Glenn Murphy is an expert in explaining science concepts for kids, teenagers, and adults. After receiving his Masters in Science Communication from London's Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, Murphy managed the Explainer team at the Science Museum in London, England. This experience led to his first book, Why Is Snot Green? With the sequel, How Loud Can You Burp?, and several more books, Murphy continues to explain science topics with humor and energy.

**In the Spotlight**

*from Stuff That Scares Your Pants Off!*

Informational Text by Glenn Murphy

**SETTING A PURPOSE** As you read, focus on the science facts that explain why some people are afraid of speaking in public and how this fear may be overcome.

**THE FEAR** Some of us are fine with the idea of standing in front of huge crowds of people. But others would happily bungee off a 200-foot bridge, or dive into a shoal of circling sharks, rather than experience the sheer terror of facing an audience. Shoved out onstage, or to the front of a class, people like this will quite literally lose their voice. The mouth may open, but the words won't come out. They just stand there gaping like helpless goldfish pulled out of water, their weak limbs quaking with fear, feeling like they want to run, hide, or cry. If that sounds like you, then you are one of the world's many, many sufferers of glossophobia—the fear of speaking (or trying to speak) in public.
The Reality

Glossophobia is amazingly common—there are usually at least four or five kids in every grade who have it, and it's very common in adults too because you generally don’t “grow out” of glossophobia. It takes help or practice to get over it. This is because it’s basically a type of social phobia—a fear of being watched, judged, or sized up by other people (especially strangers, and especially large numbers of them).

So where does it come from, and what use is it? I mean, if fear of the dark, heights, and dangerous animals helped keep our ancestors from being ambushed, what good is a fear of speaking to people? Wouldn't being able to speak to big groups have helped those early humans to communicate? The ones who were best at it, you'd think, could become chiefs, kings, and emperors. If speaking is that useful, what is this fear trying to protect us from? Being booed and pelted with rotten vegetables if we do badly?

Well, the answer is—nothing, really. There’s no real danger involved in speaking to people. But the action of standing there and being watched can trigger a much older and more useful fear—the fear of being surrounded, threatened, and attacked by other people.

Throughout the animal world, and especially in primates (the group that includes humans, gorillas, and chimpanzees), staring at someone is a signal of fighting or aggression. Even when we chat with people we trust and like, we don't stare them down while we talk. Instead, we shift the focus of our eyes around the other person's face—from their eyes to their mouth and nose and back again—and we glance away every so often during the conversation. (If you don’t believe me, try it with a friend. Sit close to each other and just stare while you talk, without looking away, for one minute. You’ll probably find you both start to feel really uncomfortable very quickly!) All of this helps to break up the eye contact, and reassures each person that the other is still friendly. Without it, a long burst of eye contact feels like the buildup to a fight.

Now multiply that one staring pair of eyes by thirty, and you have some idea of why standing up to speak in front of a class can feel so unnerving. Multiply it by 500 or 1,000, and you see why it takes a lot of confidence to be onstage in a packed theater. Even though the audience is (probably)
friendly, the sensation is like being surrounded by an angry tribe, and all your brain wants to do is get you out of there. So that’s what it prepares you to do. The “fight-or-flight” system kicks in, making your heart rate increase, your breathing tight and rapid, your muscles tense, and your guts feel queasy¹ (as blood is directed away from them). The whole time you’re trying to speak or perform, your brain is saying, “OK—any minute now we make a run for it, right? Get ready . . . readyyy . . . readyyyyyyyyyyy . . . ”

For some people, this feels quite thrilling. But for glossophobics, it’s absolutely terrifying.

But if you think about it, there really is nothing to be afraid of this time. Unlike the fear of water, heights, and the dark, there’s no real danger present at all. Even if you speak or perform really badly, it’s not like the audience is going to kill you—the worst response you’ll get is silence, booing, or rotten fruit and veggies. None of these are pleasant, but none of them can actually harm you either.

Happily, this also makes glossophobia a perfect example of a fear you can beat with simple practice. Since there’s no real danger, it’s much easier to work up from speaking to one, to two, to ten, to thirty people. Believe it or not, you can go from stage-phobic to star performer in no time!

The Chances

The odds of being killed by a classroom or theater full of people just because you’re speaking to or performing for them? Zero. Unless you’re really, really bad . . .

No, really—it’s zero. Just kidding.

The Lowdown

The fear of being “in the spotlight” is extremely common and, to those who suffer from it, extremely powerful. But it’s also extremely easy to work through, given a bit of effort. Since there’s no real danger involved, it’s just a matter of convincing your brain that you don’t need the “fight-or-flight” system to kick in when you’re speaking or performing before people. How do you do that? Practice!

¹ queasy (kwē’zē): nauseated; sick to your stomach.
There are lots of ways of working through your fears and building your confidence before audiences. The most direct (and powerful) way is to join a school, church, or community speaking group, where you can be coached on how to give speeches. At first, you may practice alone or with one or two people. Then, as you get more confident, you can work up to larger and larger groups, until before you know it you're speaking to whole school assemblies, church congregations, or community groups! The best thing is that in many cases you get to talk about whatever you want, whether it's "Ten Ways to Make a Better World" or "My Love of Dinosaurs."

If that doesn't sound like any kind of fun, then you can get experience with speaking in front of audiences without speaking directly to them. In acting or debating clubs, you can practice talking to small groups of people while being watched by an audience, but without having to look straight at them. Plus the act of concentrating on your lines or on the argument will help distract you from the many watching eyes. When you get really good at it, you might even forget the audience is there!

And if you really can't imagine speaking in front of crowds at all, then you can work up to it (or at the very least gain a lot more confidence) by trying other types of performance instead. Ever wanted to dance? How about play guitar, or sing? Learning a performing art of any kind will help you get over your fears of an audience if you eventually take it to the stage.

So if you're one of the world's many perform-o-phobes, don't worry—the "treatment" for it may turn out to be the most fun you've ever had. The prescription looks like this: take a handful of guitar, acting, or dance lessons, rock a roomful of people with your mad new skills, and call me in the morning!

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** With a partner, discuss the facts and ideas that explain glossophobia and why it is a fear that people must work at overcoming.
Determine Central Idea

In informational text, the **central idea**, or **main idea**, is the most important idea that an author of a text wants you to know about the topic. You can look for the central idea of the entire text and you can look for the central idea in each paragraph.

The **topic sentence** of a paragraph states the paragraph’s central idea. In informational text, the topic sentence is often the first sentence in a paragraph. However, it may appear anywhere in the paragraph. Sometimes the central idea is not directly stated but implied, or suggested by details. To identify an **implied** central idea, you need to examine the details to determine what the writer intends.

To find the central idea, follow these steps:
- Identify the specific topic of each paragraph or section.
- Examine all the details the author includes.

Ask what idea or message the details convey about the topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated Central Idea</th>
<th>Implied Central Idea</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lines 87–97: Central idea at the beginning of a paragraph</td>
<td>Lines 48–61: Implied central idea People who have glossophobia when speaking in public experience increased heart rate, rapid breathing, and queasiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lines 13–19: Central idea at the end of a paragraph</td>
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Determine Details

**Supporting details** are words, phrases, or sentences that tell more about the central idea. Facts, opinions, examples, statistics, and anecdotes are all supporting details that writers may use depending on the type of writing.

- A **fact** is a statement that can be proved.
- An **opinion** is a statement that expresses a person's beliefs, feelings, or thoughts. An opinion cannot be proved.
- An **example** is a specific instance that helps to explain an idea, such as a personal story or experience.
- A **statistic** is a fact that is expressed in numbers.
- An **anecdote** is a short account of an interesting incident.

Reread lines 87–97. Ask yourself these questions:
- What is the central idea of this paragraph?
- What details, such as facts and examples, support the main idea?
Analyzing the Text

1. **Interpret** Reread lines 1–12. What words and phrases does the author use to create a vivid image of glossophobia? Explain why this description is important.

2. **Infer** What is the central idea of lines 20–33 in “In the Spotlight”? Explain why this is an important idea in the article.

3. **Draw Conclusions** Reread lines 34–47. Explain why the experiment the author proposes is valuable to the reader.

4. **Analyze** The author states that glossophobia is “...extremely easy to work through, given a bit of effort” (lines 80–82). What examples support this idea? List one fact and one opinion about this idea.

5. **Summarize** What is the central idea of “In the Spotlight”? Explain how each section of the article supports this central idea.

6. **Evaluate** The author uses an informal, humorous writing style. What examples in the text show this style? Tell why the author probably used this style here and how well you think it works.

**PERFORMANCE TASK**

**Writing Activity: Letter** Imagine that you are an advice columnist. Answer a letter from a reader who would like advice on how to cure glossophobia.

- **Review** “In the Spotlight” Identify the main ideas about curing glossophobia.
- **Decide** which suggestions you will advise the reader to use.
- Cite explicit evidence from “In the Spotlight” to support your suggestions.
- **Create** an alias, or a fake name, for the reader you are responding to.
- **Read** your letter aloud to a partner to see if it is clear and helpful.
Critical Vocabulary

ambush     aggression     confidence     distract

Practice and Apply Answer each question and explain your response.

1. Which situation is an example of an ambush?
   a. a person who is hiding suddenly jumps out
   b. a dog runs out from a yard to greet someone walking by

2. Which situation shows aggression?
   a. a friend gives you a pat on the back
   b. a dog growls at someone walking by

3. Which group shows confidence?
   a. a debate team that is eager to begin a contest
   b. a marching band that decides not to be in a parade

4. Which of these would be a way to distract someone?
   a. waiting quietly while the person talks to someone else
   b. waving at a person who is giving a speech

Vocabulary Strategy: Suffixes That Form Nouns

A suffix is a word part that appears at the end of a root or base word to form a new word. Some Latin suffixes, such as -ance, -ence, and -ant, can be added to verbs to form nouns. If you can recognize the verb that a suffix is attached to, you can often figure out the meaning of the noun formed from it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-ance, -ence</td>
<td>the act of, the condition of, the state of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ant</td>
<td>one that performs or causes an action</td>
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For example, -ence is added to confide to make confidence. One meaning of confide is “to tell in secret.” Confidence means “trust or the act of confiding.”

Practice and Apply Identify the verb in each underlined word. Use context clues to define the noun. Use a dictionary to confirm your definitions.

1. The performance was sold out in only one hour.
2. We celebrated my uncle’s emergence as a great writer.
3. Mrs. Lowenstein is the attorney for the defendant in the trial.
4. She won her case because an informant testified at the trial.