

How to Handle Hecklers

We have all had “that student,” the one who wants to take over lecture, to challenge every point you make, to shift the topic to one he wants to address instead, or to put on a show for his classmates. We need to be able to regain control of the situation and redirect his behavior appropriately.

And we need to do this in a professional and instructive manner. It was recommended to me to find out what professional stand-up comedians do for this, but I found their techniques use ridicule, insults, sarcasm, and even putting the heckler “on the spot” by inviting them on stage. I feel these methods would be detrimental to the classroom, especially since we see our “audience” more than once.

I found the best advice came from professional speakers. There are two types of heckling:

Active heckling is when an audience member interrupts and starts talking directly to you in the middle of your presentation. This is the worst kind.

Passive heckling is a more mild form of disrespect. This kind of heckling usually takes the form of someone having their own conversation with their neighbor or playing with their smartphone. Although less abrasive, it can throw you and your audience off.

(speakerhub heckler)

There are also four types of hecklers:

1) The Talker / Know it all

This is the eager beaver, the show-off. They are well informed and want everyone to know it.

2) The Griper

This person has been sent to your presentation and doesn't want to be there and they're going to take it out on you. They might think they know as much as you and will air their views or will stop listening altogether.

3) The Hassler

This person is insecure, aggressive and has a lack of interest in what you are presenting.

4) The Whisperer

This person either doesn't understand your presentation, or is bored or is being deliberately mischievous.

(thought leadership)

When someone interrupts, the first question you have to ask yourself is, “Is this person a heckler or not?” This is important, as we see here:

Someone who is asking a difficult question, especially when prompted to during a Q&A session, will come across as thoughtful, respectful, and intelligent: using logic and reasoning. While they might be disagreeing with you, this stems from their genuine desire to have a discussion as opposed to brawl.

On the other hand, a heckler will jump right into a rant. They will make things personal, and will be insulting. They will poke and prod at anything, from your slides to your clothing to your ideas.

Make sure you know which kind of individual you are dealing with, because if you mistakenly start to “deal” with someone who is just trying to open a dialogue, you can risk turning your audience off.

If you want them to accept your ideas, they will need to think that you are level headed, reasonable and intelligent, and if you freak out because someone questions you, you might lose some of your credibility, and your audience.

Once you are certain you are dealing with a heckler, it’s time to disarm them and get your presentation on back on track.

(speakerhub heckler)

Once you are sure you are dealing with a heckler, you have options on how to deal with him.

#1: Never reward interrupting.

What do you do if someone starts to talk over you? Keep talking.

It might take few seconds, but the majority of the audience will not notice, and ultimately, it will make the interrupter look like the rude party. Nine times out of ten, they will stop talking.

Once they stop talking, focus on the rest of the audience. Ostracise the interrupter for a few minutes by using body language to exclude them (such as avoiding eye contact for a few minutes); this *should* put a stop to future interruptions.

#2: Don’t try to be funny.

While you can still be light and pleasant, it is better to deal with the heckler directly, and get back on track as soon as possible.

#3: Manage your own emotional state.

In this kind of situation, most people will go into a reactionary mode. This can raise your stress levels, and make you defensive and aggressive.

The risk is that it will be difficult to shake this mindset once you are in it, and this can throw off your entire presentation, dashing your natural charisma and preventing you from thinking clearly.

Take a deep breath, and stay calm. Remove your emotional attachment to the situation and deal with it in a level and relaxed way.

If you can, try role-playing these situations with friends or colleagues. It can be very useful to train yourself to override your impulsive reactions and react consciously and calmly.

#4: Let the heckler have their say.

We mentioned that you should never allow someone to interrupt your session. While this will

weed out the majority of interrupters, sometimes you will get a persistent heckler, and it can be beneficial to hear them out.

They will continue to interrupt and heckle if they feel they were shut down, not getting a response may activate a deeper need to be heard.

Let them go on for a few minutes, maybe even just a little bit too long. Once they feel like they've been heard, they're less likely to interrupt again.

#5: Listen to them.

You can disarm the heckler by hearing them out, then calmly acknowledge them.

While you don't need to validate or agree with them, sometimes just being heard is enough to pacify the audience member.

You will seem more reasonable to the audience if you understand where someone is coming from. It can also help you determine whether you are dealing with a heckler or someone who is asking difficult questions.

#6: Actually respond.

Sometimes, it is necessary to respond to the comments. When you are responding, it's crucial to address the whole audience, not just the heckler.

Top tip: don't end your response by looking directly at the heckler. They will see this as an invitation to keep the going. Look at a person on the other side of the room as you conclude your response. Then jump directly back into your presentation.

If you are dealing with a heckler, and they start sounding off, becoming insulting, and can't back up what they say, this will become obvious to your audience.

#7: Don't let it get personal.

Your initial reaction might be to respond harshly back. If you believe that they have "*gone too far*" or attacked your integrity, you might be hell-bent on serving it back to them.

Don't.

If you take the bait, you'll fall into their trap.

The most common result from this tactic is that those who are listening may jump up and take sides with the individuals, instead of the ideas.

Focus entirely on what is being discussed, and avoid attacking them personally at all costs.

#8: Be gracious.

Be courteous, kind, and pleasant: even to the heckler.

Never lose your temper. Even if you feel like they have completely ruined your moment, and you are raging on the inside, if you lose control, you will not be able to get it back.

The best course of action is to maintain a level head, be polite and get your presentation back on track as quickly as possible.

#9: Ask them to stop.

If you've got a heckler who keeps on going (even after you've heard them out and calmly responded) make a firm request that they stop.

Here are some examples:

"I'm finding it difficult to progress with my presentation. Please could you hold any more comments until the end of the presentation?"

"I love it when audience members are active and participating, but I'd like to get back to my presentation, and would appreciate it if you'd let me do so."

"Interesting point. We can discuss this further after the presentation, thank you."

#10: Get the rest of the audience on your side.

Do not underestimate the power of the crowd. Social pressure can have a tremendous effect on a heckler's willingness to keep talking.

The audience has come to hear you speak, not the heckler. If they wanted to hear a comedian, they'd go to a stand-up show.

Use this to your advantage: ask the audience whether they would prefer to listen to you finish your presentation, or whether they want to hear more from the heckler.

There might be a second or two of awkward silence, but most of the time the audience will collectively say they'd prefer you to keep going. Sometimes you might even get a cheer as they will be just as fed up with the heckler as you are. In the extremely rare situation that they opt to hear more from the heckler, simply accept it and bow out graciously.

It takes an extremely brave (or foolish) person to carry on heckling against the whole crowd. Normally, the heckler will get embarrassed, and stay silent for the rest of the session.

#11: The last resort: have them removed.

In the most extreme cases none of the above will work, and you will be forced to make the tough decision to have the heckler removed from the audience.

Only ever do this if the heckler absolutely refuses to stop, and you are past the point of being able to control the situation.

Ask for security or the event organizer to escort the heckler out of the room.

#12: Don't dwell on it.

After you have effectively dealt with the heckler, it's time to get back on track.

Take a deep breath and put yourself back into the right mindframe. Remember: you are in control.

While you can reference the situation briefly, do not focus on it and absolutely avoid referencing it more than once. If you move on quickly and gracefully, your audience will come with you.

(speakerhub heckler)

There are some other good techniques, too:

Use reflective listening before you respond

Reflect back to the heckler what they said. This means expressing in your own words your understanding of what they've said. You may think that this technique looks transparent, but the heckler will most likely be totally oblivious – they will simply feel “you've listened to me”. Or if your understanding is wrong, they'll correct you and then you can have another attempt at reflecting back what they've said.

Once again, this is prevention. Responding thoroughly and fairly to the heckler the first time means it's more likely to be the only time they interrupt.

(speakingaboutpresenting)

Silence

Somewhat surprisingly the simplest solution is often the most effective. If you stop speaking and turn and stare at the heckler, everyone else will turn to see what you are looking at. In 95% of heckler cases this kind of social embarrassment is all that it takes to shut a heckler up.

(accidentalcommunicator)

If you get asked antagonistic questions, throw them back to the audience for discussion.

Getting the audience to answer the question does two things: first it allows the audience to throw out answers (and they might give the answer you are looking for) and second, it gives you time to think so that you can come up with the answer you need.

(thought leadership)

Avoid shooting them down prematurely.

Find out what exactly they're complaining or arguing for by asking probing questions. You can ask questions like, “What exactly are you trying to accomplish or point out?” or “How is your opinion on (topic) relevant to _____?”

If you listen closely, their answers will reveal why they're heckling you in the first place. Sometimes it's a grudge, sometimes it's a misplaced anger, other times it's just to vent. Whatever their reason, you'll be more prepared to address the problem once you know what's really happening.

(riklanresources)

Move toward the heckler

A questioner threatened to take the entire Q and A – and more. Now, I pride myself on listening respectfully and being able to incorporate just about any point of view into the dialogue, so my vanity prevented me from interrupting sooner. But eventually it became clear that interruption was essential, unless the building was just about to be set on fire, struck by a tsunami, or leveled with an earthquake.

As none of those outcomes seemed forthcoming, it was time for me to step up and act like the leader. And so I did the counter-intuitive thing, the move that the chatterbox never expects – I moved toward the person until I was standing next to him.

That made him turn slightly, so that he could keep an eye or two on me, and all that extra effort of shifting his attention meant that he had to shut up, at least temporarily.

And so I took that opportunity to leap in, verbally speaking, and take back the night, or at least the speech.

(public words)

Ignorance is not bliss

Ignoring hecklers just makes matters worse.

In most cases they will keep going and just get louder. Wishing them away is not going to work. The best thing to do is to speak very clearly and slowly and say that you've heard them. Say you'll speak with them after you've finished. But you are now going to continue on with your talk. And if they're standing up, then ask them to please sit down.

(linkedin hecklers)

It is always important to avoid asking the heckler questions when you can't really control the answers. You don't want to give the heckler opportunities to add to his heckling.