

What Are You Talking About?

I don't know anyone who ever started out wanting to be dull. I doubt that there has been a person in history who said, "When I get up to speak, I want to be the most boring, dull speaker this audience has ever heard." No! When you get up to speak, you would like to be interesting. You would like folks to listen. You would like to be helpful. Nobody deliberately tries to be dull. But somehow, all of us have a way of being dull from time to time. We discover that, even without any practice, dullness comes easily.

What we have been talking about is a way to try to overcome that by taking the material you have for a talk and putting it together, not just according to a logical outline, but according to a psychological outline. In other words, we are not simply going to look at the content; we are going to look at the listener. We want to speak as a listener likes it. We said that if you are going to have an interesting talk, that talk will go through stages. The first stage we call the "Ho-hum" stage. The kind of reaction of an audience when people get up to speak in which they are a little bit bored and think the speaker will make matters worse. What we do to overcome that boredom phase, that "Ho-hum" stage, is to begin with an interesting statement.

The second stage through which an audience goes, if you have gotten their attention, is to ask the question, "Well, why bring that up?" What you do in response to that is to surface a need. If you have been following this, you will remember the diagram. There are two islands: the island of your interest and the island of the audience's interest. According to the first stage, the "Ho-hum" stage, where you have an interesting statement, what you want to do is to light a fire and get their attention. In the second stage, you want to build a bridge, a bridge between the audience's interests and needs and what you're interested in as a speaker. That is where we've come thus far. But what is the third stage?

Stage 3: What is Your Big Idea?

In the third stage, the question that the audience comes up with is, "Alright, I am convinced I have a need. What is your big idea?" That is, "If I have a need, what are you going to do to satisfy it?"

If you can get the audience across that bridge to your island, then you have got to show them your treasure. Imagine that what you have to say is a treasure chest. What you do in response to the question, “What is your big idea?” is to state it. Tell them clearly what the major idea of your talk is all about. Now, that is an important principle in speaking. A good talk is the embodiment of a single, generative idea. A good talk is an idea expanded, or putting it another way, a talk can be shrunk down to its basic idea.

You need to know two things when you are coming up with an idea. One is, you have to answer the question, “What am I talking about?” That is the subject of your talk. This can never be a single word. You can’t talk on free enterprise. You can’t talk on forgiveness. You have to define it better than that.

There is a bit of doggerel: “I have six faithful men who taught me all I knew. What and where and when and why and how and who?” Now, you can usually define your subject, what you are talking about, by using one of those questions. You can use a what, a where, or when or why, how or who. When you look at the subject, and it is a broad subject like forgiveness, you can talk about what is forgiveness. You can talk about why we should forgive. You may talk about how we should forgive, but there will be one of those subjects that will dominate everything else you say.

So a good idea is made up of the subject, and the clearer you can be about that subject, the better your talk will be. And then after the subject, you have a statement that completes it, and the two together become your idea. For instance, if I say, “What this country needs,” that’s a subject, not a complete idea. The complement and the answer to this question, “What this country needs,” that is your idea. For example: “What this country needs is a good, five-cent cigar.” Or, “What this country needs is a good, five-cent cigar that only costs a dollar.” Or, “What this country needs is a religious revival.” Or “What this country needs is to change the people who are in office.” You see, all of those are the same subject, that is what you are talking about. But the complement completes the subject that makes up the idea.

Look at it another way. The subject you are talking about can be stated as a question: “What is the test of a person’s character?” The complement is the answer to that question: “What is the test of a person’s character? The test of a person’s character is what they would do if they were absolutely certain that they would never be found out.” Or, “What is the test of a person’s character?

The test of a person's character is like a test of an oak. How strong is she at the roots?" The question: "What is the test of a person's character?" The answer: "How they stand up to difficulties in their lives." It is the question and the answer, the subject and the complement, that give you the basic idea of what you are trying to get across. If you can take all of your content and express it in a single idea, then you will know what you are talking about, and there is a better chance that the audience will as well. It is hard to overemphasize that. Many people in putting together a talk get all caught up in the details, so the talk is like a brush pile. You are not really sure what it is all about.

Years ago, Calvin Coolidge, the President of the United States, went to church and, according to the story, when he came home, his wife said, "What did the preacher preach about?" He said, "Sin," and she said, "Well, what did he say about it?" He said, "Well, I think he was against it." Bad sermons are made up of a general subject like sin, not well defined, and you come away thinking, "Well, I guess he was against it." An audience is asking, "What is your big idea?" That is, what is it that you are going to bring that will meet the need you have raised in your introduction? You need to state it. You need to "think" yourself clear. What in the world am I really talking about? What is it that I want to say about that? Now you may say a couple of things about the subject. But the subject? You can only have one of them in a talk, sermon, or a lecture.

You may have: What is the test of a person's character? One of your points may be that the test of a person's character is how strong they are at the roots. Another test of a person's character is how they go through difficult times. You have one subject and you may have one, two, three complements. That is, three major points give the answer to your question.

Is that clear? I hope so, because there is probably no failure in talks greater than that the speaker really doesn't know what he is talking about. I mean, he has talked about a lot of things but he has never really nailed that down in his mind. I will tell you this: if it is a mist in the speaker's stand, it is an absolute fog in the audience. So, when people say, "What is your big idea?" they have a right to know the answer to two very simple questions: What is the speaker talking about?—the complete, direct answer to that question. And what is it that she, the speaker, is saying about what she is talking about? At some place, answer that. Answer it for yourself, and then, in your talk, answer it for your audience.

So, that is the third stage through which you go.

The first, the “Ho-hum” stage: You start with an interesting statement. The second: Well, why bring that up? Then you surface a need. The third is: What is your big idea? And you state the idea for them. First, you have two islands. In the first stage, you build the fire and get the attention. In the second, you build a bridge and get the audience from their island of interest over to your island. And here, when they come over, you expose them to your treasure. That is the idea of your talk or of your sermon. Now, let’s take that a step further.

Stage 4: For Instance

The fourth thing an audience asks as you are speaking is, “For instance?” What you want to do is to get down to specifics. That is, the audience has come over to your island and you have shown them your treasure chest. Now what you want to do is open that chest and show them in specific ways what is there. So the audience is always asking, “For instance?” and what you want to do is give them some specifics to back up what you are talking about.

Poor speakers, boring speakers, will usually say “in other words” rather than “for instance.” I mean, they confused you enough with the first batch of words that they gave you, but they are going to give you another batch of words to try to clear up what they were not clear about when they began. But the audience is saying, “for instance,” or “for example, show me what it is that you are talking about.” The best speakers know that what Walter Lipman said years ago is true. That is, people think with pictures in their heads. And the best speakers are always talking about the stuff of life. They are always giving examples so that the audience says, “Oh, I see what you mean.” That is why they are constantly saying, “for instance?” or “for example?”

Anything that you need to do in a talk, you can do with a “for instance” or “for example.” Whenever you are developing a point in your talk or the whole talk itself, there are only three things you ever really want to do. One is to explain what you are saying, or another is to prove what you are saying, or the third is to show the implications of what you are saying. Let me put that into three questions. Whenever you make a statement, there is only one of three things you can do with it. One thing you can do with

that statement is to answer the question, “What does that mean?” Another thing you could do with the statement is to answer the question, “Is that true? Do I really believe it?” The third thing you could do with the statement is to answer the question, “So what? What difference does it make?” Those three questions are the only things you can ever do with any statement that you make. You can explain it, you can prove it, and you can apply it.

Take something as mundane and commonplace as someone saying, “We are going to have some bad weather tomorrow.” One response to that, if you are interested in the statement at all, is to say, “What does that mean? What do you mean by bad weather?” In some parts of the country, they’ll say, “I understand, we’re going to have two feet of snow; it is going to be a blizzard.” Maybe in some other place, a person would say, “I understand the temperature is going to be 110 degrees tomorrow.”

What you are doing is simply explaining what you mean by bad weather. So you say, “It’s going to be bad weather tomorrow,” and I think I know what you mean. We’re going to have heavy snow. But I might say to you, “Is that true? How did you know that?” And you would say to me, “Well, I saw it on the weather channel. I noticed the forecast for tomorrow. We’re going to have a blizzard coming our way.”

Well, I know what you are talking about, and I think you are telling me the truth. I wondered why you were bringing it up now. And you might say, “Well, I am bringing it up because you might want to start for work earlier tomorrow. You may have to brush off your car and get the car warmed up before you start, or you may want to wear heavier clothes. After all, a blizzard can threaten you.”

The point is that whenever you make any statement, there is only one of three things you can do with it. You can explain it, you can prove it, or you can apply it. Illustrations, “for instances,” can be used to explain, to prove, to apply.

For instance, let’s suppose that you wanted to talk about theology. You may or may not be interested in theology. C. S. Lewis, the gifted Christian writer, was talking about theology, and he was really talking about why theology is needed. He wanted to explain that. He said there was a time when he was speaking to a group of soldiers in the Royal Air Force (RAF). These were men who were battle-hardened veterans. He said as he was talking about some point of Christian truth, an old RAF sergeant got up and said, “Oh,

I don't have time for all of this. I know there is a God. I felt Him out there alone at night, and all of this talk about God doesn't impress me."

C. S. Lewis said, "I can understand that man's problem. In a way, he was right. That is, his experience of God was more real than talking about God." Just as a person walking by the side of the ocean, feeling the spray of the ocean in his face and the smell of the salt water in his nostrils, feels the reality of that. If he goes up to his office and sees a map of the Atlantic, that walk by the seashore is far more real than the map sprawled out across his desk. So Lewis said, "Your experience of God is more real than the theology about God, just as a walk by the side of the ocean is more real than looking at a map on your desk. But if you want to go anyplace across the Atlantic, the map is absolutely essential. And so," Lewis said, "theology is like that map."

You see what he did? He explained a fairly abstract concept in terms of a walk by the ocean and a map sprawled across the desk. It was concrete. It was specific. He painted a picture, and he explained what he had to say. So one of the things you want to do with the points in your talk is to explain it in illustrations, in analogies. It can be very helpful in doing that. Another thing you want to do is answer that question, "Is that true? Do I really believe it?" One way we can win belief is by giving people an illustration, a "for instance."

Years ago, I read an article by Dorothy Sayers. Dorothy Sayers was a mystery writer from Britain, and she was also a committed follower of Jesus Christ. In one of her discussions, she talked about the moral law of God. What she meant by the moral law is that behind the universe there is a God and that the laws of God that govern our conduct are as immutable as the law of gravity. But then she said that a lot of folks feel that many of the laws of God could easily be changed. They are very arbitrary, like the entrance requirements for getting into a country club. So she went on to say there are really two kinds of laws: there is the law of the stop sign and the law of the fire.

The law of the stop sign. In a given community, there's a lot of traffic going up and down an avenue, and so the city council meets and they put up a stop sign. So you stop. And if you don't, the fine will be \$100. But there can be a lot of folks running that stop sign. Then the city council can come and raise the fee to \$200. On the other hand, a highway may come into the community and bypass

the town so the traffic pattern changes. The city council can meet and take down the stop sign. The stop sign is in their control. A lot of folks think the laws of God are like the laws of the stop sign.

But Dorothy Sayers said, “There is also the law of the fire. The law of the fire says that if you put your hand into fire, you will get burned.” Now she said, “Imagine that all of the nations of the world gathered, all of the delegates gathered in one huge conclave and all of the delegates to this convention voted unanimously that from here on out, fire would not burn. The first delegate to leave the assembly and put his hand in the fire will discover that there is a difference between the law of the fire and the law of the stop sign, because bound up in the nature of fire is the penalty for abusing it.” And Dorothy Sayers said, “The law of the fire is like the moral law of God. You don’t really break God’s laws.”

She said you just break yourself on them, and that even God Himself cannot cancel the penalty of the law of the fire without changing the nature of fire itself. I read that thirty-five years ago, but every time I think of the moral law of God, I think of the law of the stop sign and the law of the fire. What Dorothy Sayers had done was to give me a “for instance,” and I was able to respond to a very abstract concept and say, “Oh, I see what you mean.” Good speakers do that. The audience says, “for instance,” and you give them specifics. You get down to the things you have in your treasure. So, do you have it?

First stage: “Ho-hum”—you begin with an interesting statement. Second stage: “Why bring that up?”—what you do is surface a need. The third is, “What is your big idea?” And what you do is you tell them what you are talking about. You tell them the idea of your talk, and then, as you are developing that idea, you respond to the incessant demand of the audience—“for instance, for example”—and you get down to specifics. You help them to see what you are saying, and that makes for a very interesting talk.