None of these things have happened yet. They are fears about what **might** happen.

Fear is typically based in the past and future. That is to say, we fear what **might** happen in the future, and we use events from our past to feed the fear and make it worse.

The difficulty is this: if our attention is focused on the past and/or the future, there is one place I can almost guarantee we are not putting our focus.

The present moment.

And if you are performing, the present moment is where you want to be.



## LACK OF PREPARATION.

This is often a major source of fear amongst my students. This is how it works:

- I didn't do enough (of the right kind of) preparation
- I know that I have not practiced enough and do not have the music/speech/whatever completely under my belt.
- So I worry about messing it up.
- Then I worry about messing it up - in public. 'What will they think of me?'

My head is now spinning so much that I have little or no chance of remembering my music/speech/whatever.

The twist in the thinking here occurs at the very first point – perceived lack of preparation. Only rarely are my students too lazy to do the practice. Often they are putting in many hours of work. But they aren't effective hours.

Nobody has taught them how to practice. So they either go about things the wrong way, or end up working on the wrong things. Then they get to their performance/audition/presentation and realize that they are insufficiently prepared. Or worse, they **fear** that they are insufficiently prepared, and worry so much that they aren't able to take best advantage of the work they have done.



Either we have done the work, or we haven't. If we haven't, then there is little point worrying about it. All we can do is get on and make best use of what preparation we did manage to do.

## PERFECTIONISM

I think many musicians in particular would admit to having a perfectionist streak. After all, a predisposition to paying attention to detail must be one of the defining attributes of every successful musician!

However, some of us (me included) struggle with an overly-developed perfectionist demon. We pressure ourselves to perform perfectly every time, even though we know that we're setting ourselves up for trouble and disappointment. That perfectionist demon becomes even more powerful once we're in front of an audience. How many of us secretly wish to give a flawless performance?

The problem is, of course, that the perfect performance is an impossibly high standard. No one can be perfect.

Let me say that again.

No one can be perfect.

If we set our minimum standard for a good performance as perfection, then we are always going to be disappointed. And perpetual disappointment is not going to do anything for our morale or our belief in ourselves.

***"However hard we work,  
however well we prepare, human  
beings cannot create perfection.  
It is right to try, wrong to feel  
disappointed when we fail.  
Perfection is not the  
human condition."  
Dame Janet Baker, mezzo-soprano.***

## ETIQUETTE

*“many people feel they are not getting their money’s worth unless the performer seems to be working a little to get his effects, even though that effort may defeat his aim. Therefore, we sometimes see a performer, who is not entirely free from the spirit of the showman - if he be a pianist, throw up his hands much higher than is necessary to get weight into his big chords; or, if he be a violinist, sway from side to side and make great play with his bow... Then the audience feels someone is really working for their entertainment, and go away exclaiming how wonderful it has been!” Dame Nellie Melba, soprano.*

It may seem odd, but there are two different sorts of performance etiquette that can afflict performers and prevent them from doing their best. The first is the sort that Dame Nellie Melba spoke of in the quote above: an audience expecting the performer to look as though they are working hard. This is damaging because it forces the performer to put in more effort than is absolutely necessary, and in directions that may not be helpful.

The other performance etiquette is rather more insidious, and tends to appear more often in amateur performance contexts such as school concerts or amateur dramatics.

In these sorts of performance situations, people expect performers, especially amateur performers, to display nervousness

prior to going on stage. It becomes good manners to oblige. By extension, it is bad manners to appear calm and confident!

We don’t need to conform to other people’s expectations. We do not need to be nervous. We do not need to do anything to make our job look harder than it is. We just need to perform.

# Four Words to Conquer Stage Fright

By now I hope that you will have started to realize that stage fright isn't inevitable, and it isn't incurable. To borrow FM Alexander's phrase, it is a habit of mind. And if it is a condition that is rooted in our thinking, then the key to defeating it lies in changing the way we think.

I want to share with you four concepts – the four Words - that I believe are the key to untwisting our thinking so that we can speak, sing, play or act with confidence.

## THE FOUR WORDS

- Goal
- Process
- Preparation
- Perspective

I am going to talk about each key Word in turn, and give you some tips and exercises that will help you to make the best use of each Word. My suggestion is that you find a notebook and make it your Four Words notebook. You can use it to write down your responses to my tips, and you'll be able to keep it and make use of it as you prepare to perform.

So... Got your notebook? Then let's begin!



***“Never merely ‘play through’ music but always have a concrete goal... Every time you play, have an assignment, an idea of what you want to accomplish that day.” Bart Spanhove, member of Flanders Recorder Quartet.***

## GOAL

This is the most important of the Four Words, and I want you to remember it. That’s why we are looking at it first.

You need to have a goal for each performance that you do.

Why is this important? Well, a goal functions a bit like a holiday destination. If you don’t know where you are going, you can’t choose the best route to get there. It’s exactly the same with performing. You will struggle to succeed if you don’t know what it is that you are hoping to achieve!

***“If you don’t know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.”***

Yogi Berra, Major League baseball player and manager

### Choosing a goal will:

- help you to know what you want to achieve
- give you clues about where to concentrate your attention as you prepare
- give you criteria so you can know when you have succeeded

So how do you choose a goal? Or more to the point, how do you make sure your goal is a useful one?

### Well, I suggest you make sure your goal is:

- **specific.** ‘To do really well’ is probably too vague. ‘To do well at the tricky fast passage’ would be better
- **measurable.** Again, ‘to do well at the tricky fast passage’ would be good. ‘To have people like me’ would not, because you can’t measure it accurately.
- **achievable.** ‘To play perfectly’ does not fit the bill! ‘To remember to look at the audience while I speak to them’ would be a better example.
- **contextual.** If you are going to do an audition at a particular stage school, for example, make sure you know what qualities they may be looking for at that school. If you are giving a sales pitch, make sure part of your goal revolves around targeting it to the buyers in front of you.

### Task

- **Make a goal for your next performance/speech,** and write it in your notebook. Decide what you want to achieve. Use the suggestions above to help you.

## PREPARATION

*"It took years of dedication and practice to reach the standards of accuracy and consistency that helped make me a world champion ... winners aren't made overnight." Steve Davis, snooker player, winner of 6 World Championships*

There is only one way to know something really well, and that is to do the preparation. We all hope and dream that there is some kind of shortcut, and that talented people don't need to do the long hours of study. Actually, they do. That's why they are so talented.

And doing the work is definitely a part of the Alexander Technique. Writing in 1911, FM Alexander said, "Fortunately for us, there is not a single one of these habits of mind, with their resultant habits of body, which may not be altered by the inculcation of those principles concerning the true poise of the body..."  
(*Man's Supreme Inheritance*, p.57)

FM's use of the word 'inculcation' is interesting. He wants us to fix an idea in our minds with constant repetition. Sounds a bit like practice to me!

Of course, it isn't just about the long hours of study. It's also about the quality of those hours. I know that if I practice for too long I become tired and ineffective. If I try to rush learning a

song, or a speech, or a complicated passage on my recorder, I limit my effectiveness. On the other hand, if I plan my time, if I take breaks, and if I remain patient and allow myself time to learn the music, I am more effective. And if I do these things, and take things slowly, then paradoxically I prepare better and faster.

### My tips for effective practice:

- **Do a bit each day.** Start with a very small amount, and then increase it gradually. Melba recommended singers start with just 10 minutes every day!
- **Keep doing it each day,** but also allow yourself time off.
- **Have an accountability partner** or group to keep you honest. Or at the very least, a diary with stickers that lead to a reward.

### Tasks

- **Create a practice diary in your notebook.** Decide how many times a week you will practice. Be realistic – allow yourself a day off periodically, and allow for your other commitments
- **Create a list of rewards.** This could be anything: a long bath with candles, or a movie, or a trip to the stationery store. You will give yourself a reward from this list every time you complete a week of practice.



*“When we come to know  
that certain actions produce certain results,  
and when we can, at will,  
perform those actions, uncertainty is removed,  
and uncertainty is at the root  
of most of our fears.*

*In singing, as in all else, the precept  
“Know thyself” is of the utmost importance.”  
Dame Nellie Melba, soprano.*

## PROCESS

Preparation is important – but what is it that we are going to do as we practice? What are we going to practice?

### FM Alexander's steps to creating a plan

When he was working to overcome the hoarseness that threatened to end his acting career, Alexander developed a protocol for planning how he was going to use his body most effectively to speak. With only minimal adaptation, we can use his protocol for planning our practice. Here it is:

**Step 0:** Have a goal

**Step 1:** Analyse the conditions present

**Step 2:** Select (reason out) a means, whereby the goal can be best achieved

**Step 3:** Project the directions necessary to put the means into effect.

### What does this mean in practice?

If you are working through the tasks I am giving you, then you have a goal to work towards. The next step is to analyse the current conditions. What things around you are relevant to your goal, either to help or hinder you?

Once you've looked at external and internal(mental/emotional) factors that may impact on your goal, you can start to construct a means (plan) to get you to your goal. But try something sneaky.

### *Work backwards and reverse engineer it.*

The reason why this works is that we are more likely to sidetrack ourselves if we start our plans from where we are now. If we work backwards from our ideal result, we are more likely to work out each step that leads back to where we are now. Just keep asking, 'what is the thing I need to do before x can happen?'

Finally, put into action the steps that you need to make your plan work.

### Task

- **Try using Alexander's protocol to construct a plan of action.** Don't worry about getting it perfect. The aim is to have something that can function as a starting point. If it end up needing tweaking halfway through, then that's okay!
- **Try to make you plan as detailed as possible.** When you know how many practice sessions you will have/need, try to make a goal for each one.

## PERSPECTIVE

We have our goal. We have done our preparation. We have followed a process in order to prepare. What, then, is left?

This is where Perspective enters the equation. Does it really matter if we make a mistake? Realistically, who is going to notice? And even if they do, will one or two little mistakes really outweigh all the good things about your performance? Of course not!

We need to allow ourselves the breathing space of a bit of perspective. Mistakes happen, and are actually more likely if we try to tighten our control of what we are playing to try and prevent them. If we relax and accept that our best is good enough, then good things will happen. We will enjoy ourselves more. The audience will enjoy it more. And I'm willing to bet that because we are not giving over part of our attention to unhelpful perfectionist thinking, our likelihood of mistake-free performance increases.

### Tasks:

- **What is the worst that can happen if we get it wrong?** No, seriously. Write down the worst thing that can happen if you make a mistake. Keep this note in a safe place.
- **Honestly examine your expectations of yourself.** Ask yourself whether you are setting your bar for success a little too high.
- **When you start to demand more of yourself than is reasonable,** look over your note to yourself about the worst that could happen if you make a small mistake. This will help you to regain your perspective and be easier on yourself.

***"Our concern is how well we have prepared ourselves to do the job, mentally, physically, spiritually. Only we can know this and even then, partially; all we can do is try our best at a particular moment, but it must be the best, nothing less. After that, the result is not our concern."***

***Dame Janet Baker***

# Conclusion – you can succeed

*“Be patient; stick to principle; and it will all open up like a great cauliflower.”*

*A.R. Alexander, AT teacher and F.M. Alexander’s brother*

I hope that, by reading this book, you will realize that fear of performing is entirely curable. It really is possible to enjoy performing and public speaking. You just need to be prepared to work at it.

If you do the tasks in this book, you will make a good start towards freeing yourself to enjoy playing and speaking in public.

Just remember that, just like preparing for a performance, changing your relationship with performance is a process. It requires work, practice, and a preparedness to put yourself out there in the world. You will need to keep finding places to perform in public, keep forming new goals and new plans.

And at times that may be tough. But I know that, if you stick to the process and the principles that lie behind the four Words, you will be doing work that leads to sustained improvement and increasing success.

You can do it.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

In this book I’ve given you the tools to get you started on the journey to free and confident performance. I hope that the tasks are useful, and that you receive benefit from them.

Feel free to contact me and let me know how you’re getting on. If you have a question, I’ll do my best to answer it. You might also find some useful information or free resources on my website to answer any queries you may have.

If you feel like you are ready to take your journey a stage further, I’d like to invite you to try some Alexander Technique coaching, either in person or via Skype. I have created a stage-fright-busting course that can be tailor-made to your circumstances, giving you the support you need to beat your nerves and perform with ease and grace.

**Click here to start your journey towards performance freedom:**

<http://www.activateyou.com/ConquerStageFright.htm>

Performing can be one of the most enjoyable and exhilarating things to do on the planet. Let’s get rid of our fear and start having fun!

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# About Jennifer

I am a singer, recorder player and a fanatical knitter. I've worked in professional theatre as a director and workshop leader, particularly with children. I first studied the Alexander Technique when repetitive strain injury stopped me from working and enjoying activities I loved. I couldn't use the computer, couldn't play recorder, couldn't knit, couldn't even cook. Life was pretty hard for a while.

I was astonished by the transformation the Technique was having on my entire life - and not just on my physical difficulties. So I decided to train to become a teacher and help others to make the same discoveries. I trained as a teacher of the Interactive Teaching Method with Don Weed ([www.alexandertechnique-itm.org](http://www.alexandertechnique-itm.org)). I'm a member of the ITM Teachers' Association, the Institute for Learning, and registered with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council. I'm also a member of Equity, the actors' union.

I've worked for Bristol City Council (Learning Communities Team), Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. I'm also the resident AT tutor at the Folk House in Bristol. My recorder quartet Pink Noise gives concerts and recitals in the Bristol area. And I'm knitting again - obsessively!







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