



# Illustrating what you say

**TN145** Training Notes series: Communication

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*Advice for preachers and speakers in church*

**Articles A19 and A54 on this website, respectively *Speaking so that people listen*, and, *How to get a message across*, describe how to ‘colour’ the spoken word when you are giving a talk of any kind.**

**You can do this by using different tones of voice, varying your body movements and eye contact. There are many variations that support the spoken word and give it interest or ‘colour’. See page 6 of A19 for more about this.**

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One other way you can do this is to use illustrations in some form. But what are the options and how do you go about using them? These notes explore the art of illustrating the spoken word. They expand the ideas about illustrations in Article A19. You can have a lot more fun in all-age talks in church, but here I assume an adult audience.

The Bible is full of examples of people who used various kinds of illustration in this way (and of course these were then written down). Nathan used story-telling to hit his message home to King David. Several Psalms tell the story of the Exodus to remind people of God’s faithfulness and love. Old Testament prophets took the illustration of the vine to warn Israel of what was happening. Hosea’s marriage to Gomer was an extreme teaching aid for the people. And, of course, we have the rich collection of Jesus’ parables.

An illustration is only the colouring of the picture. What matters is the message being put across. Illustrations serve messages – they must never dictate them.

So here are 12 possible ideas for how to illustrate a popular talk or sermon. If you want further ideas within more of a training context – see Article A10 on this website, *An introduction to the art of training*.

## 1 **Story telling**

There are stories and there are stories. Some sermons still seem to be peppered with the hack stories such as the one about the little boy who once .... Well, you get my point. Might it be that building up an index of stories is not to be recommended? But simple, relevant, imaginative story-telling, of a kind that grips the audience and carries a powerful punch, was used by Jesus as his main way of putting across truth about the kingdom of God. Note how his stories would have resonated with his audience: some about farming in a very rural community, others about life at work in the vineyards, or a valuable item being lost around the house, or a family problem when one son storms out of the home. These touched people's lives in a powerful way because they connected with their own experience. People love stories they can relate to.

## 2 **Living analogies**

Analogies from daily life might be thought of as static stories and are used throughout Scripture. The writer of Proverbs personifies wisdom to make his point. Paul uses Roman armour to illustrate a spiritual battle or a temple to an unknown God he has spotted. Jesus talks about light and darkness. But, as with stories, the illustration needs to come from the daily life of the listeners or the whole point is lost. So something from today's news is fine (there is power in being contemporary), or any example of recent history that people will remember well so they get the point. Talking about a popular TV series or book, provided most people will know about it, is possible, as will reference to current joys or sorrows that people are facing.

## 3 **Personal testimony**

There is a view that speakers should not use illustrations from their own life. Too much of this can indeed be mawkish and verge on the showing-off, but the occasional use of personal testimony or story can be powerful because it is real, it happened to the speaker. The women rush to tell the disciples about the empty tomb. Paul describes how Christ met him on the Damascus Road. Some of the best personal illustrations will come from the very recent past and that day if possible. What the speaker saw on the way to the event has the power of the immediate. But whatever, avoid stories about your spouse or family unless you have their willing permission. And in any personal story, make sure the one who is to blame for any error is yourself.

## 4 **Apt quotations**

Reading quotations from poets, writers or other speakers can have value provided it is not done too often. Better if they are from someone living whom listeners will be aware of. Yet again it can be powerful if it is someone the listeners know well. Quoting a media celebrity may resonate more than a quote from Calvin or a current academic – unless you are giving an academic seminar when valid authorisation is an essential requirement. You may need to explain who the writer is even then but make sure the quotation makes a telling point and is not something the speaker could have said in a similar form themselves. A related point is to use occasional statistics to explain the national scene. But, once again, they must illustrate the point you are seeking to make rather than defining it.

## 5 **Probing questions**

Jesus often asked questions, sometime in response to a question to him. He asked whose image it was on a Roman coin, or who people thought he was. Telling a Bible story but stopping at various points to ask what you might have done next in that situation can add personal involvement. Most of us rush to provide answers but good speakers know how to ask relevant, powerful questions that force listeners to take an active role in the communication process.

## 6 **Visible objects**

If Jesus used this method ("show me a coin") surely we can too, rather than leaving this just for all-age talks. The illustration of something physical can be visually powerful and provides a focus that the spoken words then wrap around. I once heard a powerful talk on Jesus as the light of the world where the speaker simply held a candle. Another on the fruit of the Spirit where the speaker peeled an orange with its (he hoped!) nine segments. Another speaker held a distorting mirror to contrast what we saw of ourselves and what God saw. The key for visual aids is simplicity. Once you complicate this means of getting your message across you lose its power. But something visible will be grasped and recalled more easily than something spoken.

## 7 **Supportive PowerPoint**

PowerPoint or its equivalents rarely makes a speaker more interesting and often has the opposite effect. But it can be useful for displaying major headings, Scripture verses (if people are not following in their Bibles or on their phones), an overall summary or visuals to illustrate what is being said. Best to use it for few words in a large font and never to put up words when saying something different. Text-heavy slides are usually a turn-off. As a low-tech alternative use a picture held in the hand or point to a feature in the building that everyone can see.

## 8 **Appropriate humour**

Humour can be a great way of holding people's attention, but only if you can do it well. It used to be the norm for a sermon to start with a joke. This often seemed no better than a cheap, and often cringe-worthy way, to make an impression with little link to the talk. Thank goodness those days seem to have passed. But dry humour can work well as can amusing stories or illustrations provided they are chosen for what they illustrate and not for a cheap laugh. I am sure the crowds in Jesus' day would have laughed at camels going through needle eyes, or at a family being woken up at midnight.

## 9 **Sudden surprise**

Several of Jesus' parables made quite shocking points for the crowds. We have become too used to hearing them to realise that the Good Samaritan or the Lost Son had shock value within them. So saying something that no one was expecting to follow next can be valuable, provided it enhances the point being made and is not put in just for effect. Another possibility is to misread a passage or to offer a clearly how-not-to illustration, provided they are explained for what they are. Or tell half a story at the outset of the talk or sermon and finish it off to make your point right at the end.

## 10 **Message application**

The application of biblical teaching to daily life might be considered a separate point to this piece on illustrations but is in fact all part of the genre. Several of Paul's epistles have a doctrine section followed by practical living out the doctrine. There is no essential need to have an 'application' section to a sermon right at the end. Some of the best sermons I have heard brought in a practical way of applying the passage verse by verse, seeking to identify with the audience in different ways.

## 11 **Group discussion**

If the audience is used to an interactive approach you can break a talk at one or two places with a question to be discussed in groups or for people to react to what has been said. This will not be appropriate in every setting, though. But what you use needs to be simple enough for a group of about three people to cover it in two or three minutes – or things will drag on for too long.

## 12 **Interactive quiz**

This means simply a group discussion in quiz format. You are asking people to discuss the answer(s) to one simple question to back up a point you are making in your talk. You can use these as an ice-breaker. For example, for a talk on the first verses of a Bible book, you might quote three or four first lines of famous novels or children's books to see if people can recognise them. Then link in with the idea of this is how this prophet or Gospel writer started their book. But you may want to raise a question (No. 5 above) for people to answer in a group setting. Never make them patronisingly easy or academically complex. Much depends on the setting as to whether this might be appropriate or not.

In a practical workshop or an all-age or young people's setting there are other possibilities to these twelve. In a lecture or seminar you will want to pick just a few of these as some are hardly appropriate in that setting. But each of the above can work well in a Sunday sermon, depending on your church's culture and what people are expecting.

Spoken words alone can be dull. Colour them with these ideas and then read Articles A19 and A54 for other ideas relating to the use of the human voice and body. But, remember. Illustrations are just a colouring of what is being taught or said. The message is what really matters.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN145. See also Articles A10, *An introduction to the art of training*, A19, *Speaking so that people listen*, and A54, *How to get a message across*, plus Training Notes TN56, *Questions for preachers*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training in or review of some aspect of church communication.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN145 under Communication.

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