

Translating the Written Word into the Spoken Word

I. Speaking vs. Writing

Think about how most of us prepare to speak. We swim happily in the ocean of literary efforts that we're comfortable with because we've been educated and trained that way. But then, of course, we have to emerge on to dry land, where we'll be giving our presentation. And that's where we run into problems. Because all we have is a literary document: the polished notes or manuscript we've worked on so hard to help us speak with eloquence.

But now we are in the oral arena of public speaking—the most powerful venue for influencing listeners. The fundamental problem is that we probably don't *sound* the way we want to come across. That's because **writing and speaking are two distinctly different forms of communication**. They differ in their rhythms, use of language, and of most important, what can be absorbed in real time by the reader versus the listener.

To boil all of this down: ***you can't judge how anything will sound until you hear it yourself***. Try this simple experiment to hear what I mean: Choose a passage from today's newspaper, novel, or nonfiction: the form doesn't matter. Read the selection silently, "listening" in your head to the words you emphasize. Now read the same passage out loud. You will be surprised at how ***different words need to be emphasized for the meaning to come across when you're speaking vs. reading***.

That's why I suggest that once you know you'll be performing this material in public, **start with speaking rather than writing**. Marshall your ideas the same way you normally would and use one of the proven formats for organizing a speech. Then start trying different ways of ***speaking your ideas*** with phrasing, metaphors, imagery, length of sentences, etc., always keeping in mind how best to reach your audience.

When something sounds the way you want it to and you're likely to get the audience response you want, both intellectually and emotionally, then ***write it down***. By the time you finish this process, you'll have a speech that will almost always succeed in the oral arena. And, best of all, you'll save yourself the editing time you would otherwise need to make a literary document into an oral presentation.

II. Writing for the Ear

Your speech can be focused, clear, and concise and still lack vitality. Adopting figures of speech will keep your speech from sounding like an essay or legal document. When you speak, you add impact and beauty to your speech with rhetorical devices.

When you use these devices, your presentations will be more impactful (easier to remember) as well as more beautiful (more pleasurable to listen to).

1. Rhetorical Devices: Sound

Sound-based rhetorical devices add a poetic melody to speeches. Not surprisingly, the net effect is that speeches are more pleasurable to listen to. Three of the most common forms are:

- Alliteration — repetition of the same sound at the beginning of nearby words; e.g. “what my wife wanted”, “her husband has had”
- Assonance — repetition of the same vowel sound in nearby words; e.g. “how now brown cow”
- Onomatopoeia — a word which imitates the sound of itself; e.g. “buzz”, “whoosh”, “meow”

2. Rhetorical Devices: Repetition of Words or Ideas

Two common forms involve repetition in successive clauses or sentences.

- Anaphora — repetition of a word or phrase at the start of successive clauses or sentences; e.g. Winston Churchill: “We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, [... many more ...] We shall never surrender.”
- Epistrophe — repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive clauses or sentences; e.g. Emerson “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny compared to what lies within us.”
- Repetition is a powerful technique that is also used for emphasis. Repeating a word or phrase in different parts of the speech helps the audience make connections as if you were sewing your speech elements together with a thread.

3. Rhetorical Devices: Change Word Meanings

Three rhetorical devices by which words can take on new meanings are:

- Personification — giving human qualities to abstract ideas, inanimate objects, plants, or animals; e.g. “The trees called out to me”. Or my tag line: “*Your book doesn’t speak for itself. It needs you to be its voice.*”
- Metaphor — a comparison of two seemingly unlike things; e.g. “Life is a highway.”
- Simile — same as metaphor, but using either “like” or “as”; e.g. “Life is like a box of chocolates.”

If you would like some help creating more pleasure and interest for your listeners, let’s have a conversation!