

Do You Have Something Important To Say?

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There will come a time when you'll get an invitation to speak. You'll be flattered. Somebody feels that you have enough to say to hold an audience's attention for 30-40 minutes. And so in the flattery of the moment, you'll agree to do it. And then, sheer terror will begin to strike, raising all kinds of questions—"What will I talk about? How will I say it?" It's no wonder that in the book of lists, "speaking" is at the top of the list of things people fear most. It's above cancer, above death. People who anticipate public speaking often do so with dread. But most folks get that opportunity whether they want it or not. Some who are pastors get it every week; others get it once a year; and maybe some others, once in a lifetime. If you get that opportunity, you'll want to make the most of it.

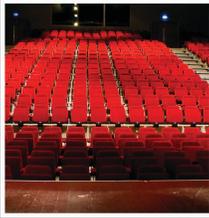
Now, what I'd like to talk with you about is a way of arranging your material so that the listener will receive it. There are all sorts of ways of arranging material, you know. If you've been in school, you know that you can arrange your material logically. You have an outline—you have Roman numerals, then "A" and "B," then "1" and "2" under the "A." That is an important thing to master.

A good outline gives you a flow of thought, a way of putting your ideas together. But what I'd like to do is to give you a psychological outline. Instead of concentrating on the content and putting it together, I'd like to give you a way of taking the content and relating it to your audience. In other words, when you get up to speak, how does that man sitting four seats in, in the seventh row, hear what you have to say?

If you could relate what you have to say to that person's way of thinking, then you have a much better chance of having an interesting talk and one that can make a difference in people's lives. So, what we'd like to talk about is speaking as listeners like it. We want to talk about how folks listen, as well as how you'll speak.

Psychological outline

Speaking
as listeners
like it



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Speaking speed: | Listening speed:



130-180
words per minute

Not covered by David Pridgen from the House/Photo/Unsplash


Up to 500
words per minute

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Attention
↓
Interest

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Now, before we get into it, let me lay a little bit of theory on you. If you begin to think about your task as a speaker, one of the things you have to do is to get and to hold people's attention. At the top level of what I want to talk about is "attention." Attention means that you get people to listen to you, and a good speaker will try to get and hold attention. In fact, there are some theorists in communication who argue that if you could hold people's attention, riveted on what you have to say for 30 or 40 minutes, then you could persuade that audience of almost anything.

Well, it's an interesting theory, but the difficulty is that it's very hard to test. How do you test riveting people's attention when most of us don't do that? Secondly, probably no speaker, even the most effective, can rivet people's attention for an entire 30 minutes. The person there in front of you, in the audience, can think about five times faster than you can speak. As a result, there is a lot of free time in there for the mind to wander.

But, certainly, at one level, you have to think about attention. But attention is fleeting. If you drive down the highway, the focus of your attention will change, probably 150-200 times in a minute. That's true for the folks who are there in your audience. They will listen, but it's very, very difficult for you as a speaker to just focus on people's attention. It goes away too quickly. But the first level, at least, is the level of attention.

But now there's a second level and that's the level of interest. That's a deeper level, and if you can speak to what people are interested in you've got a better chance of getting and holding their attention. Think of the speaker's situation for just a moment. You get up and people give you their attention. It's voluntary. But the trick is that you want to take voluntary attention and turn it into involuntary attention. That is, people listen because they should listen, but what you want to do is to get them to listen because they want to listen. The way you can do that is to talk about what interests the audience, because we tend to give our attention to what interests us.

For example, imagine two people making a trip around the United States. They cover essentially the same territory. One of the travelers is a geologist; he's interested in rocks. The other is a sociologist; he's interested in people and how they interact in groups. They get back home and they are showing their slides. The geologist will show you pictures of rock formations in Arizona, California, or the Pacific Northwest. The sociologist



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We give
Attention
to what we have
Interest
in, and we are most
interested in what we
Need

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will show you groups of people, how folks assemble in a small town, or what happens in the inner city of San Francisco. Because they are interested in different things, they give their attention to different things. That's true of all of us. We tend to give our attention to the things we are interested in.

So, the first level we have to be concerned about is the level of attention. The second level is the level of interest. We give our attention to what we are interested in. Now, let me go down to a third level, the most basic level. That is the level of need, because we are most interested in what we feel we need most. Let's see how it works. We give our attention to what we're interested in, and we are most interested in what we need. Therefore, when you feel you need something, you will listen. You will give it your full attention. You've seen that.

Suppose you go down to an art museum and you know, love, and appreciate art. You're strolling through the art museum, looking at the Picassos and the Rembrandts, and then suddenly you realize that you need to find a restroom. Interesting isn't it? The only picture you're interested in seeing in that museum at that point is one that has a "little man" or "little woman," because that need has come to dominate you. You're interested in what you need, and you give your attention to what you're most interested in. Therefore, if we can arrange our talk or our sermon in a way that touches people's needs, then we know we have their interest, and we have a better chance of getting and holding their attention. That's the theory behind what I'd like to talk with you about when we talk about speaking as listeners like.

All right then, how do we do this? How do we put together an outline that relates to the person in the audience and speaks in the way that an audience thinks? Well, imagine you're getting up to speak. You've been at a dinner and you're the featured speaker. Folks have had their food, then there have been announcements and there have been introductions, and about an hour and a half after the whole thing has begun you're going to be introduced to talk to this audience.

Let me tell you what's not going on. People are not sitting on the edges of their seats, eager to hear what you have to say. No! If you could survey that audience, by that time they're just a little bit bored, and they have a sneaking suspicion that you're going to make matters worse. If you were to survey that group, they would come up with a unanimous "Ho-hum." They aren't particularly

Stage 1: Ho-Hum

eager to hear what the speaker has to say.

Now, that is the first step; that is, you have to think of the “Ho-hum” stage. The question is, How do you overcome that? What you need to do is to overcome the “Ho-hum” with an interesting statement. The opening statement of your speech or your sermon or your talk ought to be an interesting statement. It ought to be a statement that goes after people’s attention.

I think you can sense that in the way you watch television. At our home we have cable TV. One of the cable TV stations shows old movies. I like to watch them because it takes me back to the long ago and far away of my youth. But the way those old movies started was that they would give you the title of the movie, then the major actors and the minor actors and actresses, then the names of the photographers. They would finally get to the producer and the director, and then the movie would begin.

You flip the channel and come up with a movie made today or a movie made for television. They start right off. In fact, they don’t even give you a chance to wonder what the title is. They superimpose the title over the action. They’re into it, and they hook you before they ever get to a commercial. Why? Because the people who put television together know that the folks watching the television set have a “clicker” in their hand. Unless you deliberately tune in to watch a particular program, you’ll go channel surfing. They know they’ve got about 15-20 seconds to hook you, and if they don’t, off you go with that instrument in your hand that enables you to look at 48 different channels.

Folks come to hear you speak, whether it’s in church or at a dinner, and they sit there with clickers in their hands. They don’t give you a lot of time to get their attention. In fact, there’s some evidence that folks make up their minds about you in the first 30 seconds that you get up to speak. They decide whether they like or dislike you, whether the talk is going to be interesting or boring, whether you’re going to be the kind of person that engages them, or whether they ought to tune out or tune in. You don’t have a lot of time. Therefore, if you’re going to overcome the “Ho-hum,” you want to get an interesting statement. The first 25-30 words that you give ought to be interesting words, words that make people sit up and listen.

For example, if you began by saying, “The man who sat next to me on United flight #407 to Los Angeles was an interesting man.



*They'll make up their minds about you **in the first 30 seconds of your speech.***

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I never got his name, and after our conversation I was glad that I didn't." Well, folks don't quite know where you're going with that, but it does have a way of getting their attention. Or, if you said, "According to statistics, over 50% of men are unfaithful to their wives sometime in their marriage, and I expect that some of you would help make that statistic a reality."

I don't know what you would want to do with that, but I know there will be a lot of women who sit up and listen, and a lot of men who will not tune you out because they want to hear what you have to say. The point is that the opening sentence is an important sentence. It doesn't have to be startling, but it does have to be interesting.

So, the "Ho-hum" is the first stage, and you overcome the "Ho-hum" with an interesting statement. Look at it this way. Imagine that you as a speaker are on one island and your audience is on another island and there is a gulf between you. On your island, you're aware of everything you want to say. You've done the research, you've worked on your talk, you've given hours to it, but the audience—they're on another island. So what you need to do when you begin is to light a fire on your island; do something to get the attention of your audience. The way you light a fire is by starting with an interesting statement. That's the first stage—"Ho-hum."

Let's suppose you have a good, interesting opening statement. What's the second thing that the audience asks? That man that we talked about out in the audience, a few seats in from the end, if you get his attention, the next question that comes to his mind is, "Why bring that up?" The way you answer that question is by surfacing a need. Think about those two islands I talked about just a moment ago. You're on your island, and hopefully with your opening sentence, you've lit a fire. Now what you want to do between those two islands is to build a bridge. To build a bridge between where your audience is and where you want them to be and what you want to do is to create a need.

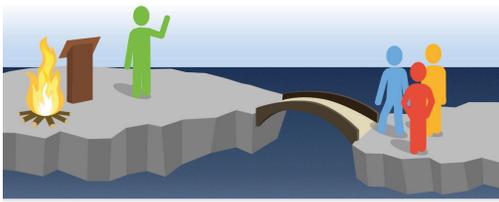
Sometimes when people think about speaking, if you ask them, "Where do you apply your talk?" the answer is often, "You do that at the end." But if you wait until the end of a talk to show people why this may be important to them, you will have lost the audience. You may all start out together, but that doesn't mean that you're all going to finish together. It's too late at the end of a talk to tell folks why this is important. So up front, right after



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...Right after you get their **attention** with an interesting statement, surface a **need**.



you get their attention with an interesting statement, surface a need—build a bridge between their world and your world.

A while ago, I had a luncheon with a man who is a vice president of a publishing firm in New York City. It was his task, he told me, to help evaluate the manuscripts that his firm was going to publish in the year to come. You can imagine that a publishing house gets a large number of manuscripts. So I said to this man, “How many book manuscripts do you, personally, evaluate in the course of the year?” And he said, “Well, I suppose 300-350.”

I said to him, “I read rather rapidly, but there is no way you can read 300-350 manuscripts in a year. I don’t see how you could do that.”

He said, “Well, the truth is that we don’t read them all. There’s a kind of a formula we follow. In the first paragraph, an author needs to grab an audience. If an author has gone through the first chapter and the whole thing is kind of a wide yawn, there really isn’t much hope that later on in the book it’s really going to become interesting. Now,” he said, “occasionally we make a misjudgment and somebody else picks up the book and it does pretty well, but as far as I’m concerned, that formula is good enough so that we measure our books against that.”

I thought, speeches aren’t as long as a book, but there’s some pretty good advice there, isn’t there? That is, what he is simply saying is that a good author, early in the book, tells you why you need what she has to say, and you are caught as a reader by the interest factor, the need factor that is woven into the book.

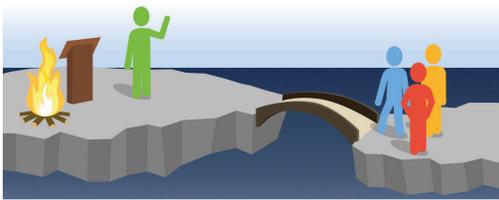
So, what you want to do is to surface a need. You answer the question, “Why bring this up?” You build a bridge between where you are and where the audience is. How would it work? Suppose a preacher began a sermon this way:

If you went to New York City, one of the things you’d want to see is the New York subway system. You ought to ride the subway before you leave the city. In the New York subways, there are advertisements on the wall, and one of the things you discover in New York is that there are a lot of budding artists. These are folks who love to work with graffiti.

On the 59th Street subway in New York a while ago, there was an ad. There were two people, a man and a woman, facing each other.

Stage 2: Why bring that up?

- Surface a need.



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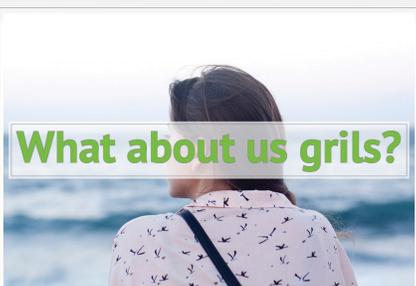
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What about us grils?



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Underneath, there was an ad for vodka. A graffiti artist came along and out of the mouth of the man, he drew a balloon, like a cartoon character, and in the balloon the man said, 'I like girls,' but he misspelled the word 'girls.' He spelled it g-r-i-l-s—'I like grils.' A little later, another graffiti artist came along and wrote next to that, 'It's girls, stupid! It's girls you like!' Then a while later, a third graffiti artist came along and commented on the previous comment, writing underneath that, 'Well, it's alright to like the girls, but what about us grils?' When you think about it, that's a question a lot of folks ask.

Here is a young woman who wants desperately to be married. She's attractive enough, has a pleasant personality, but somehow she has never met the right man—never met many wrong men either. All of her friends are married. She goes to their weddings, and according to the myth, if you catch the bouquet then you're the next person married. She knows it's a myth because she has caught her share of bouquets but is not married. Now when girlfriends have a shower, she just sends a gift. Sometimes at night, she says, 'Everybody loves the girls, but what about us grils?'

Here's a couple, married now eleven years. Before they were married, they talked about having children. He said he'd like two, and she said she'd like four. Eleven years have now passed, and they don't have any children though they desperately want a child. Again, this young woman goes to showers where friends of hers are having children—she has none. She reads statistics about abortion where unborns are murdered, where if they were able to come into life, they could be adopted by couples desperately wanting children. Mother's Day is a tough, tough time in church because it reminds this couple of everything they don't have. They lie in bed at night and hug each other with tears coming down their cheeks, and they say, 'Well, everybody loves the girls, but what about us grils?'

Here's a boy, fifteen years of age. He wants to play football to make the high school team. If desire could do it, he'd be on the first string. All summer, he has gone out and run and he's lifted weights, and now he goes for the tryout. A few days after the tryouts, a list is posted of who made the team. Three of his friends are on the team, but he hasn't made the team. He'll sit in the grandstand and cheer the others on. That's tough when you're fifteen years of age. Sometimes as he goes home, he says, 'Everybody loves the girls, but what about us grils?'



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Every one of us has been a ‘gril’ at some time or another. We feel that we have been losers in the battle, and we’re frustrated.

“If that’s your condition,” the preacher says, “I’d like to introduce you to a man in the Bible who I’m sure in the middle of his life, must have said, ‘Everybody loves the girls, but what about us grils?’ The story of that ‘gril’ is found in ...”

The question is, would you like to turn in the Bible to find out who that person is? If you do, then the preacher has succeeded in that second step, answering the question, Why bring that up? He’s built a bridge from where the audience is into his sermon.

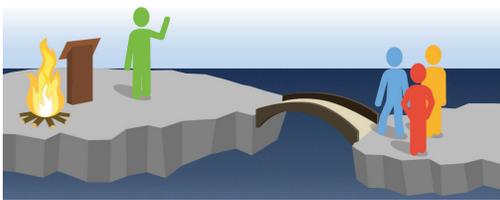
Those are the first two stages of a well-planned speech. “Ho-hum”: you have an interesting statement; and “Why bring that up?”: you build a bridge by surfacing a need.



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Stage 2: Why bring that up?

- Surface a need.



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