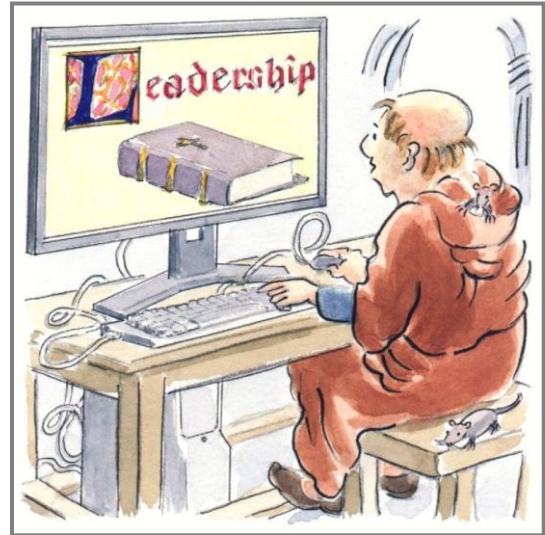


Speaking so that people listen

For all leaders and preachers

A19 Articles series: Leadership



This article was first published on the website in July 2008 and last updated in July 2024. It is copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Modern technology gives many public speakers the luxury of high-quality sound systems, data projector presentations, DVD clips, multi-media back-up and more. But when you have invested in all the kit, have found gifted operators and can make it all work seamlessly (not straightforward!), you come back to the key element of it all: the person up-front.

This article focuses on how to be a public speaker who enables an audience to become enthusiastic listeners. It has wide application, but is specially designed for any church leader who acts as a teacher or preacher, including livestream.

It is *not* concerned with the message to put across. It assumes you have something to say that others need to hear and that a sermon format or talk is the means you will use, although there are questions that can be asked about this. Nor does it deal with the crucially important issues (in the case of preaching) of theological content and the personal life and study of the speaker. This, instead, deals with the limited but specific topic of *technique* for effective communication in speech.

It never seeks to amaze this writer that those whose job it is to preach can go for years without training, support or effective feedback. Meanwhile those who have to listen to them gain little benefit if the form of delivery encourages them to switch off, even if the content is brilliant. What a waste of time and effort for everyone!

What follows is written in a way that would allow a group of speakers to give themselves a DIY training session. It is divided into four parts:

Connection - Structure - Colour - Distraction.

Read it with a couple of recent talks/sermons you have given in mind (with your notes if they exist), ready to analyse them. The article includes a number of exercises that assume you will do this. If you are speaking to camera, read also Training Notes TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips*, also on this website.

1: Connection

Before considering the delivery of the talk it is essential to consider the message to be put across in the context of those to whom it is to be given. Good speakers know what they want to say, discover as much as they can about their hearers, and have defined the kind of reaction they are seeking.

Consider any talk you have heard where the message or the application was not clear or where the needs of the hearers were ignored. From this, what points can you learn about how *not* to go about giving a talk?

Start by looking at what you want to say and to whom, how you will remind yourself of this during the talk, and what you want your audience to do as a result of hearing and understanding your message. Any speaker who has thought through these points is off to a promising start. Here are some ideas on each of these.

Be clear about the message

1 Write it out as a headline

Test: summarise the heart of all you want to say in one sentence. The point of this is to distinguish the message from its detail. Such definition clarifies your delivery and might also cut the length.

EXERCISE Provide such a one-sentence summary for a talk or presentation you have given recently. It may have had seven points, but its summary must be one.

2 Check it is worth saying

Now you have a single headline, ensure it is a message that is worth putting across: one that your audience need to hear, one that you are enthusiastic to give. If it does not pass these tests, cancel the talk, get someone else to do it or change the headline.

3 Choose how you will put it across

You need to understand what you want to say. But this does not necessarily mean that you have to state this headline all the time, or even at all.

Some of the gospel parables are good examples of messages without the headline being stated. But the speaker knew what he was trying to put across, even if the Twelve needed help to understand him.

Know your audience

Who are they? What are their needs? Yes, you think your talk will enthral every one of them, but reality may be rather different. So do a spot of research, even if in the mind, and use some imagination. Otherwise you run the risk of being disconnected, so putting people off. If you speak to this group on a regular basis, consider whether anything might be different from usual on this occasion.

1 Who are they?

Obvious question, but be prepared. What kind of people are they? What ages and backgrounds? Are children or teens present? What is their interest, or lack of it, in what you are saying? The same presentation may have to be changed for different audiences.

2 What is your relationship with them?

If you are a stranger, perhaps a visiting speaker, they are less likely to be warm to you at the start than if they know you well and respect you. On the other hand they may be much more intrigued than if they know you well and were bored by previous talks!

3 How will they be feeling when you speak?

This may depend on time of day, what they were doing beforehand, whether they came on their own initiative or not, the environment of the room, the comfort of the pews or chairs, and so on.

Unknown to you, they may bring all kinds of baggage with them: a difficult day at work, an argument at home, a recent bereavement, high expectations of you from what they have been told. See also a later point about distractions.

4 **Will they understand what you are saying?**

Speakers have to take the message they want to put across and code it up into words. The hearer then has to decode it. Things frequently go wrong at both these stages and this leads to misunderstanding. Are you using words they will understand correctly? Are your underlying assumptions different from theirs and, if so, what might this imply? Are you failing to explain abstract ideas in a way that makes sense?

EXERCISE Consider one recent talk you gave and answer the four questions above.

Use appropriate support

Some speakers can talk for an hour without a scrap of reminder in front of them. Others have a complete text.

Find what works for you, in the context of whether this is a sermon, Alpha talk, seminar, or party speech. If you do use a full script you have to learn to use it so that you neither spend the entire talk looking at it and so are separated from the audience, nor sound as though you are reading a prepared speech. Both of these outcomes can effectively kill the message.

If you have nothing, you need to be very confident that you have learnt it off well (or have a prompt system of some kind).

If you have headings and what you want to say in note form, make sure you can follow these but

have your eyes switching to the audience most of the time.

EXERCISE If working at this in a group, discover what each person does for different occasions and what they have learned from each of these.

Define the desired response

If your presentation, talk or sermon is going to be worthwhile, it is going to have an impact on its hearers. What are you praying this will be?

Try to define the desired response not in terms of mood but of action. So, it is good to know that you hope people will be challenged by what you have to say, but much better to aim that, as a result of being challenged, they go away and determine to change their lives in some way.

Similarly, it is good to hope that people will be better informed by your talk. But better informed for what purpose?

Whatever the response you hope for, make sure you believe in it yourself. You will communicate your conviction in the message, or lack of it, without realising it. Those who are clearly enthusiastic for what they are putting across (without putting on an act) will take their audience with them much more easily than speakers whose interest in the topic and enthusiasm for action appear to be lacking.

EXERCISE In the recent talk you are considering define what your desired response was/might have been if you had had one. Is there any way you can assess the outcome?

2: Structure

Most people understand the concept of structure when preparing written material: they are used to words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters. Sadly, many speakers think only of structure in terms of a number of points to make. There is more to it than this! It is all the more important because the structure is not visible on the page, as it is with print.

Group and break your words

Many speakers open their mouths and utter a continuous flow of words. But unless hearers can package them up into **groups** with **breaks** between them, see why one group is following another and understand how each group relates to others, they quickly become lost. They need to *hear* the structure.

We are used to this concept in print. Consider:

We find it easier to write each individual word with space so neither sides that we can identify each word one at a time without this and with no punctuation print is hard to read as this block makes clear.

In speech you need the equivalent of breaks and groups: words, sentences, paragraphs and

headings. Listeners cannot see them as they can in print, so the speaker has to draw special attention to them.

Here are some points about groups and breaks. In each case an example is given (from a variety of contexts). In a training session it is worth getting those present to suggest others.

1 **Sometimes announce the structure near the start**

“Three things about our giving shine through this passage: first it should be joyful, second it should be generous, and third it should be disciplined. Let’s look at each of these in turn and apply them to our lives today.”

2 **Emphasise the breaks with reminders of the structure**

“So, we have now seen why the Mission to Bungee Jumpers was set up and the four ways in which it operates today. Before I explain how we hope you will get involved, let me give you one example to show how our current existence hangs by a mere thread.”

A concluding summary can also be helpful. Some repetition is valuable, but don’t overdo it.

3 **Change the dynamic for the breaks**

“It would be good to have a chance to consider your reactions to that last point before we move on. Please get into groups of two or three just as you are sitting and tell the others in your group what surprised you most in what I have been saying.”

4 **Use pauses and markers for the breaks between groups**

The pause is the equivalent of the white space between paragraphs. Rather than rushing on to the next sentence, wait a second to create an audible space.

There are also marker words that help an audience see how the structure is working out. Consider:

- “first, second, third...” for numbered points to give a list;
- “therefore, because of that, hence...” for a reasoned argument;
- then, next, at that point...” for a chronological story.

Combining a pause with a marker word (and slight emphasis – see points about colour below) helps the hearer realise where you are and what to look out for next.

Keep the whole in view

Helping people *hear* the groups and the breaks is crucial. Without this your listeners get lost and switch off (unless you are a brilliantly engaging speaker). But while concentrating at this detailed level you cannot afford to lose sight of the whole. So:

1 **Keep it simple**

Your notes may show four primary points each divided into six all spelling out the name of the institution you are addressing, but people will quickly get lost. One point, made in several different ways with good illustrations, will be remembered. Your brilliantly constructed multi-point sermon needs a lecture hall and printed notes.

By the way, the value of forced alliterations as an aid to memory is hugely overestimated.

2 **Use PowerPoint or hand-out sheets for structure**

PowerPoint will never make up for a poor speaker and can be dreadfully dull itself now everyone is used to the idea. But it can be a useful means of emphasising a break. “On the screen now is the reminder of where we have got to so far before we move on to see the implications of all this for our lives today.”

3 **Get the opening and closing right**

Pay particular attention to how the talk starts and how it ends. You have just a few seconds at the beginning to attract people’s attention. Say something dull at this point and you will have a hard job to recover lost ground. End in mid-flow and people may be confused.

4 **Get the length right**

Hearers will also be put off if the talk goes on too long. A good speaker can hold an audience for, say, 30 minutes and no one realised it was more than 15. A poor speaker can take 15 and everyone thought it was at least 30.

Time your talks, and aim for people at the end to be disappointed you finished so soon, rather than bored because you went on too long.

It is always painful to see on the cutting room floor material you feel is so important. But your hearers may be glad you used the scissors.

There are however good reasons *against* over-structuring a talk. A highly organised speech can be particularly boring. Gifted speakers don't have to announce a structure at all. If you are not in this category, however, it is best to have

the structure mapped out, in your own mind at least.

Remember that stories have structure automatically built into them, which is part of the reason why they are easy to listen to. But even that can become tedious (hence the idea of flash-backs that you sometimes get in plays or films).

EXERCISE List the 'groups' and the 'breaks' in the talk under consideration, and show how the structure worked (perhaps using a diagram). How did you help people see where you were at various points?

3: Colour

You can 'colour' print not just in the obvious way, but by wise use of bold and italic fonts and through different sizes and layouts. Speech, though, offers a much greater array of possibilities because the human voice has so many different adjustments that the speaker can make to it.

Colour brings life to a talk. A highly structured sermon or speech can be colourless. Here are some key points to work through. Try to think up practical demonstrations of these.

Colour with your body

The speaker's body offers several means of providing interest and variety to any talk. Consider the following.

1 **Get close to people!**

If the speaker is shielded from the audience there cannot be the same rapport as when there is clear space between the two parties. Speaking from behind a solid table is not as good as behind a light, single-stem lectern. Having the lectern to one side is better provided you do not need to look at your notes too much. If you do, try to speak with a notebook or Bible balanced on the palm of one hand. Consider what a traditional church pulpit does here!

2 **Maintain eye contact**

The speaker needs to link with his or her audience in some way. Those who read a prepared text without looking up become disconnected from their hearers. The eyes need to move over the whole audience from time to time: side to side, front to back. Never threaten individual

people with your eyes, but do say 'hello' with them.

Common bad practices: staring at a script and never looking up (but also looking up and then losing the place!), staring right over people's heads at the wall beyond, staring at your own feet or the ground just in front of you.

3 **Use natural body movements**

Speakers who wave their arms around all the time or who pace around the floor can distract from the message (see part 4), but those who remain motionless quickly becomes talking heads.

Be yourself. Learn to let movement, especially of arms and hands, flow naturally. Try to have at least one arm free all the time.

4 **Vary the voice**

God has given us so many buttons we can push to change our voices. What matters is appropriate variety. Options include volume, speed, tone, pause, repeats, emphasis, emotion. Try to vary each of these to fit the moment.

A talk that is given at a constant speed, at the same volume throughout, or in one tone, rarely gets people connected with the message. It is hard work to listen to a talk like that. Slow down if you have an important point to make. Repeat it in a slightly different way. Change the tone of voice. Let people *hear* the emphasis or the bold print.

Novice speakers are often frightened of such variations, but this is an art to be learned. Listen to a gifted speaker and watch out for all these points.

The best changes are often quite slight, but a speaker should be providing colour and interest at every point simply by using all the controls that the human voice is blessed with. In a large arena, the variations need to be more obvious.

5 **Believe in what you say**

This point appeared in part 1, but it bears repeating here. If you do not believe in what you are saying, you can hardly blame the audience if they fail to get excited or take action as a result. This is not a technique to be switched on as you can with volume or speed. If you are naturally enthusiastic it will show.

One of the worst sins for a preacher is to make the Good News of Jesus dull.

Colour in other ways

1 **Choose illustrations with care**

Quotations from dead people are fine in an academic lecture, but rarely help much in a popular talk. Illustrations that are divorced from the experience of speaker and hearers are also unwise. People enjoy illustrations that are people-centred, topical, relevant to everyone present, possibly amusing. These can be very powerful provided they fit.

The best speakers take illustrations from their personal experience, the immediate surroundings or events that day or week. Those that start, "A little boy once said to his mother..." are best omitted!

All illustrations should bring a particular point in the talk to life by helping people identify with what is being said. Some of the best ones fail to tie everything up neatly and make the listener ponder (think of Jesus' parables for starters).

It should go without saying that you choose an illustration for the point you want to make, and not the other way round.

2 **Consider different means of communication**

Before you assume that a lecture-style is the only approach, consider alternatives.

Story telling is increasing in popularity and often grips an audience – allowing a simple point to be made at the end (or left in the air can be even more powerful). An interactive approach with the audience is a better means of learning than straight teaching. Humour, if natural, can help from time to time, but don't try to force it if it is not 'you'.

3 **Use background visuals carefully**

PowerPoint can be useful to list points in a more complex talk, or to provide background (such as the biblical verse you are speaking on) or visuals as support for what you are saying. But presentation software is often misused.

A good talk can be enhanced by its wise application but it cannot make up for a poor speaker. Make sure the text is large and clear enough for everyone to read, use special features sparingly, and give people time to read a new screen rather than talking on as it appears. Many talks are better without it so that people focus on the speaker.

Never, ever have your talk on slides and simply read each one out. This is a complete turn-off!

4 **Surprise people from time to time**

Nothing keeps an audience on the edge of their seats like a few twists in the argument, or a sudden surprise in the logic of the presentation. Many of Jesus' parables make quite shocking points. Over-exposure means that we are no longer surprised.

It helps if you can occasionally get to a point where people think they know what you are going to say next, but you say something different.

EXERCISE Get the group to analyse a recorded talk for all aspects of colour. This might be a talk given by one person present, or a commercial recording of a gifted speaker.

4: Distraction

But, even if the talk is well structured and full of colour, there are often powerful distractions at work to prevent clear communication. Some can be controlled, some have to be worked round. Speakers need to be aware of what can happen and be ready.

Four sources

The wise speaker expects distractions and prepares for them. There are four main sources.

1 You, the speaker

Most of us have mannerisms or strange characteristics that seek to speak louder than the words we are using. Do you know what yours are? Are they phrases you say or movements you make that others need to tell you about? How are you seeking to minimise them? If you are not sure, ask your family or friends to help you.

But the distraction may simply be the way you look: the inappropriate outfit you are wearing or one detail on it that isn't quite right. Anything out of place for the occasion or any aspect that is too bright can speak louder than your words. Check a mirror before the event and, again, ask friends who are not afraid to be honest with you.

It is no bad idea to watch a recording of a speaking event you have undertaken. Your own distractions are points you have the power to control.

2 They, the listeners

These may be outside your control. I have already mentioned something of the baggage that people may bring: tiredness, worries, concerns at whether they forgot to lock the car or put the joint in the oven for lunch, and so on.

Sometimes something may have happened nationally, locally or just to the group that is causing some feeling of despair. It is important to address that rather than to ignore it and hope it will go away.

You can however have some measure of control over points such as physical comfort. Is the room at a good temperature? Do you need to open some windows? If the chairs are not comfortable, would a one minute stand-up-and-stretch break be welcomed?

3 Third parties

There are many other distractions that you cannot always anticipate: people arriving late, a baby crying, a mobile going off, traffic visible outside the window, an insect circling the speaker's head. Again, these may be outside your control, but you can minimise some.

Sometimes it is worth pausing to let the fire engine go past. If you can, and without hurting anyone else, make a humorous remark. If necessary, repeat your last sentence or two to get everyone back on track.

4 Technology

This can let you down in a dramatic way. Typical problems include a radio mic battery giving up on you, a sound system that seems to be coming on and off, and feedback. Learn in advance how to use any mics in the best way and whether you or the operator will switch you on and off. If something goes wrong, it is worth pausing to see if it can be sorted rather than ploughing on regardless.

EXERCISE List distractions you are aware of in your own speaking and with others. It is worth knowing what can go wrong.

Learn from others

One of the best ways to overcome any distractions outside your control is simply to be more interesting than the distraction!

One exercise a group can carry out at another time but then discuss when they meet is to listen to a number of different speakers within a short space of time and list how to provide an attractive talk that overcomes problems.

At one conference I heard seven speakers in two days. In my estimation, three were brilliant, two were poor and two were dreadful. So what were the keys to success for the three? Each of them was quite different: one gave a fast and highly structured talk, the second was much slower and appeared to be speaking off the cuff, but I

suspect knew exactly what he was doing, and the third was off-beat and witty. My analysis for these three compared with the other four came down to these points:

- 1 They structured their presentations well, chose the right speeds and used pauses to break it all up.
- 2 They had messages that attracted listeners.
- 3 They took control of the situation – they felt confident in what they were saying.
- 4 They knew how to use visuals and humour effectively (but in different ways).
- 5 Two of them used handouts very effectively.

- 6 They took the Bible seriously, albeit with different approaches.
- 7 They appeared to be themselves – what you saw on stage seemed to be the same person you saw in private.

It is all very well talking about giving a talk, but any discussion or training session should allow time for people to rehearse something of what they have been considering. If you are a group of speakers, get everyone to do a five minute talk on, say, an appropriate Bible passage for that week. Then everyone analyses it under the kind of headings introduced in this article.

Don't forget to encourage the speaker by listing all their good points!

Once you start to think 'delivery' for yourself, you automatically watch the techniques used by others (which can be a distraction from their messages, of course!).

Don't try to ape others. God has made you as you are, and he can use you as you are. But, if you want to get your message across, be aware of how people respond to speakers. Everything in this article should be a matter of prayer. All of us who speak should aim to be lifelong learners in the art of getting a message across. That means being willing to be vulnerable and to review personally (listening to and/or watching a recording) or working together in a group seeking to help each other.

Above all, ask yourself:

- Am I connecting with my audience in different but effective ways?
- Is my structure clear so people can follow me?
- Am I appropriately colourful in the way I come across?
- Am I minimising any distractions that might get in the way?

Better still, get others to answer these questions with you, perhaps using the headings in this article as a means of doing this.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A19. See also Articles A49, *How to read the Bible out loud*, and A54, *How to get a message across*, plus Training Notes TN16, *Interviews in church services*, TN52, *The perils of PowerPoint*, TN56, *Questions for preachers*, TN82, *Print or screen*, TN93, *And now for the notices*, TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips* and TN145, *Illustrating what you say*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A19 under Leadership (with a link to Communication).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>