Good Words

Speaking and Presenting

“Patrick Barry is a master of communication. That’s his superpower. And, being a great communicator, he can teach that superpower to you. That’s why this book matters.”

—PROFESSOR JOSHUA KLEINFELD,
Northwestern University
Pritzker School of Law

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Books

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Online Courses

“Good with Words: Speaking and Presenting” (Coursera)

“Good with Words: Writing and Editing” (Coursera)

Good with Words

Speaking and Presenting

Patrick Barry

Feedback from law students who took the class version of *Good with Words: Speaking and Presenting*

“Professor Barry is a true gem and gift to the Michigan Law community. His pedagogical approach to public speaking has changed how I approach class and interact with others. I feel very privileged to have taken his course.”

“Professor Barry is an *amazing* professor. He brought material from all different fields and areas—both in law and outside of law. He challenged us to think about sticky subjects from multiple perspectives without imposing his view. In this *Good with Words* course, Professor Barry certainly had a way with words! It was a great class.”

“This is one of the courses that makes Michigan Law so special!”

“Every day in a Professor Barry class is a little different, ranging from lectures, to videos, to small-group work, to demonstrations and simulations. One day, for example, we conducted mock interviews in which three students sat at the front of the room and were asked questions by the rest of the class. Going into an actual job interview after that exercise didn’t feel so intimidating. Another day, a federal judge came to our class, and students gave him a verbal breakdown of a real case pending before the court and made suggestions as to how he should rule, just as a real law clerk would do in chambers.”

“I really loved this course. I loved both the readings and the in-class discussions. I liked how Professor Barry included poignant examples of representing different kinds of clients and diverse ways of communicating.”

“I have learned a lot more than I ever thought I could through this course.”

“This class was rich in material, the discussions were very in-depth, and the assignments really made you work and see change—all in a very safe, inclusive, diverse environment. I couldn’t recommend this course more. I am definitely going to take more of Professor Barry’s courses next term.”

Feedback from graduate students who took the workshop version of *Good with Words: Speaking and Presenting*

“Filled with captivating stories and opportunities for self-reflection, these workshops are motivating and particularly timely given our upcoming graduation. Expect to walk away with tangible insights on how to be a more critical thinker and communicator.”

—MBA student

“It is not an exaggeration when I say that everybody was thoroughly engaged throughout the workshop and walked away with concrete examples of how to apply creative storytelling principles when pitching an idea.”

—Graduate student in public health

“Professor Barry is the secret weapon for those deathly afraid of public speaking.”

—Graduate student in nursing

“My presentation was elevated to the next level because of Professor Barry’s suggestions. I did well enough that one of the panelists ended up passing on my resume, which ultimately led to a job offer that I accepted today. Professor Barry’s workshop, even if it was just for a few hours, was instrumental in this process.”

—Graduate student in computer science

“Incredibly thoughtful, well-structured, and efficient. We look forward to debriefing on the material during our next professional practice seminar. In the meantime, we have a lot of valuable notes as takeaways from this session to stew over.”

—Graduate students in design

“It was so cool to have a professor from the law school—he was so engaging and had us think through *real* scenarios for recruiting, work, and beyond. Very thankful for these pop-up workshops and the practical, applicable advice. Great job!”

—MBA student

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For Ramzi: We have been speaking with each other, as best friends, since we were eleven years old. I don't plan on stopping anytime soon.

*Voices have a poetry that is
Unlike
Just
Meaning.*

—Dmae Roberts, “Finding the Poetry” (2010)

*What might you say if you knew
you would be able to say it well?*

—Written on the board during class at the
University of Michigan Law School,
February 13, 2019

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INTRODUCTION

HOLD PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

Our words, gestures, and exhibits in court mean something to the jurors, just as they do in ordinary speech. But to become better persuaders, we must deconstruct or dissect our presentations. To do this usefully, we need a taxonomy—words to describe what we are doing.

—Michael Tigar, *Persuasion: The Litigator's Art* (1999)

Good speakers and presenters do something magical, valuable, and rare: they hold our attention.

They take one of the world's most precious commodities—other people's interest and focus—and they grab it, sometimes for thirty seconds, sometimes for thirty minutes, sometimes for an entire morning, afternoon, or evening. They change our perspective. They spark our curiosity. They offer a new way to see the world.

Imagine if you had that ability. Imagine if you could walk into a room, start talking, and get people to listen. They'd stop looking at their phones. They wouldn't run through their mental to-do list. Instead, they'd begin to eagerly wait—not for you to finish but for you to tell them more.

The actress Carrie Coon, who was nominated for a Tony Award for her debut performance on Broadway, once described how empowering and transformative developing this skill can be. Recalling a speech she gave in her very first play—a student production of *Our Town* back in high school—she remembered feeling “a little bit of power in that moment. I felt the ability to capture people's attention, and I knew it was important.”

My hope is that this book will help you regularly have the experience Coon identifies. Maybe you're a teacher. Maybe you're a lawyer. Maybe you're a coach, doctor, consultant, parent, or entrepreneur. Whatever your profession or set of characteristics, chances are that your success at work and in many other domains depends on communicating important information out loud. We all have ideas that are worth sharing. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to do so in a way that others appreciate and remember?

Your stage doesn't have to be a theater, auditorium, or courtroom. Plenty of opportunities to connect with audiences big and small exist for each of us every day. They exist at the office. They exist at home. They exist anywhere in which the way you deliver a message can go poorly or well.

INTRODUCTION

* * *

The importance of speaking skills is nicely summed up in an observation often attributed to famed nineteenth-century lawyer and former secretary of state Daniel Webster, whose eloquent arguments in Congress and the Supreme Court earned him the distinction of being his generation's finest orator: "If all my talents and powers were to be taken from me by some inscrutable Providence, and I had my choice of keeping but one, I would unhesitatingly ask to be allowed to keep the Power of Speaking, for through it I would quickly recover all the rest."

Winston Churchill made a similar point in "The Scaffolding of Rhetoric," an essay he wrote soon after making his first political speech. "Of all the talents bestowed upon men," he declared in the essay's opening lines, "none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world."

Perhaps the most playful endorsement of speaking skills, however, comes from legendary investor Warren Buffett. While talking to a class of business students at Columbia University, he offered anyone in the room \$100,000 for 10% of their future earnings. He then said he would raise that amount to \$150,000 for anyone who developed the ability to speak clearly and compellingly out loud. "You can improve your value by 50%," he said, "just by learning communication skills—public speaking. If that's the case, see me after class and I'll pay you \$150,000."

I can't offer you that kind of money. Nor can I re-create the public speaking

course Buffett himself took, the one whose graduation certificate he proudly displayed in his office, after dropping out the first time he enrolled because he was too scared to participate.* “I was terrified of public speaking,” he told the journalist Alice Schroeder during interviews for her bestselling biography *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and the Business of Life*. “You can’t believe what I was like if I had to give a talk. I was so terrified that I just couldn’t do it. I would throw up. In fact, I arranged my life so that I never had to get up in front of anybody.”

What I can offer, however, is a collection of materials that I have used with students and professionals from a wide range of fields. Many of these materials were created for something called the “Problem Solving Initiative,” a multidisciplinary platform at the University of Michigan Law School that brings together students and faculty from a variety of departments—business, medicine, public policy, design, engineering, economics, sociology, and many more—to tackle complex, real-world challenges. One semester, a team developed a plan to fix the foster care system, while a different team worked on building an entrepreneurial ecosystem in neglected parts of Detroit. Another semester, the challenges ranged from regulating autonomous vehicles to creating affordable housing to training doctors and nurses to treat victims of human trafficking. (A full list of past projects can be found at <https://problemsolving.law.umich.edu/classes/>.)

My role mainly consisted of helping each team more persuasively pitch their ideas—to lawyers; to business executives; to politicians, deans, and philanthropists. I often encouraged people to think of their presentations as a product and to make them as user-friendly as possible. We even started to use the letters P-R-O-D-U-C-T to organize

* We’ll talk more about Buffett in chapter six.

INTRODUCTION

seven different elements of public speaking that seemed useful to focus on and fine-tune.

Poise
Rhythm
Optimism
Dynamic
Unexpected
Conversation
Tact

You'll notice that the chapters of this book follow a similar structure. Chapter one discusses "Poise." Chapter two discusses "Rhythm." Chapter three discusses "Optimism." And so on.

You'll also notice that each chapter includes a collection of "Speaking Stories," "Speaking Studies," and "Speaking Exercises." The Speaking Exercises are particularly important. Although I certainly hope that the concepts and techniques we'll be learning about will increase your verbal competence and confidence, you'll be at a real disadvantage if the only thing you do is read the material. You can't think your way to acquiring speaking skills. You have to develop them, often slowly, through a not-always-comfortable mix of practice, feedback, reflection, and adjustment. Preparation is key. Humility is key. And so is the capacity to productively fail. It can be tough to figure out how to hold people's attention if you don't learn from times you have bored or irritated them.

It can also be tough if you don't at least occasionally try something new. As Robert Kelley of the Carnegie Mellon Tepper School of Business points out, a pretty good question to ask when putting together a presentation is, "What is the most creative way (within the confines of the law) to lock in the audience I want to reach?"

Fidelity to what's familiar is unlikely to produce a compelling answer to that question. Creativity generally doesn't pal around with the status quo.

* * *

We'll return to Kelley's question in chapter five when we look at the part of the P-R-O-D-U-C-T framework that encourages you to consider adding something unexpected to your presentations. But I want to make clear that presentations aren't the only thing this book is designed to address. Soon after starting to work with the Problem Solving Initiative at Michigan, I created the semester-long course from which this book gets its title. The course wasn't called "Good with Words: Presenting." It was called, as this book is, "Good with Words: Speaking and Presenting."

That's because speaking skills are important in all kinds of settings. They're important when you're networking. They're important when you're team building. And they're certainly important when you're giving and receiving feedback.

So try applying the tips and techniques you learn in the following chapters to a wide variety of situations—formal, informal, planned, improvised, large, intimate. They were designed with a broad range of interactions in mind.

ONE

Poise

Occasionally at the end of a sentence he would suddenly stop, for what seemed like a long time, and, with his eyes uplifted upon his audience, looking like one inspired. Everyone in the audience seemed to stop breathing, as if afraid to mar the solemn impression produced.

—Local newspaper account of the speaking style of Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy* (1881)

Poise can be planned. It may seem like an elusively innate characteristic, something reserved only for those lucky few who seem to have been blessed with a fully functioning—and quite rhythmic—internal teleprompter. Barack Obama comes to mind. So do Ronald Reagan, Oprah Winfrey, and United States Supreme Court Justice John Roberts.

Yet none of these figures was born an orator. Each practiced, messed up, and then practiced some more. Their experiences help highlight how there are aspects of poise that can be learned—by lawyers, by teachers, by anyone who has to consistently and effectively articulate their ideas out loud.

A key step involves deliberately building in pauses whenever you present. Communications consultant and two-time Emmy Award-winner Bill McGowan makes this point well in his 2016 book *Pitch Perfect*, where he collects speaking advice he has used to help sharpen the presentation skills of everyone from executives at Facebook, to quarterbacks in the NFL, to the jazz legend Wynton Marsalis. “The more quickly we talk,” McGowan explains, “the more likely we are to put people to sleep, sacrifice our credibility, or worst of all, accidentally say something we’ll regret.”

He therefore recommends that we treat speaking fast as “a high-risk proposition” and recognize that it is “nearly impossible to maintain the ideal conditions to be persuasive, articulate, and effective when [your] mouth is traveling well over the speed limit.”

One tactic is to speak as if your ideas were punctuated by verbal periods, given that run-on sentences can be just as difficult to listen to as they are to read. A thought that never ends is a thought that never persuades. Impatience sets in. Confusion rises. Comprehension plummets. Concision and separation are much better options.

So slow down. Break up your sentences into smaller, more audience-friendly parts. And try, as much as you can, to embrace the virtue of clarity.

A. The Virtue of Clarity

The phrase “the virtue of clarity” comes from a compliment the Australian writer Clive James paid one of his literary heroes: the American novelist and essayist Edmund Wilson. Wilson’s “great virtue was clarity,” according to James, by which he meant that Wilson

had the restraint and wisdom to space out his ideas. Wilson didn't overpack his thoughts. He didn't insist on saying everything at once. Instead, he demonstrated a wonderful combination of discipline and courtesy. Before he started a second point, he completely finished the first.

We should all follow Wilson's model—not only when writing but also when speaking, and particularly when speaking about material that is unusually dense or sensitive. Few audiences like a motormouth.

And although psychologists at the University of Southern California have found that there are certain situations in which talking fast can function as a credibility cue—the faster you talk, their study found, the more persuasive and intelligent people sometimes think you are—it can also make you seem nervous and unsure of yourself, especially in front of a large group. If you rush through what you have to say, you don't exactly project a sense of calm and control. You don't put people at ease. Quite the opposite: you create the impression that you don't want to be there.

That's not really the best way to compel your audience to stick around and pay attention. It's rarely fun to listen to someone when you know they want to flee.

B. Being in Public

Another way to think about this dynamic is to remember that speaking in public involves actually *being in public*. To excel at it, you need to be comfortable with how you present yourself to the eyes, ears, and judgments of other people, many of whom will be complete strangers. It is a test of your interpersonal skills on a very grand scale.

Eye contact is a must. Smiling (at the right time) is a must.* And so is conveying a careful mix of competence and warmth. You want to come across as authoritative while at the same time communicating

* There will be more advice on smiling in chapter three.

that you are approachable. You want to be seen as convincing but also open-minded—a credible source of information but also a friendly conversationalist. In short, try to gain your audience’s trust in two ways. First, gain their trust intellectually, with your content. Second, gain their trust emotionally, with your demeanor.

In order to achieve both of these goals, pauses are going to be very important. It’s hard to trust someone whose words fly by too quickly for you to understand them. *Hasty* is not a synonym for *trustworthy*. Nor is *frazzled* or *manic*.

People who rush are people who signal that they wish the whole experience would be over as soon as possible. That’s not a good message to send.

C. Charisma

As effective as pausing is, it can be difficult to remember to do. So consider creating a few external cues. Regardless of what you’re presenting about—it could be constitutional law, it could be astrophysics, it could be last quarter’s earnings report—write out the word *PAUSE* in the notes you bring with you, or at least the ones you use to prepare.

Don’t just write it once. If you are working with sheets of paper, write it between every paragraph, as well as between many of your key sentences and phrases. If you are working with note cards, write it on the bottom of all of them. Pump the brakes as you transition between each point.

These steps may seem excessive, but when it comes to preparing to be poised, you don’t want to skimp. The word *PAUSE* shouldn’t appear in tiny, lowercase letters. It should appear in big, bold, capitalized letters. It should be a billboard for your brain.

The same goes for another word: *BREATHE*.

If you don’t breathe during your presentation—if you forget to create a place for some much-needed oxygen—you’ll have a hard time finishing your remarks with the energy and enthusiasm you’ll need to

POISE

keep your audience engaged. You'll also miss out on the ultimate test when it comes to speaking: seeing if people pay attention even when you aren't saying anything.

We often talk about charisma as if it is the ability to have people “hang on your every word.” But perhaps a more powerful incarnation of it involves the ability to have people hang on your every pause, to perform in a way that your silences are as effective as your sentences. Poise isn't the province of the prolix. It is not something you achieve by piling on more and more information at an ever-increasing rate. Instead, it's a kind of practiced grace, something you find by removing excess, by slowing down, by making time for genuine connection.

Pauses can help you do that. Include them. Everywhere.

If you do, your patience and your consistency will start to look a lot like a persuasive form of expertise.

Speaking Stories: LBJ and RBG

Discussing screenwriting at one point, [Academy Award–winning director David Fincher] said that “coming up with a great line is not actually the gift of the screenwriter. The gift is, When do they say it?” And, he added, “strategically deployed silence can be just as breathtaking.”

—Jonah Weiner, “David Fincher’s Impossible Eye” (2020)

(1) LBJ: Lyndon B. Johnson’s first speech to Congress as president of the United States was a big event. Five days earlier, John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Johnson’s home

state of Texas. The country was still in shock. And now Johnson, who was not the most telegenic of leaders, had to simultaneously introduce himself to the millions of Americans watching at home and reassure them that Kennedy’s vision for the future would be preserved. “He had understood from the first moments

after the assassination the importance of instilling confidence in him in the American people,” explains Robert Caro in *The Passage of Power*, the third book in Caro’s monumental biographical series on Johnson. “After the speech, they would either have confidence in him—or not. And if they didn’t, all the assumptions about the inevitability of renomination for a sitting president would be meaningless. Speculation about rival candidates would begin immediately.”

Aware that he wasn’t the most polished of public speakers and that he often talked much too fast, Johnson needed a way to slow himself down and make sure his audience could follow the message he hoped to convey. So he used one of the external cues this chapter recommends: he wrote the word “Pause” throughout the script of his text. Here’s Caro again:

To try to keep himself from rushing through [the speech], blurring its meaning and its force—as, for thirty years, despite every effort, he had almost invariably done—he had it retyped in one-sentence paragraphs in an attempt to make himself pause between the sentence. Then, because he had used that device before and it hadn't worked, he reinforced it by writing in, by hand, between many paragraphs a reminder to himself: “*Pause*.” And then, as if he was afraid that he would nevertheless still speak too fast, he wrote in “*Pause—Pause*.” Before a one-line paragraph he wrote in “*Pause Pause*.” Then, after the paragraph, he wrote again, “*Pause Pause*.” For thirty years, talking too fast, he had almost invariably rushed through key words he should have emphasized. When he finished editing the text, it was filled with underlined words he wanted to emphasize.

Johnson's speech received a two-minute ovation from Congress, as well as praise from newspapers around the country. “It was the way the President spoke,” an article in the *New York Times* gushed, “the dramatic force of his delivery . . . that impressed a city long accustomed to thinking of Mr. Johnson as flamboyant.” The pauses—well-planned and purposeful—played a big role in that.

(2) Winston Churchill:

Like Lyndon Johnson, Winston Churchill relied on visual cues and annotations to help him slow down and deliver his speeches effectively. A favorite tactic was increasing the space between lines.

Drafts of a speech Churchill delivered in February 1941 provide a good example. They're housed at the Morgan Library in New York and were featured in a 2012 National Public Radio segment called "Winston Churchill's Way with Words." Here's an excerpt from the segment:

At the Morgan Library are several drafts of a single speech from February 1941, when England stood alone against the Nazi onslaught and Churchill appealed to President Roosevelt for aid. The first draft looks like a normal typescript; the final draft, says [the library's curator], "looks like a draft of a poem." Churchill made those markings, [the curator] explains, to indicate how the speech should be delivered. He inserted white space to remind himself to pause.

(3) RBG: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had a distinctive, pause-filled way of speaking. Here's how a profile in the *New Yorker* once described her: "During conversations, she is given to taking lengthy pauses. This can be unnerving, especially at the Supreme Court, where silence only amplifies the sound of ticking clocks. Therefore, her clerks came up with what they call the two-Mississippi rule: after speaking, wait two beats before you say anything else. Ginsburg's pauses have nothing to do with her age. It's just the way she is."

Speaking Studies: Teachers, Comedians, and a Swedish Linguist

In many a piece of music, it's the pause or the rest that gives the piece its beauty and its shape. And I know I, as a writer, will often try to include a lot of empty space on the page so that the reader can complete my thoughts and sentences and so that her imagination has room to breathe.

—Pico Iyer, *The Art of Stillness* (2014)

(1) Teachers: Mary Budd Rowe was one of the premier science educators of the twentieth century. Elected president of the National Science Teachers Association in 1989, she headed the science education research division of the National Science Foundation for several years and taught at, among other places, Columbia, Stanford, and the University of Florida.

Her most famous line of research involved pauses. She found that teachers could improve student performance if they simply waited a couple of seconds longer after they asked a question and before they responded to the answer. The most common “wait time” Rowe recorded was one second. Bumping that up to three seconds produced a bunch of beneficial outcomes, as Rowe relayed in a 1986 article summarizing over twenty years of research. The article, which appeared in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, was called “Wait Time: Slowing Down as a Way of Speeding Up!” Here are some highlights:

- The length of student responses increased between 300% and 700% when teachers waited three seconds instead of one second.
- Students tended to give much more complex, elaborate answers when teachers waited three seconds. Their answers were short and more likely to be “I don’t know” when teachers waited only one second.

- One study had independent judges evaluate the quality of student responses to stories. The responses when the teacher waited three seconds were rated higher by the judges.
- Students asked more questions when the teachers waited three seconds.

Two findings are worth quoting directly:

- “Under very short wait times, students compete for turns to perform for the teacher. There is little indication that they listen to each other. Under the 3-second regimen, however, they show more evidence of attending to each other as well as to the teacher, and as a result, the discourse begins to show more coherence. This outcome is particularly influenced by wait time 2, [where the teacher] pauses after the first student responds.”
- “Under the short wait time pattern a major portion of responses comes from a small number of students: Typically six or seven students capture more than half of the recitation time. Under the 3-second regimen, the number of students usually rated as poor performers who become active participants increases. Interestingly, this change in verbal activity gradually influences teacher expectations for students because more students do more task-related talking. (Verbal competence appears to be a salient factor in teacher judgments concerning a student’s capabilities.)”

Rowe sums up the piece by noting that “under a wide variety of instructional situations and levels ranging from first grade through university level, from classrooms to museum settings and business settings, the quality of discourse can be markedly improved by increasing to 3 seconds or longer the average wait times used by teachers after a question and after a response.” “These pauses are ordinarily so brief,” she continues,

“1 second or less on average, that an adequate exchange of ideas and the nurturing of new ideas cannot take place.” As a speaker, that’s not a result you want.

(2) Comedians: In *Confessions of a Public Speaker*, Scott Berkun suggests that 20% to 30% of a comedian’s onstage time is spent in silence. He doesn’t point to any research to support this claim, but the percentage seems plausible, given the way many of the most successful comedians use waiting, walking, and other forms of unspoken communication to give shape and structure to their performances. Watch old clips of Chris Rock or Richard Pryor pacing across the stage. See how people as different as Ellen DeGeneres, Dave Chappelle, Ali Wong, Amy Schumer, Michael Che, Jerry Seinfeld, and Tina Fey hold the attention of an audience, even when they’re not talking. All these performers and many more—Wanda Sykes, Aziz Ansari, Trevor Noah, Margaret Cho, John Leguizamo—build pauses into their act. Even Kevin Hart, who is known for his high-energy humor, has learned to be strategic about silences.

In *I Can’t Make This Up: Life Lessons*, for example, Hart talks about the difference between the amateur comedian he started out as and the professional performers he watched and admired. “Unlike me, [Keith] was very relaxed on stage and wasn’t afraid to take long pauses and let things settle,” he says of one of his mentors, Keith Robinson.

Hart also recalls getting—and following—this next piece of advice during his first international show in Montreal: “Kevin, you’re doing great. . . . There’s just one thing: slow down. Make sure everyone can understand you and you’re not breezing through your material. In New York, maybe you can talk that fast, but if you want everyone to relate to you here, you need to at least pause sometimes.”

“That simple pivot was just what I needed,” Hart writes. “I obliterated the audience at both showcases so decisively that, afterward, the festival’s bookers added me to every event where they had space. Newspapers were writing about me. Strangers I walked past at parties were buzzing *Kevin Hart, Kevin Hart, Kevin Hart*. I felt like the Godzilla of comedy—I destroyed Montreal.”

(3) Perfect Pause: Swedish linguist Kristina Lundholm Fors spent over seven years studying pauses—short pauses, medium pauses, long pauses. She found that pausing too long can make the people you are talking with uncomfortable and also less able to understand what you are saying. (In her experiments, “too long” was four seconds. “Four seconds doesn’t sound like a long time,” she explains, “but when you are talking to somebody, it can feel like an eternity. A typical pause in speech lasts only about a quarter to half a second.”)

Yet she also found that spoken sentences that contained a half-second pause turned out to be significantly easier for audiences to understand than sentences that lacked pauses and sentences that contained long pauses.

Her general advice is “to be aware of your and other people’s pauses. Experiment with them. Make them longer. Make them shorter. See what happens to the conversation. And sometimes . . . just let them last a half a second longer.”

Speaking Exercises: Pause Practice and Moments of Silence

It is also a commonplace that, as we get nervous or begin to worry about the amount of time remaining in the argument, we will speak too fast. It might help to write the words “SLOW DOWN” on any notes you take to the podium.

—Ted Olson, “Ten Important Considerations
for Supreme Court Advocacy” (2018)

Background

The passages below contain close to one hundred words. With a stopwatch to help time you, read at least two of them out loud at a rate that will allow you to finish each one in about a minute.

It may take a few attempts to get near that time. But the extra practice should start to give you a sense of the pace at which effective speakers know how to communicate—a pace considerably slower than the 150 words per minute commonly cited as around average for a one-on-one conversation. Martin Luther King, for example, dropped down to around 90 words per minute during much of his “I Have a Dream” speech, and John F. Kennedy averaged 96.5 during his inaugural address, the one in which he famously declared, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

That said, both King and Kennedy were also good at periodically changing their pace. King reached 156 words per minute during certain crescendos in his “I Have a Dream” speech, and Kennedy, a notoriously fast talker, peppered his inaugural address with quick conversational bursts. But we can work on employing that kind of variety later. For now, focus on slowing down . . . and . . . adding . . . more . . . pauses.

Assignment

#1 Difficulty Level: Easy

Presidential Speechwriter (121 Words): “Try staging [a] strategic delay the next time you deliver a sales pitch or answer a query put to you during a conversation. If someone in your audience asks you a question, rather than blurting out a quick answer, pause while you absorb the question and put your thoughts into words. Before you speak, frame your reply in your mind—in a sentence with a subject and predicate. A hurried answer suggests that you didn’t give the question a full hearing. A deliberate pause before you talk adds weight and wisdom to both your actual answer and your audience’s perception of it. You’re perceived as having really listened to the questioner instead of rushing in with a stock, or canned, answer.”

—James C. Humes,* *Speak like Churchill, Stand like Lincoln* (2002)

#2 Difficulty Level: Medium

College Textbook (107 Words): “Many novice speakers are uncomfortable with pauses. It’s as if some social stigma is attached to any silence in a speech. This tendency is probably a carry-over from everyday conversation, where we cover pauses with unnecessary and undesirable vocal fillers, such as ‘uh,’ ‘hmm,’ ‘you know,’ ‘I mean,’ ‘it’s like,’ and ‘anyways.’ Like pitch, however, pauses can be important strategic elements of speech. Pauses enhance meaning by providing a type of punctuation, emphasizing a point, drawing attention to a key thought, or just allowing listeners a moment to contemplate what is being

* Humes wrote speeches for several US presidents, including Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush.

said. In short, they make a speech far more effective than it might otherwise be.”

—Dan O’Hair, Rob Stewart, and Hannah Rubenstein,
A Speaker’s Guidebook: Text and Reference (2001)

#3 Difficulty Level: Hard

Harvard Business Review (90 Words): “How often should you breathe? At the very least, at the end of every sentence! If you are prone to rushing through your speech or presentation, then practice breathing at every punctuation mark—it will force you to slow down. . . . It’s not about trying to sound like someone else; it’s about giving your voice the richness and fullness it deserves every single time you speak in public, so that the power of your voice matches the power of your words. If you do that, people will listen.”

—Allison Shapira, “Breathing Is the Key to
Persuasive Public Speaking” (2015)

Moments of Silence

Vermeer understood the power of withheld information. Composers have a similar understanding that in shaping sound, a nothing can be just as expressive as a something. It depends on the frame, what it is that echoes in the silence.

—Jan Swafford, “Silence Is Golden” (2009)

Background

One of the goals of this chapter is to make you more aware of the role that silence plays in effective communication. So the next time you are listening to somebody present information—it could be one of your teachers, it could be one of your coworkers, it could be a news anchor you see on TV—pay attention to their pauses. Do they rush through what they are trying to say? Do they forget to punctuate their points with verbal periods?

Or are they instead much more considerate of their audience's brains, doling out content in easily digestible bits? It usually takes only a few minutes to find out.

Assignment

Find someone you think is a good speaker, and then find someone you think is a not-so-good speaker. As you listen to each of them talk, mark down how many times they pause. (Saying *um* or *uh* or *like* does not count as a pause.)

Also note when and why these pauses occur. Are they being used for emphasis, suspense, drama, comedic effect? Do they follow (or precede) statistics, dialogue, stories, advice? Are there any that you think should be longer? Are there any that you think should be shorter?

You don't need to take notes the entire time you are listening. Just focus on a three-minute segment. Even in that short amount of time, you'll likely notice a big difference between the good speaker and the not-so-good speaker.

Here are the specific things you might write down, although other approaches could work as well:

1. The number of times the good speaker paused in the three-minute segment.
2. The number of times the not-so-good speaker paused in the three-minute segment.
3. Fewer than one hundred words describing any other differences you noticed between the good speaker and the not-so-good speaker. (It is possible that the pauses may not vary that much from one speaker to another; other qualities may stand out more clearly.) You are welcome to write more than one hundred words, but you don't have to.

TWO

Rhythm

I choose Rhythm.

—Jabari Asim, “Some Call It God” (2020)

There are many reasons why Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is easy on the ears. For one thing, he uses concrete language. He never gets stuck for too long on abstract musings or digressions. For another, he creates memorable comparisons. The United States, he says at one point, has essentially bounced a check by failing to follow through on the promises and protections laid out in its founding documents.

And then, of course, there is King's distinctive intonation. If dignity had a sound, it would be very close to the pitch and timbre of King's voice, which is equal parts soothing and stirring.

Not all of these advantages are replicable. But certain important aspects of King's speech are, including the time-tested rhythms he uses to add order and importance to the message he wanted to deliver. The recurrence of the phrase "I have a dream . . . I have a dream . . . I have a dream . . ." is not an accidental bit

of composition. It's deliberate. King understood the power of rhetorical repetition.

In particular, he understood the power of *anaphora*, the specific kind of rhetorical repetition that happens at the beginning of successive clauses and phrases. In addition to using anaphora in the famous "I have a dream . . ." part of the speech, he also uses it in earlier sections. "Now is the time . . ." begins several sentences toward the start of the speech, and "With this faith . . ." kicks off several others toward the middle. Anaphora was an essential part of how King communicated.

A. "More Saving. More Doing."

Anaphora is also an essential part of how organizations communicate, especially when it comes to branding. For years, Home Depot used

anaphora through its catchy slogan “More Saving. More Doing.” So has cosmetics giant Maybelline: “Maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s Maybelline.” There is also the design firm IDEO, which is known for making the following anaphoric motto a cornerstone of its mistake-friendly approach to innovation: “Fail early, fail often.”

I mention these examples alongside King’s “I Have a Dream” speech not to equate them. What King achieved in his speech goes well beyond any marketing slogan, however earnest and clever those slogans may be. Madison Avenue can’t compete with moral authority.

Still, it can be helpful to see that certain rhythms work in many realms. A wide range of people who are good with words—from marketers to ministers, from politicians to poets—consistently turn to rhetorical repetition. Sometimes the repetition appears at the beginning of clauses or sentences. Other times, as we are about to see, it appears at the end, with similarly powerful effects.

B. “If You See Something, Say Something”

The term for end-focused repetition is *epistrophe*. A good example comes from a slogan used by cities, security agencies, and transit authorities all over the world: “If you see something, say something.”

Another comes from someone we talked about in chapter one, President Lyndon Johnson, in what may have been his finest oratorical hour: the voting rights speech he gave to Congress

on March 15, 1965, a week after civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama were beaten and tear-gassed as they tried to peaceably make their way to the state capitol.

Johnson's most famous lines in the speech came in the middle of his remarks. Evoking the language (and music) of the civil rights move-

ment, he insisted that “what happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it’s not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us, who

must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”

The epistrophe comes a little earlier. “There is no Southern problem,” Johnson says. “There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem.” Five and a half months later, the bill Johnson advocated for became law.

C. Parallel Structure

Unfortunately, neither anaphora nor epistrophe has proven to be an easy term for students of mine to remember. So I tell them to simply lump both techniques under the more expansive category of “rhetorical repetition.” This category covers everything from Winston Churchill’s famous front-loaded repetition—“We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets”—to Abraham Lincoln’s equally famous back-loaded repetition: “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” You don’t need to memorize hard-to-pronounce words to be able to recognize effective verbal patterns.

If it helps, you can even simply think of rhetorical repetition as a form of parallel structure, which Carl Klaus of the Iowa Writers Workshop usefully describes as “corresponding ideas expressed in corresponding forms.” Klaus focuses mainly on written sentences in his

2013 book *A Self Made of Words*, but at certain points, he extends his discussion of parallel structure to spoken sentences as well. Highlighting both Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, he suggests that “the capacity to select and arrange words in patterns corresponding to related ideas suggests the presence of a highly articulate and thoughtful person.”

In a list of traits you might demonstrate when speaking, “highly articulate and thoughtful” are not bad options. Nor are some of the other qualities associated with parallel structure: organized, measured, balanced, precise. Audiences respond well to purposeful proportion. There is something at once comforting and compelling about syntactic symmetry.

D. The Rule of Three

Along with parallel structure and rhetorical repetition, there is another rhythmic arrangement that is worth learning: the rule of three.

Sometimes the rule of three is used in a straightforward way, like when British prime minister Tony Blair announced his political agenda to a crowd of faculty and students at the University of Southampton in 2011: “Our top priority was, is, and always will be education, education, education.” Other times, the composition is more subtle. Take Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second inaugural address in January 1937, as the country continued to struggle through the Great Depression. When Roosevelt proclaimed that he saw “one-third of the nation ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished,” he was doing more than beginning three consecutive words with the prefix *ill-*. He was also tapping into a strategic linguistic rhythm.

The rhythm can be described as either “short, short, kind of long” or “same, same, kind of different.” For example, the sequence “ill-housed,

ill-clad, and ill-nourished” starts with two words that are similarly short, at least in terms of syllables: *ill-housed* is only two syllables and so is *ill-clad*. But then the syllable count increases when Roosevelt gets to the third word: *ill-nourished*. He goes, quite intentionally, from two syllables to three.

Another British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, used a similar progression during her famous “The Lady’s Not for Turning” speech at the Conservative Party Conference in Brighton, England in 1980:

Previously, [those countries] had lived through rampant inflation; they knew that it led to suitcase money, massive unemployment, and the breakdown of society itself.

Notice where Thatcher puts the phrase “the breakdown of society itself,” which is the longest and most syntactically different construction in her three-part list. She doesn’t put it in the beginning of the list. She doesn’t put it in the middle. She puts it at the end, after two relatively shorter and similar phrases (“suitcase money” and “massive unemployment”). Any other order would ruin the list’s attractive cadence.

The same is true of this next example. It comes from a commencement address by the writer George Saunders in 2013 that was so effective and popular that the printed version became a *New York Times* bestseller. After telling the graduates to “err on the side of kindness” as they go off to pursue their goals and ambitions, he reminds them to reserve some space and time to “do those things that incline you toward the big questions” and to “avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial.” Then he hits them with the more subtle form of the rule of three, with some help from Shakespeare, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa: “That luminous part of you that exists beyond

your personality—your soul, if you will—is as bright and shining as any that has ever been. Bright as Shakespeare’s, bright as Gandhi’s, bright as Mother Teresa’s.”

The names *Shakespeare* and *Gandhi* are two syllables. *Mother Teresa* is five. Short. Short. Kind of long. It’s a wonderful way to arrange and articulate tripled information.

E. Same, Same, Kind of Different

The reason I say we can describe this more subtle form of the rule of three as both “short, short, kind of long” and “same, same, kind of different” is that occasionally two relatively longer units of content will come before the shorter units. A good example can be found in another celebrated commencement address: the one Steve Jobs gave at Stanford University in 2005, not long after he learned he had pancreatic cancer.

Here’s how he relays getting the diagnosis. The rule of three comes at the end, as a series of structurally similar sentences:

About a year ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. I had a scan at 7:30 in the morning, and it clearly showed a tumor on my pancreas. I didn’t even know what a pancreas was. The doctors told me this was almost certainly a type of cancer that is incurable, and that I should expect to live no longer than three to six months. My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor’s code for “prepare to die.” It means to try to tell your kids everything you thought you’d have the next 10 years to tell them in just a few months. It means to make sure everything is buttoned up so that it will be as easy as possible for your family. It means to say your goodbyes.

The structure of those last three sentences is “long, long, kind of short.” But notice how that order can still be thought of as “same, same, kind of different.” Notice, too, that Jobs pairs the rule of three with rhetorical repetition. That’s not uncommon. Think of Governor George

Wallace's famously racist pledge to segregationists in Alabama—and throughout the country—during the civil rights movement: “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny. And

I say: Segregation today. Segregation tomorrow. Segregation forever!”

The roar of approval Wallace's hate-filled words received that day is a tough reminder that effective uses of language are not limited to noble causes.

F. Verbal Technology

The rule of three's link to Wallace and his bigoted statement shouldn't taint the rhythm's usefulness. The better approach is to consider the rule of three to be a form of verbal technology. In the right hands, it can inspire and edify—like when Martin Luther King closes his “I Have a Dream” speech with these three lines: “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last!” But in the wrong hands, it can certainly degrade and dehumanize. Check out a few of Adolf Hitler's speeches. The rule of three makes some unsettling cameos.

So does rhetorical repetition, parallel structure, and many other rhythms. As I often tell my students, “Nobody has a monopoly on effective language.” But what we all do have, at least when we are giving speeches or presentations, is a need for structure. And that's what these rhythms provide. They help organize our content, giving much-needed shape to what might otherwise be a scattered collection of data, examples, and ideas.

Speaking Stories: Suffrage and Slavery

I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States Senator. I speak as an American. . . . I don't want to see the Republican Party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny—Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, and Smear.

—Senator Margaret Chase Smith, speaking out against Senator Joseph McCarthy on the floor of the Senate, June 1, 1950

(1) Women's Suffrage: When Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who teamed up with Susan B. Anthony and others to launch the women's suffrage movement in 1848, started addressing audiences in the fall of that year, she didn't have any experience as a public speaker. Nor was she eager to get any, having never been comfortable in front of big groups. One account describes her as being so nervous at the now famous Seneca Falls Convention that when she started talking, "at first, she could barely be heard."

Stanton persevered, however, and eventually became a highly sought-after speaker. She even joined the heralded Lyceum Bureau, an organization that brought to the stage such oratorical giants as Frederick Douglass, Charles Sumner, Henry Ward Beecher (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe), and perhaps most famous of all, Mark Twain.

Below is an excerpt from a speech Stanton delivered in Waterloo, New York soon after the Seneca Falls Convention. Notice the rule of three in the opening section:

I should feel exceedingly diffident to appear before you wholly unused as I am to public speaking,

- were I not nerved by a sense of right and duty,
- did I not feel that the time had fully come for the question of woman's wrongs to be laid before the public,
- did I not believe that woman herself must do the work, for woman alone can understand the height and depth, the length and breadth of her own degradation and woe.

Notice, too, the parallel structure in the third clause: "height and depth" matches "length and breadth." Stanton may have begun as a reluctant speaker, but she certainly developed into an effective and rhetorically sophisticated one.

(2) Slavery: There is an interesting moment in the novel *Roots*—which became the basis for the most watched television miniseries of all time—when the protagonist, Kunta Kinte, learns of Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" pronouncement during the American Revolution. Kunta likes the rhythm of the phrase, but he questions the accuracy of its content:

Even from what Kunta heard and could understand, it was clear that white folks were moving toward a crisis with the king across the big water in the place called England. And there was a lot of exclaiming about some Massa Patrick Henry having cried out, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Kunta liked that, but he couldn't understand how somebody *white* could say it; white folks looked pretty free to him.

(3) Women's Suffrage and Slavery: The author of the next speech, Sojourner Truth, took up the cause of both women's suffrage *and* slavery. "A woman of remarkable intelligence despite her illiteracy," writes the historian Nell Irvin Painter,

“Truth had great presence. She was tall, some 5 feet 11 inches, of spare but solid frame. Her voice was low, so low that listeners sometimes termed it masculine, and her singing voice was beautifully powerful.

Whenever she spoke in public, she also sang. No one ever forgot the power and pathos of Sojourner Truth’s singing, just as her wit and originality of phrasing were also of lasting remembrance.”

That musicality comes through in Truth’s most famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Notice the rhetorical repetition she uses with the phrase “as any man” (and its slight variations).

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

Speaking Studies: What Makes It Great?

They taught her the most important part of style, which is the natural run of the voice in speaking.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928)

(1) What Makes It Great?: Composer Rob Kapilow has studied the rhythms of classical composers for over two decades—first as a student at the Eastman School of Music, then as a professor at Yale, and most notably as the host of the NPR show and concert series “What Makes It Great?” In 2014, however, White House correspondent Ari Shapiro asked him to comment on the rhythms of something else: presidential speeches.

The segment was called “Speechwriters Deliberately Use Rhythm to Make Their Point,” and Kapilow’s comments were woven together with additional analysis by the linguist John McWhorter of Columbia University. Both men stressed the captivating power of rhythm, the way it can move people to action and create a feeling of coherence and community. “For a moment we stop being ourselves,” Kapilow said, describing the experience of a crowd chanting in unison at a football game, “and we all become part of a powerful group. I think we’re all looking for that opportunity to step outside of a ‘me’ and become part of a ‘we.’”

Here’s what McWhorter added, building off the idea that the rhythm of a great speech can give people a sense of order and satisfaction: “The fact that there is rhythm in that way is very stirring to any listener. . . . It gives you that sense of expectation which is satisfied. It’s very human. It’s very primal in its way. But it certainly works in a speech.”

The segment focused, as I mentioned, on presidential speeches. But the principles apply to other speeches as well.

There are certain rhythmic patterns—parallel structure, the rule of three, rhetorical repetition—that can really help organize material and, at their best, uplift audiences. Experiment with them all.

(2) Creating Power: “Repetition is the best way speakers can create power,” writes Robert Lehrman in *The Political Speechwriter’s Companion: A Guide for Writers and Speakers*. In addition to promoting rhythmic structures such as rhetorical repetition and parallel structure, Lehrman also recommends trying out antithesis, which is a form of parallel structure designed to highlight a persuasive contrast. The Patrick Henry declaration mentioned before—“Give me liberty or give me death”—may be the most recognizable example. But many others exist. Here’s a sample:

- “I defended the Republic as a young man; I shall not desert her now that I am old.”
—Cicero, 2nd Philippic 2.118 (44 BCE)
- “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”
—Neil Armstrong, July 20, 1969
- “Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice.”
—Polonius, *Hamlet* (1600)
- “Raise less corn and more hell.”
—Exhortation attributed to nineteenth-century Populist leader Mary Elizabeth Lease*

* “Ironically,” historian Brooke Speer Orr writes in *The People’s Joan of Arc: Mary Elizabeth Lease, Gendered Politics, and Populist Party Politics in Gilded-Age America*, “after becoming a national figure, Lease maintained in an 1896 interview that she never actually directed farmers to ‘raise less corn and more hell,’ though supporters and opponents alike continue to associate Lease with the speech.”

Try antithesis out the next time you address an audience. It is a great way to be pithy and memorable.

(3) Classical English Rhetoric: In 2010, Ward Farnsworth of the University of Texas Law School published *Classical English Rhetoric*, a comprehensive account of rhetorical devices used by such masters of English as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass. Some of the devices have tricky names—*epizeuxis* comes to mind, as does *hypophora*—but all are worth a look. As Farnsworth writes in the book’s preface, “Everyone speaks and writes in patterns. Usually the patterns arise from unconscious custom; they are models we internalize from the speech around us without thinking much about it. But it also is possible to study the patterns deliberately and to learn more about how to use the ones that make the words they arrange more emphatic or memorable or otherwise effective.”

Readers of Farnsworth’s book may even recognize one of those patterns—*polysyndeton*—in the last sentence of the excerpt I quoted. The move involves adding in extra conjunctions. Here’s the sentence again. I’ve underlined the *polysyndeton*: “But it also is possible to study the patterns deliberately and to learn more about how to use the ones that make the words they arrange more emphatic or memorable or otherwise effective.”

Farnsworth definitely practices what he preaches.

Another account suggests Lease decided not to fight the attribution too much because she thought “it was a right good piece of advice.”

Speaking Exercises: Rhythm and Poise

By the fall of 1952, Cummings's speaking style had evolved over the dozen or so lectures he had given into something both powerful and eccentric. His voice, a whispery yet carrying sound, was magnetic as well as pleasing. Using it as an instrument, he read the poems as if they were arias without music. You leaned forward to hear him, and you were often rewarded with a joke or an inspired, wicked impression of someone like T. S. Eliot or a redoubtable English professor.

—Susan Cheever, *E. E. Cummings: A Life* (2014)

Background

In the last chapter, we used the “Pause Practice” exercise to experiment with a more deliberate, measured rate of delivery. Now we are going to add rhythm to the mix. Pauses are even more effective when built around the right verbal arrangement.

Assignment

Record yourself reading at least one of the passages below. But this time, concentrate on emphasizing the instances of rhetorical repetition, parallel structure, and the rule of three. Those sections will be good opportunities to showcase the rhythm of the words.

(1) Tear Down This Wall:

Are these the beginnings of profound changes in the Soviet state? Or are they token gestures, intended to raise false hopes in the West, or to strengthen the Soviet system without changing it? We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace.

General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!

—Ronald Reagan, Brandenburg Gate in
West Berlin, Germany (1987)

(2) Covering a War:

Covering a war means going to places torn by chaos, destruction, and death—and trying to bear witness. It means trying to find the truth in a sandstorm of propaganda when armies, tribes, or terrorists clash. And yes, it means taking risks, not just for yourself but often for the people who work closely with you.

Despite all the videos you see from the Ministry of Defense or the Pentagon, and all the sanitized language describing smart bombs and pinpoint strikes, the scene on the ground has remained remarkably the same for hundreds of years. Craters. Burned houses. Mutilated bodies. Women weeping for children and husbands. Men for their wives, mothers, children.

Our mission is to report these horrors of war with accuracy and without prejudice. We always have to ask ourselves whether the level of risk is worth the story. What is bravery, and what is bravado?

—Journalist Marie Colvin,* service for war wounded
at St. Bride's Church, London (2010)

* Less than two years later, Colvin was killed while covering the civil war in Syria.

(3) Prepared to Die:

This then is what the [African National Congress] is fighting. Their struggle is a truly national one. It is a struggle of the African people, inspired by their own suffering and their own experience. It is a struggle for the right to live.

During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

—Nelson Mandela, closing statement in the Rivonia Trial (1964)

THREE

Optimism

*Don't open a shop unless you
know how to smile.*

—Proverb quoted by Ari Weinzwieg in *Zingerman's
Guide to Giving Great Service* (2003)

A friend of mine does something really smart right before he gives a presentation. He glances at a picture of his two young kids.

The picture, which fits discreetly among the notes he brings to the lectern, isn't very big. Nor is it professionally done. But it is powerful. Whenever he looks at it, his demeanor softens, his eyes brighten, and he significantly reduces the chance that he, a lawyer who also has a PhD in philosophy, will appear defensive or combative.

I think it's a great tactic. It helped him turn a shaky start on the academic job market—people initially perceived him as cold and aggressive—into a plum position at a world-class institution, as well as a prestigious teaching award. It also nicely aligns with a piece of advice I often give students as they face various kinds of audiences: smile more than you think appropriate.

I have a particular kind of smile in mind. You may have seen it on your favorite teacher or coach, and perhaps also on a friend as they're about to serve you a home-cooked meal or pass along some good news. It's the smile of someone who has something to share.

Good presenters have this smile. They treat their material like a gift they can't wait for the audience to open. There is a feeling of excitement and anticipation, of surprise and discovery. Neither ego nor pretension drives them to speak. Earnestness and generosity do.

And so does something else: hope.

A. Informed Hope

The hope good presenters have is not naïve hope. They're not Pollyanna at the podium. Instead, the kind of hope they have is disciplined by research, by data, by expertise. It's informed hope.

One way to think about this distinction is through a framework offered by Nancy Duarte in a series of blog posts for the *Harvard Business Review*. Duarte, who helped Al Gore develop the visual slides for his Oscar-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, suggests that “the most effective presenters use the same techniques

as great storytellers: By reminding people of the status quo and then revealing the path to a better way, they set up a conflict that needs to be resolved.” “That tension,” she explains, “helps persuade the audience to adopt a new mindset or behave differently—to move from what is to what could be.”

A presentation needs to have both elements. It needs to articulate “what is,” and it needs to articulate “what could be.” The “what is” will often be a clear and accurate statement of the issue or problem your presentation is designed to address. This statement can’t be wishy-washy. It can’t obfuscate. Instead, it has to communicate a sense of candor, knowledge, and credibility. It’s the “informed” part of “informed hope.”

Martin Luther King includes that element early on in his “I Have a Dream” speech. Before offering his vision of what an integrated United States might look like—before offering his “what could be”—he is quite frank about the degradation being endured by millions of his fellow Black Americans. “One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation,” he says at the beginning of a long string of rhetorical repetition, “the Negro is still not free; one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity; one hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land.”

This setup is important. It creates a reason, even a need, for the “dream” part of the speech. If King had skipped that part or if he had started by saying that race relations in the country had already reached a kind of Platonic ideal, there would be no reason for him to continue. A clearly stated problem whets an audience’s appetite for a solution.

Chip Heath of Stanford Business School and Dan Heath of Duke University highlight this point in *The Power of Moments: Why Certain*

Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact. “You can’t appreciate the solution,” they write, “until you appreciate the problem.” The answer to a riddle isn’t that satisfying unless you first know the question.

Said differently: Jokes can’t survive on just a punchline. There needs to be some initial architecture or framework. “Knock, Knock. . . . Who’s there?” falls apart once you remove the “Knock, Knock.”

That’s not to discount the value of the solution. The “dream” portion of King’s speech is rightly famous. Few audiences want to hear presenters only state problems. Bad news, on its own, isn’t very inspiring. What people more commonly want is some version of the following:

- a fix for a problem they are facing
- an answer to a question they’ve been asking
- a reason to act

Chris Anderson, the CEO of the organization that puts on and distributes TED Talks, identifies the ideal outcome: “A successful talk is a little miracle—people see the world differently afterward.”

But to produce that kind of result requires vision and imagination. Information alone generally won’t do. King’s speech would have been forgotten the next day if instead of saying “I have a dream,” he had said, “I have some statistics.”

B. Eames and Orwell

Fortunately, however, information and imagination can team up in helpful ways. The more knowledgeable you are about a particular subject, the easier it can be to move beyond stale ideas and conventional wisdom.

There are, of course, certain instances in which naïveté and even downright ignorance can be an advantage. Had Cyrus Field, who helped develop the first transatlantic cable, known more about how cables actually work—and how hard they can be to get right—he

might never have tried to lay one across the Atlantic Ocean. Had Wendy Kopp, who started Teach For America, known more about how schools actually work, she might never have tried to turn her college thesis project into a full-fledged national program. And had Phil Knight, the founder of Nike, known more about the perils of the shoe industry, he might never have tried to build what has become one of the most recognizable brands on the planet. Instead, he would have realized that his likelihood of success was way too low.

Yet as Steven Johnson argues in *Where Good Ideas Come From*, many innovations are generated not by newbies with epiphanies but by experienced experts whose accumulated knowledge and tinkering eventually develop into what Johnson calls a “slow hunch”: “The snap judgments of intuition—as powerful as they can be—are rarities in the history of world-changing ideas. Most hunches that turn into important innovations unfold over much longer time frames. They start with a vague, hard-to-describe sense that there’s an interesting solution to a problem that hasn’t yet been proposed, and they linger in the shadows of the mind, sometimes for decades, assembling new connections and gaining strength.”

Johnson offers the eighteenth-century scientist Joseph Priestley as an example: “When [Priestley] decided to isolate a mint sprig in a sealed glass in an ingenious experiment that ultimately proved that plants were creating oxygen—one of the founding discoveries of modern ecosystem science—he was building on a hunch that he’d been cultivating for twenty years, dating back to his boyhood obsession with trapping spiders in glass jars.”

Johnson could have also pointed to Charles Eames, whose molded plywood chair, developed with his wife, Ray, earned the label “Best Design of the 20th Century” from *Time* magazine. Asked whether

the design was a flash of inspiration, Eames responded, “Yes, it was a flash of inspiration—a kind of 30-year flash.”

Or think of George Orwell. *Animal Farm* wasn't his first novel. Nor was *1984*. They were his fifth and sixth novels—the last two, in fact, he ever wrote. Like many writers—Miguel de Cervantes, Bram Stoker, Anthony Burgess, George Eliot—Orwell wasn't terribly precocious. His best works of fiction didn't come at age twenty, or thirty, or even forty. The really innovative stuff needed some extra time to develop, not to mention

the fuel provided by decades of reading and experience.

In other words, new ideas don't come out of nowhere. They have roots. They have predecessors. They are produced from a large constellation of catalyzing material. As MIT's Sherry Turkle has written, “You need to have a strong background of facts and concepts *before* you know you need them. We think with what we know; we use what we know to ask new questions.”

Or think again of Martin Luther King. He delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. But his first major involvement with the civil rights movement occurred way back in 1955, with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. That means when he stepped up to the Lincoln Memorial podium in 1963 to deliver his “dream,” his words were powered by eight years of experience and understanding. He had knowledge. He had credibility. He had exactly what he needed to create one of the most iconic and inspiring moments in American history.

Perhaps he even glanced, like my friend does, at pictures of his kids before he started speaking.

Speaking Stories: Silicon Valley

Few outsiders knew that one of Rockefeller's greatest talents was to manage and motivate his diverse associates. As he said, "It is chiefly to my confidence in men and my ability to inspire their confidence in me that I owe my success in life."

—Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (1998)

(1) Silicon Valley: *Masters of Scale* is a podcast hosted by Reid Hoffman, whose Silicon Valley credentials are as varied as they are impressive. He cofounded both PayPal and LinkedIn. He was an early investor in Facebook. He's a partner at Greylock, a venture capital firm that helped launch companies as different as Instagram, Airbnb, Dropbox, and Pandora. And in 2017, his many efforts to promote social networking earned him the title of Honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

That same year, Hoffman interviewed another Silicon Valley star—Stewart Butterfield, the CEO of the workplace-messaging platform Slack. Hoffman focused on one quality of Butterfield's in particular: his ability to communicate an optimistic vision of his company's purpose and future. Hoffman called it an "entrepreneurial superpower."

Butterfield's own thoughts on this superpower are worth quoting: "If there was one piece of advice I wish I could phone back and give to myself, [it would be to] just concentrate on that storytelling part, on the convincing people. Because if you can't do that, it doesn't matter how good the product is, it doesn't matter how good the idea was for the market or what happens in the external facts, if you don't have the people believing."

(2) Lincoln's Lessons: In *Lessons in Elocution*—a book studied and cherished by Abraham Lincoln when he was developing his now famous eloquence—cheerfulness is identified as one

of the qualities that is crucial to effective public speaking. Projecting aspects of that trait must have been difficult for Lincoln at times. As president, he had to deal with secession, slavery, and the Civil War, as well as his own internal struggles with depression. Yet part of his success as a speaker stemmed from the charm and sense of humor he demonstrated as a storyteller, characteristics he evidently learned from his father, Thomas Lincoln. “Night after night,” Doris Kearns Goodwin explains in *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, “Thomas Lincoln would swap tales with visitors and neighbors while his young son sat transfixed in the corner. In these sociable settings, Thomas was in his element. A born storyteller, he possessed a quick wit, a talent for mimicry, and an uncanny memory for exceptional stories. These qualities would prove his greatest bequest to his son.”

(3) The Hope Speech: In 2009, Sean Penn won an Oscar for his portrayal of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person to hold political office in California. Among Milk’s most notable public performances was something that has come to be known as “The Hope Speech.” An excerpt is below:

I can’t forget the looks on faces of people who’ve lost hope. Be they gay, be they seniors, be they blacks looking for an almost-impossible job, be they Latinos trying to explain their problems and aspirations in a tongue that’s foreign to them. I personally will never forget that people are more important than buildings. I use the word “I” because I’m proud. I stand here tonight in front of my gay sisters, brothers, and friends, because I’m proud of you. I think it’s time that we have many legislators who are gay and proud of that fact and do not have to remain in the closet. I think that a gay person, up-front,

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will not walk away from a responsibility and be afraid of being tossed out of office. After Dade County, I walked among the angry and the frustrated night after night, and I looked at their faces. And in San Francisco, three days before Gay Pride Day, a person was killed just because he was gay. And that night, I walked among the sad and the frustrated at City Hall in San Francisco and later that night as they lit candles on Castro Street and stood in silence, reaching out for some symbolic thing that would give them hope. These were strong people, whose faces I knew from the shop, the streets, meetings, and people who I never saw before but I knew. They were strong, but even they needed hope.

**Speaking Studies: Duchenne Smiles,
Reset Buttons, and Negotiations**

When waiters are trained to provide “service with a smile,” their customers report feeling more satisfied, and they leave better tips.

—Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler,
*Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social
Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (2009)

(1) Duchenne Smiles: In Mary Gaitskill’s novel *The Mare*, which earned a spot on many “Best Books of the Year” lists in 2016, a new girl at school is described in the following way: “Her mouth smiled, smiled hard, but her eyes never smiled.”

That’s not the smile you want to make when speaking and presenting, at least not if you want to communicate genuine interest in and excitement about your topic. Instead, you want to make something like a “Duchenne smile.”

Named after the nineteenth-century French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne, who first noticed the facial differences between sincere joy and feigned joy, a Duchenne smile uses more than just the muscles around your mouth; it also uses the muscles around your eyes. “An easy way to spot the difference is to look for wrinkling around the outside of the eye, often referred to as crows feet,” reads the website of Professor Paul Ekman, the leading authority on the relationship between emotions and facial expressions. “If these wrinkles appear or become deeper, it is likely the [eye muscles] are engaged and you are witnessing a ‘genuine smile.’”

For years, it was believed that a Duchenne smile could only happen involuntarily. But more recent research suggests that generating one is a skill people can learn. That’s encouraging news, especially given the following:

- In one study, people who exhibited Duchenne smiles were rated by interviewers as more hireable and competent than people who exhibited non-Duchenne smiles.
- In a different study, people who exhibited Duchenne smiles were perceived as more generous and social.
- Several other positive characteristics—trustworthiness, persuasiveness, and even attractiveness—have been attributed to people who exhibit Duchenne smiles.

These findings certainly don't guarantee that you'll win over your audience simply by smiling with your eyes. And it should be noted that there is disagreement about how easily people can produce a Duchenne smile on purpose.

Still, it is not a bad idea to check whether your eyes are in line with your mouth when it comes to communicating interest and enthusiasm. A more coordinated facial approach may be worth the extra effort.

(2) Reset Buttons: Barbara Fredrickson of the University of North Carolina is one of the foremost experts on the beneficial effects of positive thinking. She's been called the "genius of the positive psychology movement" by Martin Seligman, whose own contributions to the movement have been immense.

As a magazine profile of Fredrickson's research explains, she "has determined that you can reframe adversity and be more effective every day by countering negative loops with a buried resource—the well of joy, hope, amusement, gratitude, interest, appreciation, awe, and other buoyant emotions we can call on as needed. These low-key assets have the power to calm blood pressure and operate as a kind of reset button for stress-addled minds and bodies."

In one study, Frederickson tests her method on the stress-inducing experience of public speaking. After getting a base reading of participants' heart rate and blood pressure, she surprised them with an unexpected request: they would have to prepare a speech on why they are a good friend. "To build the psychological pressure even further," she writes, "we told them that we'd videotape their speech and have it evaluated by their peers."

Unsurprisingly, the participants soon became anxious. "Heart rates shot up," Fredrickson explains, summarizing data from

a combination of verbal reports and moment-to-moment cardiovascular measures. "Blood pressures rose. Veins and arteries constricted."

That's when the real point of the experiment began. Fredrickson wanted to see if anything could be done to help reduce the participants' anxiety, if anything could "undo" their stress. So she randomly assigned each of them one of four short film clips.

- The first two clips were filled with positive images: one evoked serenity by showing ocean waves; the other evoked mild amusement by showing a puppy playing with a flower.
- The third clip was filled with negative images: a young boy crying at the death of someone he loved.
- The last clip was neutral: a computer screen saver that showed an abstract display of colored sticks piling up.

"What you need to appreciate about the two positive films clips we used in this experiment," Frederickson writes, "was

how extraordinarily mild they were. When people view them under normal viewing conditions—that is, when they aren’t anxious about public speaking—[the film clips] evoke no changes whatsoever in the cardiovascular measures we tracked.”

Yet even these mild clips produced a salutary reaction. Participants who watched one of the two positive clips—the ocean waves or the playful puppy—had the fastest cardiovascular recovery. Participants who watched either the negative or neutral clip had the slowest.

Fredrickson calls this result “the undo effect” of positive emotions. “Positivity can quell or ‘undo’ the cardiovascular aftereffects of negativity,” she suggests. “This is your hidden reset button. You can hardly stop your heart from beating faster and harder when you face stress and negativity. But, with positivity, you can rein in those reactions and regain a calm heart.”

(3) Negotiations: In 2003, Carnegie Mellon economist Linda Babcock teamed up with journalist Sara Laschever to write *Women Don’t Ask*, an in-depth look at major discrepancies in the way different genders negotiate. Babcock and Laschever followed up the success of that book with *Ask for It: How Women Can Use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Want*. One chapter includes the following advice: “Positive emotions are . . . contagious. If you walk into your negotiation feeling upbeat, relaxed, and confident, your mood may influence the feelings of the other negotiator, freeing both of you to look for imaginative, outside-the-box solutions.”

They cite two studies to support this claim. The first is similar to the film clip study mentioned above—only instead of undoing stress, the goal was to spark creativity:

GOOD WITH WORDS

Researchers showed participants one of two five-minute films. One film was funny and had been shown to produce happy feelings in viewers; the other was about math and had a neutral effect (it didn't change how viewers were feeling). After participants had viewed one of the two films the researchers gave them a creativity problem called the Duncker (named for its creator, Karl Duncker). Using a box of tacks, a match, and a candle, participants were asked to find a way to attach the candle to a wall-mounted corkboard so that it would burn without dripping wax onto the table or the floor.

Each participant was given ten minutes to work on the problem. Seventy-five percent of the ones who saw the funny film solved it. But only twenty percent of the ones who saw the neutral film did. (The solution involves a bit of imaginative repurposing: first you have to empty the tacks from the box; then you have to use those tacks to attach the box to the corkboard; finally, you have to turn the box into a kind of stand for the candle—and its drippy wax.)

“The results of this research confirm that people do not live on emotional islands,” the study concluded. In particular, the groups that had an injection of positive contagion—a participant who brought a good mood into the mix—experienced improved cooperation, decreased conflict, and increased perceived task performance. Those are all good things, whether the group you are addressing is a couple of people or a whole auditorium.

Speaking Exercises: What Happens If You Win?

To just invent something and have a great idea is a lot of work, but it is not enough. You have to get it out in the world.

—Google cofounder Larry Page, quoted by David Vise and Mark Malseed in *The Google Story* (2005)

Background

Ted Olson is one of the premier appellate advocates in the country. A former solicitor general, he has argued over sixty cases in the Supreme Court and won more than 75% of them, including *Bush v. Gore*, *Citizens United v. FEC*, and the case that opened up the opportunity for all fifty states to legalize sports gambling, *Murphy v. NCAA*.

He was also given the American Bar Association's highest honor, the ABA Medal, for his work on *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, the 2013 case that helped put the Supreme Court on the path to safeguarding the right of same-sex couples to marry.

In 2018, Olson shared some tips in the professional journal *Litigation* on what he has learned from his experience appearing in front of the justices in these and other cases. One tip was prompted by a question his teenage son asked him before a big case. His son essentially wanted to know, “What happens if you win?”

Olson insists that being able to answer this question is fundamental to being an effective advocate. If you can't muster a response, “you have probably not given your case the intense analysis required to make a cogent, persuasive argument.”

Assignment

Apply Olson's tip to one of your upcoming presentations. The presentation doesn't have to be an argument to a bunch of judges. It can be a pitch to investors, a proposal to board members, or even an idea you want to test on your friends, family, or significant other.

The point is to practice being as concrete as you can about the benefits you are offering. By the time you stop talking, it should be very clear to everyone listening why World A, in which we follow your advice, is better than World B, in which we don't.

1. Start by doing something Olson himself does: imagine what the lead sentence will be in the next day's newspaper after the decision you propose is made. What important thing will have changed? Who will be helped? Where will the greatest gain be felt? What cost or danger will be avoided?

"Journalists have to compress the gist of a decision into the lead sentence or two," Olson explains. "Imagining what those words will be—or what you wish they will be—will help focus your thoughts."

If you need more than one or two sentences, that's okay. Take a whole paragraph at this point. For our purposes, four sentences brimming with compelling details are better than one sentence puffed up by nothing more than vague generalities. The answer to "What happens if you win?" should be vivid and affecting.

2. Once you have your lead sentence, try to craft the article's headline. Be direct. Be pithy. Be the kind of person whose words get people to start nodding their heads in agreement.

Verbs can help, so don't neglect them. Your headline shouldn't simply state what the proposal is about; it should

communicate what the proposal does. Actions, when properly communicated, can be quite compelling.

3. Finally, record yourself reading the headline, the lead sentences, and any other context you want to give out loud. Shoot for a thirty-second teaser, as if you're previewing the news. You might not get more time than that for your opening in the Supreme Court or an engaged board room.

Here are some templates to show you how flexible and accommodating the "What happens if you win?" approach can be:

CEO to Board

- Approving this merger will _____

Nurse to Patient

- Taking this medicine will _____

Passenger to Driver

- Stopping now instead of later will _____

Employee to Boss

- Changing this policy will _____

Boss to Employee

- Adding this person to your team will _____

Graduate Student to Dissertation Committee

- Greenlighting this research will _____

Politician to Voters

- Electing me will _____

Speaking Exercises: Agent Advocacy

Female negotiators' performance enhanced significantly when negotiating for someone else as opposed to only for themselves.

—Hannah Riley Bowles, Linda Babcock, and
Kathleen L. McGinn, “Constraints and Triggers:
Situational Mechanics of Gender in Negotiation” (2005)

Part A

Step 1: Think of one of your friends. Now imagine they have hired you to be their negotiation agent on the job market, or for a promotion, or for some other exciting opportunity. Then spend about five minutes writing down some notes you’d use in a pitch to decision-makers on your friend’s behalf. Be as specific as possible.

Step 2: Record yourself actually making the pitch. Aim for one to three minutes.

Step 3: Watch the video of your pitch. Pay attention to the words you use to describe your friend and the way you frame their overall value. Pay attention to your hand gestures and facial expressions as well. Do you smile when talking about your friend? Do your eyes widen? Do you look *convincing*?

Step 4: Jot down some notes about what you observed.

Part B

Step 1: Use fifty to one hundred words to identify what you found most persuasive about the pitch you made as your friend’s agent. What were the most compelling phrases or sentences? What were the most engaging gestures and facial expressions? What was the general vibe?

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Step 2: Think about what is preventing you from using those same persuasive techniques when advocating for yourself.

What's stopping you from telling your story as compellingly as you tell your friend's story? Create at least three bullet points with some initial thoughts.

Part C (Optional)

Step 1: Imagine you could hire yourself as a negotiation agent. Then make a pitch as that agent on behalf of yourself. To create some potentially helpful cognitive and emotional distance, try referring to yourself in the third person; or if that is too awkward, switch in one of your friend's names but just pretend they have the exact same resume, skills, and experiences that you have.

Step 2: Record yourself making the pitch.

Step 3: Compare it to the pitch you made as your friend's agent. What was the same about the two pitches? What was different? What persuasive technique can you borrow from one situation and use in the other?

FOUR

Dynamic

Most of what happens happens beyond words.

—Dana Gioia, “Marriage of Many Years” (2016)

When giving any kind of public presentation, your mouth should not be the only thing that moves. Your hands, your arms, your hips, your head, your legs—all of these things can significantly enhance your ability to communicate. Don't leave them dormant.

Instead, let them help you. Use your hands to provide emphasis. Use your arms to add energy. And use your hips and head to help your eyes maintain a more purposeful, balanced form of contact. Even your feet and legs have roles to play, especially if you avoid a mistake many people make when placed behind a lectern or podium: they treat it as a leash.

Don't get me wrong. There are obviously situations in which your movement will be limited. Appellate courts, for example, generally don't permit peripatetic displays of persuasion. And pacing during an interview is unlikely to get you hired.

But that leaves plenty of other spaces where mobility can be an asset, particularly if you use your movements to shorten the distance between you and your audience. Just because you begin speaking in a specific place doesn't mean you have to stay there. There is no public-speaking equivalent of the invisible fencing systems dog owners use to keep a rein on Fido. You're not going to get an electric shock if you venture out beyond your initial position.

Former Senator Slade Gorton, who was the attorney general of Washington state before heading to Congress, even recommends ditching podiums entirely, as well as anything else that might interfere with your ability to make personal connections. "If you can possibly do so," he advises, "speak without having something between you and the audience. Don't have a podium, don't be at a table, don't use a microphone. The more exposed you are to the

audience the more connected you will be, the more attention they will pay, and the more questions they'll ask."

Bill Clinton is often held up as a master of this kind of move. Many still remember the moment in the 1992 presidential election when he and George H. W. Bush took different approaches to answering questions during a town hall debate in Virginia. Toward the end of the event, a woman asked the two candidates, "How has the national debt personally affected you? And if it hasn't, how can you honestly find a cure for the economic problems of the common people if you have no experience in what's ailing them?"

Just as the woman who asked the questions started speaking, Bush impatiently checked his watch. (He later revealed that he was fed up with the debate at this point and was thinking to himself, "Only ten minutes more of this crap.") Making matters worse, Bush's convoluted answer to the woman came across as defensive, dismissive, and entitled. None of those qualities is a good way to make a personal connection.

Contrast that with Clinton. Before saying a word, he walked right up to the woman who asked the questions and empathetically engaged her. In fact, he traveled so far from his original seated position that the television cameras switched to a wider shot of the stage so that viewers could see where Clinton ended up. "Tell me how [the national debt] has affected you again," he said, looking right at her. "You know people who've lost their jobs and lost their homes?"

The woman told him that she had.

"Well," Clinton continued, "I've been governor of a small state for twelve years. . . . I have seen what's happened in the last four years when in my state, when people lose their jobs, there's a good chance I'll know them by their names. When a factory closes, I know the people who ran it. When the businesses go bankrupt, I know them. And I've been out here for thirteen months meeting . . . with people

like you all over America, people that have lost their jobs, lost their livelihood, lost their health insurance.”

Pulitzer Prize–winner Jon Meacham summed up the impact of Clinton’s performance in *Destiny and Power*, Meacham’s highly acclaimed—and otherwise rather celebratory—biography of Bush: “There it all was: the economic concerns predominating; the public empathy; the showmanship of politics in the new media age—none of which Bush had come close to mastering.”

A. Head, Arms, Heels

Even in situations where walking around isn’t an option, you can still be dynamic. Take another look at Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, especially the final couple of minutes where he builds toward his famous closing pronouncement. He’s stuck behind a podium, but he nevertheless uses his head, his arms, and even a subtle lift in his heels to add extra force to his words.

Head

The head movements come as King delivers, in a textbook example of anaphora, the lines “Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!” Starting with small, dignified tilts to the right and left—the kind of thing that helps him see and connect with both sides of the crowd—King eventually builds toward a dramatic look skyward as he describes “the curvaceous slopes of California.” The effect is powerful, almost as if his words and ideas are being delivered from above.

Arms

King’s next move involves his arms. He begins by using his right arm for emphasis, stretching high into the air as he says, “Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountain-side!” His left arm comes next—but only after something interesting

happens: King makes a verbal gaffe. Instead of saying “When we allow freedom to ring,” he actually says, “When we allow freedom ring.” Mistakenly—and quite ungrammatically—he leaves out the word *to*. One of the most famous speeches in American history contains the equivalent of a typo.

I don’t mention this error because I want to diminish King’s performance. Nobody doubts his skill as a speaker. I mention it because I want to highlight how his movements enhance his message. Everything about King in this moment—his tone, his cadence, his posture, his demeanor—communicates an inspiring sense of eloquence, compassion, and conviction. An unsaid word isn’t going to derail that.

Nor will it if you stumble in a similar way. Dynamic speaking is not flawless speaking. Words get skipped. Words get repeated. Words sometimes don’t come out as words at all. The website for the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* has a nice collection of “Words Unfit for Office,” which it describes as “the flubs that got presidents (and candidates) in trouble with their critics.” President George W. Bush’s use of *misunderestimate* is on there. “Sometimes you misunderestimated me,” he told reporters at a news conference in 2009. But the collection also includes examples from presidents such as Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama who are often held up as models of verbal dexterity.

As far as my own gaffes go, I remember once mispronouncing the phrase *public speaking* when giving a presentation on, embarrassingly, public speaking. What came out of my mouth—“public smeaking”—sounded garbled and weird and unprofessional. Yet it didn’t sink the presentation. Without too much difficulty, I was able to recover and move on to the next point, in part because I think the way I was already using my hands, arms, and head helped take some of the focus off my words.

That’s an additional perk of learning to incorporate physical movements. Using your body well can do more than just enhance your moments of eloquence. It can also, sometimes, mask your mistakes.

Heels

There is a final movement of King's worth mentioning. As he is building toward his stirring "Free at last!" ending, he lifts his heels off the ground at two different moments, almost as if he were trying to match the crowd's growing excitement.

The first lift comes as his arms drop down at his side after he says, "when we let [freedom] ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city." In the middle of his next line—"we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children"—he begins to elevate.

His elevation isn't terribly dramatic. It's not like he jumps or bounces. At most, he shifts a couple of inches. But if you look closely enough to catch the change, it can be very inspiring: King believes so strongly in what he is saying and connects so meaningfully with how people are reacting that he seems to want to transcend his standard five-foot-seven frame. Big ideas, his body appears to be saying, require big gestures.

The second lift is even more subtle. It comes as King lists the categories of people he hopes will one day "join hands": "Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics. . . ."

On the phrase "Jews and Gentiles," his heels get going again. It's a nice bit of physical punctuation.

B. Technology

A different way to be dynamic is to add some technology. Video can work well. Audio can work well. So can interactive tools like iClickers, which allow the audience to participate in your presentation and then see the results of that participation on screen. Even the most compelling speaker can get tiresome after a while. Changing up the audience's menu of sights and sounds can be a great way to reorient people's attention.

Just try to keep the video and audio clips short. You're not presenting the clips. You're using the clips to present. A good range to shoot for is around thirty to sixty seconds.

My own clips are sometimes shorter than that. Rarely are they longer. But more important than the actual time is the function. Clips work best when they offer more than mere decoration, especially given that a bad decoration can quickly become a big distraction. In other words, just because you can use clips doesn't mean you should.

So think hard about the value the clips will add. One test: What words and sentences will the clips allow you to share with the audience that a clip-less presentation wouldn't? Even better: Imagine the transcript of your presentation with the clips; then imagine the transcript of your presentation without the clips. Is there a big difference? Are there insights in one that are not in the other?

If not—if your contribution would largely be the same—I'd be cautious about incorporating clips. Clips can malfunction. Clips can be hard to see and hear. They can also throw off your timing and become a bad kind of crutch. What Chris Anderson, the CEO of the TED Conference, observes about the more general category of slides also applies to clips: "The first question to ask is whether you actually need [them]." "It is a striking fact," he explains in *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*, "that at least a third of TED's most viewed talks make no use of slides whatsoever."

Anderson imagines objections to this view: Wouldn't a talk plus images always be more interesting than just a talk? "Well, no actually," he says. "Slides move at least a little bit of attention away from the speaker and onto the screen. If the whole power of a talk is in the personal connection between speaker and audience, slides may actually get in the way of that."

He adds that having no slides at all is better than having bad slides, a point I'd extend to technology more generally. You don't want something designed to enhance your presentation to instead

undermine it. Some companies—Amazon, Apple, pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline—have taken hard stances against PowerPoint in particular, as did former defense secretary Robert Gates. During his tenure at the Pentagon, nobody giving him a briefing was allowed to use it.

Yet even if you are good with PowerPoint or other digital tools, don't mistake its accoutrements for quality content. A crappy presentation with good technology is still a crappy presentation. Even the most dynamic heels in the world won't save you.

Speaking Stories: Respect the Robe

Both on the page and in person, she spoke from the body.

—Description of poet and activist Audre Lorde by
Emily Bernard in “Audre Lorde Broke the Silence” (2021)

(1) Respect the Robe:

Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman to become a justice on the US Supreme Court. Before being elevated to that position, she spent several years as a state court judge in Arizona. This was

back in the 1970s, when the legal world was even more male-dominated than it is now. O'Connor, however, was extremely savvy about the way she presented herself and often had “small but telling ways” of establishing her authority, as Evan Thomas notes in *First*, his bestselling biography of her. Here is how he describes one of those ways: “At the sentencing commission, she came straight from court and seemed, to some of the participants, to make a show of taking off her black [judicial] robe and draping it on the back of her chair. No one doubted who was the judge in the room.”

Words can signal power—but so can, O'Connor showed, physical gestures.

(2) On Bended Knee: Apologies are hard. Apologies on behalf of entire countries are even harder. Political leaders looking for a model to follow might therefore learn a lot from the dramatic gesture German chancellor Willy Brandt made when he visited Warsaw, Poland on December 7, 1970. Poland, as the Pulitzer

Prize-winning geographer Jared Diamond writes in *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis*, “had been the country that had had the highest percentage of its population killed during World War Two. It had been the site of the biggest Nazi extermination camps.

Poles had good reason to loathe Germans as unrepentant Nazis.”

This historical background makes what Brandt did as he approached a monument commemorating the Warsaw

Ghetto Uprising, which was an unsuccessful Jewish revolt against Nazi occupation in the spring of 1943, that much more remarkable. Here’s how Diamond describes Brandt’s move: “In front of the Polish crowds, Brandt spontaneously fell down on his knees, acknowledged the millions of victims of the Nazis, and asked for forgiveness for

Hitler’s dictatorship and World War Two. Even Poles who continued to distrust Germans recognized Brandt’s behavior as unplanned, sincere, and deeply meant. In today’s world of carefully scripted, unemotional diplomatic statements, Brandt’s kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto stands out as a unique heartfelt apology by the leader of one country to the people of another country who had suffered greatly.”

There is now even a plaque in Warsaw to celebrate Brandt’s act.

(3) Flags: Planting a flag can send a powerful message. Think of the six US Marines who banded together to raise one in World War II during the Battle of Iwo Jima. Or picture Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong sticking one on the moon in 1969. Each act moved people much more than words alone could have.

The same is true of what civil rights activist Bree Newsome did in the early morning of June 27, 2015, outside the state capitol building in Columbia, South Carolina. Only instead of planting a flag, Newsome took one down.

Ten days before, nine churchgoers were killed in a racially motivated mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. That, to Newsome, was an inflection point: “A white man had just entered a black church and massacred people as they prayed. He had assassinated a civil rights leader. This was not a page in a textbook I was reading nor an inscription on a monument I was visiting. This was now. This was real.”

Spurred to action, Newsome headed to the capitol. She could have given a speech. She could have published an op-ed. She decided, however, to do something more dynamic, if also considerably more dangerous. She climbed up the thirty-foot pole in front of the statehouse and removed the Confederate flag that, to her and many others, represented a shameful legacy of racism and oppression.

“The history of the South is also in many ways complex and full of inconvenient truths,” she later told the *Washington Post*. “But in order to move into the future we must reckon with the past.”

Newsome was soon arrested, and later that day a Confederate flag was put back up on the pole. But as word spread about what she had done, more and more pressure was placed on state officials to reverse course and take down the flag for good. Less than two weeks later, they did. Newsome’s climb helped bring about a historic political change.*

* Newsome, who is Black, didn’t do the climb alone. She was helped by James Tyson, a thirty-year-old white man. The partnership was strategic. As the *Washington Post* story explained, the two of them decided “that a black woman should be the one to remove the flag and that a white man . . . would help her over the fence ‘as a sign that our alliance transcended both racial and gender divides.’”

Speaking Studies: Body > Face

I sing the body electric.

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

(1) Body > Face: A team of psychologists decided to investigate the role body language plays in communicating positive and negative emotions. The conventional wisdom has been that the information transmitted by facial expressions is much more significant. “We assume that the face conveys whatever is in the person’s mind, that we can recognize their emotions,” says Princeton’s Alexander Todorov, who was part of the research team that conducted the study. “But that’s not necessarily true.” Particularly when emotions reach a high level of intensity—when people are excited or angry or in pain—the nuances of facial expressions begin to blur. It’s like “increasing the volume on stereo speakers to the point that [the message] becomes completely distorted.”

Todorov and his collaborators found that body cues—not facial expressions—tend to be better emotional indicators. “Before I read this paper, I would have thought that the body only provides contextual clues,” said the psychologist Jamin Halberstadt, who was interviewed for a story announcing the study’s findings. “[But the research] is not saying that bodily context helps interpret an expression of emotion—it is saying that bodily context is the expression of emotion.” “The face,” he continued, “reveals a general intensity of feeling but doesn’t communicate what the person is feeling exactly. The body is where the valid information comes from during intense feelings.”

Which means it may not be enough simply to rely on a smile or grimace to communicate your message when presenting. In one of the study’s more interesting

experiments, pictures of people were altered so that faces from one emotional peak (victory) were spliced onto a body from an opposing peak (defeat). When people, unaware of the splicing, were asked to assess the overall emotion conveyed, they more often picked the emotion associated with the body.

(2) Displacement: In *Work Rules!*, the former head of “People Operations” at Google, Laszlo Bock, describes a program called “G2G” (“Googler-to-Googler”) that gives employees at the company a chance to teach one another a range of skills. One of the many courses offered while Bock was there focused on giving effective presentations, including tips on how to take potentially distracting movements—like fidgeting—and channel them into something more purposeful. Here are two of the well-tested techniques. Both come from Google sales leader Adam Green:

If you find yourself always fiddling with your hands or keeping them in your pockets, try standing behind a chair or podium and planting your hands on the podium so you appear confident. Planting your hands displaces the nervous energy.

To rid yourself of saying “umm” during a presentation, use physical displacement. Every time you are transitioning, do something small but physical, like moving your pen. Making a conscious effort to move your pen will turn your brain off from using a verbal filler instead.

(3) Visuals, Vocabulary, and Viewpoints: In a paper published in the *Journal of Child Language* in 2014, a trio of University of Chicago psychologists—Özlem Ece Demir,

Susan C. Levine, and Susan Goldin-Meadow—review research showing the relationship between the use of gestures by children early in life and a host of later verbal developments. “Names for objects that young children indicate in gesture are more likely to quickly become part of their spoken vocabularies than names for objects that they do not indicate in gesture,” they note. “Similarly, the age at which children first combine words and gestures to convey sentence-like information (e.g. pointing to a jar while saying *open*) predicts the age at which they will produce their first two-word utterance (e.g. *open box*).”

The paper then adds an additional relationship, based on observations of five-year-olds, six-year-olds, and seven-year-olds. Young children who used character-viewpoint gestures when they told stories at age five went on to produce better-structured stories at later ages than children who did not use gestures in this way. “Doing gestures thus has the potential to enhance both story comprehension and story production,” the researchers conclude.

They also explain that these findings align well with studies of mathematical and spatial thinking, “which show that children who are taught to practice a problem-solving strategy in gesture are more likely to learn how to solve the problem than children who practice the strategy only in speech or simply watch another person’s gestures.”

Speaking Exercises: Storytime

For we can indicate our will not merely by a gesture of the hands, but also with a nod from the head: signs take the place of language in the dumb, and the movements of the dance are frequently full of meaning, and appeal to the emotions without any aid from words.

—Marcus Fabius Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (95 AD)

Option A

Step 1: Think of a story you like telling. It could be about someone in your family. It could be about one of your friends. It could be about anyone, including yourself.

Step 2: Record a video of yourself telling the story.

Step 3: Record yourself telling it again. But this time keep your body as still as possible. No hand gestures. No footwork. No nothing. Try not to even move your face that much, beyond what it takes to open your mouth and talk.

Step 4: Record yourself telling it a third time. Focus on exaggerating your movements. Use your arms. Use your legs. Use anything you think will help capture and enhance what you are trying to say.

Step 5: Watch all three recordings. What do you notice in each of them? When are you most engaging? When are you hardest to watch? Which movements seem to work for you? Which don't? What might you try if you told the story again?

Don't feel compelled to commit to a uniform style. It may help to mix and match. The point is simply to help you become more aware of the role movement can play. Some situations will require a lot. Some will require a little. Some will require none at all. Good speakers and presenters adapt accordingly.

DYNAMIC

Option B

Find a two-minute video clip of someone you think is particularly dynamic when speaking. Record yourself mimicking their movements as their audio plays in the background. Or if you know their audio well enough, try saying it yourself. Possible candidates include the following:

- your favorite stand-up comedian
- a good speech from a movie
- a good speech from a television show
- a good speech from a play
- a recording of a teacher you like

Identify three movements you found effective and might usefully add to your own repertoire. Identify at least one that isn't a good fit for you at all. An important part of being dynamic is knowing which movements someone with your particular strengths and weaknesses should avoid.

FIVE

Unexpected

Our brightest blazes of gladness are commonly kindled by unexpected sparks.

—Samuel Johnson, *The Idler* (1759)

Be surprising, in a convincing way. That's not a bad goal to shoot for when giving a presentation, especially considering that many studies have shown the beneficial effect that surprises can have on people's ability to learn and retain new material. As one group of Swiss researchers put it, "When subjects are surprised and uncertain, they pay more attention to new information and tip the balance in favor of new information relative to accumulated evidence in prior beliefs."

But there has to be a purpose to the surprise. Shock value can seem empty, even manipulative, if it's not accompanied by actual value. Novelty is wasted if there is no supporting substance.

That's why I tell students preparing to give a presentation to "be surprising, in a convincing way."

The phrase comes from the British writer E. M. Forster in his book *Aspects of the Novel*, which collects a set of lectures he gave at Cambridge University in 1927. Making a distinction now familiar to many English majors and MFA students, Forster identifies two types of literary characters: round characters and flat

characters. "The test of a round character," he explains, "is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round."

Presenters aren't necessarily novelists, but the best ones do know how to tell a good story, even if that story is not about a person but a product, or not about an event but an idea. Presentations by two different tech icons—Bill Gates and Steve Jobs—provide helpful examples.

A. Microsoft, Malaria, and Mosquitos

The Bill Gates presentation I am thinking of came in 2009 on the stage of that year's TED Conference in Long Beach, California.

Among the topics he addressed was a disease whose effects are as disproportionate as they are devastating: malaria. Over two hundred million people in the world were infected with malaria at the time Gates gave his talk, and virtually all lived in one general area—poor countries bunched around the equator.

That wasn't always the case. In 1900, people across the globe contracted malaria, and things continued to be that way until as late as 1942. But then rich countries began systematic, well-resourced eradication efforts. The United States, for example, became malaria-free by 1951. All of Europe earned that distinction in 1975, followed by Australia in 1982. You are not going to find many malaria cases in Sydney or Melbourne. Nor in St. Louis, St. Paul, or Stockholm.

The negative consequence of this success is that funding for more widespread eradication stalled. As Gates put it, "Because the disease is only in poorer countries, it doesn't get much investment." He even noted, by way of illustration, that there is actually more money spent on research to cure male-

pattern baldness than there is on research to cure malaria. It was an unexpected comparison that really engaged the audience, at least judging by how much laughter the comparison generated.

But what engaged people even more—and drew headlines around the world—was what Gates did next: he let a bunch of mosquitos, the very things that transmit malaria, fly around the auditorium.

Up until that point in the presentation, the mosquitos had been secured in a glass jar, far away from anyone they could bite and infect. But when it comes to fearing the disease, Gates cheekily told the crowd, "There is no reason only poor people should have the experience." So he removed the jar's lid and let the mosquitos loose.

He didn't let the crowd panic for too long before revealing that those particular mosquitos were harmless and didn't carry any malaria.

He did, however, definitely make his point: the developed world is unhelpfully insulated from, and even ignorant of, a disease that terrorizes hundreds of millions of people every day. If a picture is worth a thousand words, those mosquitos were worth a whole lot more—perhaps even, Gates seemed to hope, a renewed push to end the disease.

B. Apple and Envelopes

About a year before Gates and his mosquitoes appeared on the TED Talk stage in Long Beach, another tech-industry icon, Steve Jobs, appeared on the Macworld stage in San Francisco. He didn't have any insects with him. He had something much more pedestrian: an interoffice envelope.

The envelope didn't have any special markings on it. It didn't have a crazy design. Instead, it looked exactly like what you might find in supply rooms across the world—a paper-thin manila rectangle, with six preview holes on each side, and that little red button and string designed to secure whatever memo or report you put inside. Except the envelope Jobs brought out didn't contain a memo or report. It contained an entire computer. To stress just how light and lean the new MacBook Air laptop was, Jobs had placed the laptop in a plain old interoffice envelope. He then bragged that it was “the thinnest [laptop] in the world.”

Gestures like this were common when Jobs was running Apple, and they continued even after he died in 2011. When the company launched the iPad Mini in 2012, for instance, its marketing chief, Phil Schiller, showed the device alongside a pencil. “This iPad Mini is just 7.2 millimeters thin,” he said. “That’s about one quarter thinner than the 4th generation iPad. To put it into context, it’s as thin as a pencil.”

Numbers and dimensions alone wouldn't have done the needed persuasive work. Schiller's unexpected comparison was much more effective.

C. Include a Little Mischief

Each of these examples—Gates’s mosquitos, Jobs’s envelope, and Schiller’s pencil—illustrate that it can be good to include a little mischief in a presentation. You don’t want to go overboard. You don’t want to offend. But a bit of good-natured irreverence can add some welcome levity and wit to the audience’s experience. So let’s check out a couple more examples to get a sense of the range of possibilities. The first involves a bag of popcorn. The second involves a cup of ice water. Both are good reminders that mischief can begin with the mundane.

Popcorn: In *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Take Hold and Others Don’t*, Chip Heath of Stanford University and Dan Heath of Duke University describe how back in 1992, a public health researcher named Art Silverman cleverly communicated the nutritional consequences of using coconut oil to pop popcorn, which is the process many movie theaters relied on at the time.

Rather than just tell people that a medium-sized bag of popcorn made with coconut oil contains thirty-seven grams of saturated fat—almost double the recommended amount for an entire day—the nonprofit organization Silverman worked for called a press conference and made the following announcement: “A medium-sized ‘butter’ popcorn at a typical neighborhood movie theater contains more artery-clogging fat than a bacon-and-eggs breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings—combined!”

But the announcement wasn’t the helpfully mischievous part of the presentation. The helpfully mischievous part was the visual prop the organization created to accompany its message: they brought

out a full buffet of greasy food for all the television cameras to see. The not-so-subtle message: “This is what thirty-seven grams looks like. It’s what you eat every time you snack on just a medium-sized bag of popcorn.”

The press conference quickly got a lot of attention. Featured on CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN, it also, the Heath brothers explain, “made the front pages of *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post’s Style* section. Leno and Letterman cracked jokes about fat-soaked popcorn, and headline writers trotted out some doozies: ‘Popcorn Gets an ‘R’ Rating,’ ‘Lights, Action, Cholesterol!,’ and ‘Theater Popcorn is Double Feature of Fat.’”

Best of all, many of the biggest theater chains in the United States soon announced that they would stop using coconut oil. Mischief, in this instance, made a difference.

Ice Water: This next example comes from the presidential commission created in 1986 to investigate the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, which killed all seven crew members on board. Picked to be a member of the commission, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman soon became fed up with what he considered the irrelevant and evasive testimony of many NASA representatives. So he decided to take matters into his own impish hands during a televised hearing. Here’s an account of what he did. It comes from *Genius: The Life and Times of Richard Feynman*, an engaging biography by the award-winning science writer James Gleick.

Tuesday morning [Feynman] rose early and hailed a taxicab. He circled official Washington in search of a hardware store and finally managed to buy a small C-clamp and pliers. As the hearing began, he called for ice water, and an aide returned with cups and a pitcher for the entire commission. As a life-size cross section of the joint was passed along for the commissioners to examine, [Air Force Commander Donald] Kutyna saw Feynman take the clamp and pliers

from his pocket and pull a piece of the O-ring rubber from the model. He knew what Feynman meant to do.

What happened next became perhaps the most memorable moment of the entire investigation. Feynman took the clamp and pliers from his pocket, dipped them in the ice water, and then offered the following analysis: “I took this stuff that I got out of your seal and I put it in ice water, and I discovered that when you put some pressure on it for a while and then undo it, it does not stretch back. It stays the same dimension. In other words, for a few seconds at least and more seconds than that, there is no resilience in this particular material when it is at a temperature of 32 degrees.”

The “stuff” Feynman was referring to was the now infamous O-rings that were supposed to keep the space shuttle sealed during the launch. Feynman and his ice water showed something important about them: they didn’t respond well to cold temperatures. “I believe,” Feynman announced with grave understatement, “that has some significance to understanding our problem.”

The news coverage of Feynman’s mini-experiment was immediate and far-reaching. And pretty soon more official tests confirmed that, in Gleick’s words, “the failure of the cold seals had been virtually inevitable—not a freakish event, but a consequence of the plain physics of materials, as straightforward as Feynman had made it seem with his demonstration.” Gleick then quotes renowned physicist Freeman Dyson’s summation of Feynman’s performance: “The public saw with their own eyes how science is done, how a great scientist thinks with his hands, how nature gives a clear answer when a scientist asks her a clear question.”

But here's the thing about that performance: Feynman's ice water demo almost didn't happen.

The first obstacle was getting the actual ice water, as Feynman himself recalls in *What Do You Care What Other People Think?*, a memoir prepared with the help of his friend Ralph Leighton:

I go to the meeting, all ready, with pliers in one pocket and a C-clamp in the other. I sit down next to General Kutyna.

At the previous meeting, there was ice water for everybody. This time, there's no ice water.

I get up and go over to somebody who looks like he's in charge, and I say, "I'd like a glass of ice water, please."

He says, "Certainly! Certainly!"

Five minutes later, the guards close the doors, the meeting starts, and I haven't got my ice water.

Feynman then gestures to the guy again. "Don't worry," the guy says, "it's coming." But as the meeting continues there is still no sign of the ice water. So Feynman signals him one more time.

Unfortunately, he gets the same answer—"Don't worry, you'll get it"—and the same result: no ice water. (The number of exclamation points Feynman uses to tell this story in his memoir—eight in two pages—helps communicate just how frantic the episode must have seemed to him.)

Finally, with the O-ring pieces already in hand and primed for their big moment, Feynman sees a young woman walking toward the stage with an entire tray of ice water. She had apparently misunderstood the scope of his request. He had wanted a single glass of ice water—for him only. But she had brought a whole bunch of ice water—for everybody. Preparing them is what took so long.

Undeterred, Feynman reaches for the microphone.

But then he runs into the second obstacle: the television cameras are pointed in a different direction. They are focused on another

commission member. If Feynman begins his demonstration, nobody is going to see it.

It is unclear whether Feynman realizes this problem himself. But General Donald Kutyna, who was one of Feynman's few allies on the commission, certainly did. So Kutyna leans over and says, "Co-pilot to co-pilot. Not now."

Feynman doesn't quite get the message and goes for the microphone a second time. "Not now!" Kutyna urges again, pointing to a briefing book one of the NASA representatives, Lawrence Mulloy, had been discussing. The book contained charts, slides, and all sorts of other material. "When Mr. Mulloy gets to this slide here," Kutyna says, "that's the right time to do it."

Heeding Kutyna's advice, Feynman waits a little longer. And then, when it is time for the slide, he acts. Lights. Camera. O-ring.

Twenty-five years later, Matthew Herper, a senior editor at *Forbes* who covers science and medicine, commemorated the event in a special post. Praising Feynman's "graceful proof that the space shuttle's O-ring was not able to handle the cold," he noted that "it didn't take a high-tech assay, it didn't take a supercomputer. Just a guy who was clever enough to dip a rubber ring into a styrofoam cup of drinking water. Every day, we should all aspire to dip the O-ring in the [metaphorical] ice water. There are few things anyone can do that are more important."

Herper might have added—given General Kutyna's key role in Feynman's performance—that when trying to pull off the unexpected, it helps to have a co-pilot.

Speaking Stories: Babble

Don't buy this jacket.

—Message the clothing company Patagonia printed along with a picture of one of its jackets in a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* in 2011. The company paid for the advertisement to run on Black Friday, the biggest shopping day of the year.

(1) Babble: In *Originals: How Non-conformists Move the World*, Adam Grant of the Wharton School of Business tells the story of Alisa Volkman and Rufus Griscom. These two entrepreneurs took an unorthodox approach to pitching investors when starting Babble, an online magazine and blog network devoted to giving comically candid advice to new parents.

“In 2009, when Griscom pitched Babble to venture capitalists,” Grant writes, “he did the exact opposite of what every entrepreneur has been taught to do: he presented a slide listing the top five reasons *not* to invest in his business. This should have killed his pitch. Investors are looking for reasons to say yes, and here he was, hand delivering a list of reasons to say no. Entrepreneurs are supposed to talk about the upsides of their companies, not the downsides.”

Yet Griscom’s counterintuitive approach worked. By the end of that year, Babble had raised \$3.3 million in funding.

Griscom used the same tactic two years later, on an even bigger stage: a meeting with Disney to see if the company wanted to buy Babble. Here’s Grant again. “For this pitch, it would logically have been unthinkable to lead with the downsides. It’s one thing to admit that your startup has problems; you can promise to fix the flaws. But when you’re selling an established company, you have every incentive to emphasize the silver linings—and you’re not going to stick around long enough to do anything about the clouds.”

Strangely, though, Griscom did it again. One of his slides read “Here’s Why You Should Not Buy Babble.” The result: Disney bought the company for \$40 million.

Griscom’s approach won’t work in every situation. But there can be something at once refreshing and cleverly strategic about leading with your proposal’s faults, at least with certain audiences. “Most of us assume that to be persuasive, we ought to emphasize our strengths and minimize our weaknesses,” Grant notes. “That kind of powerful communication makes sense if the audience is supportive. But when you’re pitching a novel idea or speaking up with a suggestion for change, your audience is likely to be skeptical. Investors are looking to poke holes in your arguments; managers are hunting for reasons why your suggestion won’t work.”

Under those circumstances, it can be helpfully disarming to lead with your flaws. Candor can be a compelling form of surprise.

(2) Rip It Out: One of the more memorable moments in the 1989 movie *Dead Poets Society* is when the teacher played by Robin Williams gives students an introductory lesson on poetry. After asking each of them to read aloud from a standard textbook, he makes the following pronouncement: “Excrement.”

He is referring to the stale theory of literature the textbook expounds. “We’re not laying pipe,” he says, mocking the author’s overly mechanical approach. “We’re writing poetry.”

The quip grabs the students’ attention. But not as much as what Williams says next: “Now I want you to rip out that page.” Stunned and a little bit skeptical, the students all need some extra coaching. “Go on, rip out the entire page. You heard me, rip it out. Rip it out!”

What follows is the best kind of classroom engagement. The students ditch a fusty, boring, unhelpful mode of instruction and take ownership over their own education and development. And although the scene is obviously fictional, the lesson for teachers of all kinds is clear: craft your content around moments of surprise.

Maybe not every class. And certainly not too much in any one class. (If brevity is, as Shakespeare's Polonius says, "the soul of wit," irregularity is the soul of surprise.) But do build in at least some moments of surprise. Poetry isn't the only subject that can be enlivened by the unexpected.

(3) Sojourner Truth: We first discussed Sojourner Truth in chapter two, when we were learning about the rule of three

and other effective rhythmic structures. One of the heroes of the nineteenth-century fight to end slavery in the United States, Truth became a leading voice of the abolition movement after escaping with her infant daughter from the New York home of her master, John

Dumont. (Heart-wrenchingly, Truth was not able to take her other four children with her.)

We already looked at Truth's most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," which was delivered in Akron, Ohio in 1851. It's her actions seven years later during a political meeting in northern Indiana, however, that show her real gift for the unexpected.

The meeting was filled with both antislavery and proslavery advocates. At some point, the proslavery advocates turned hostile, as the historian Nell Irvin Painter explains in *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*. They "challenged [Truth's] authenticity

as a woman,” Painter writes, “knowing that much of her appeal lay in her uniqueness as a former slave woman condemning the evils of slavery.” Several members of the crowd even insisted that Truth step aside and show her breasts to the women present, as a way to confirm her actual identity.

Truth did them one better, in a calculated bit of surprise. At once shaming and scandalizing her critics, she bared her breasts to the entire audience. Here is how the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, which covered the meeting, described the situation: “[Truth] told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to man’s estate; that, although they had suckled her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck!”

“By inviting her critics to suck,” Painter concludes, Truth “infantilized them. She unmanned them. Truth had turned the challenge upside down.”

Not every flash of nudity will be this effective, of course. Remember Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” at the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show? That’s not going to win a Sojourner Truth Award for Social Justice anytime soon.

But the idea of turning, in Painter’s words, a “challenge upside down” is a helpful one to keep in mind, especially because it stretches well beyond bold bits of body language. Truth’s indignant ingenuity is a good lesson for us all.

Speaking Studies: Peek-a-Boo Pedagogy

The link between information and novelty was discovered and brilliantly explained by Claude Shannon, an engineer working at Bell Labs in the 1950s. According to Shannon, the amount of information contained in a signal is proportional to the amount of novelty—or, put another way, the amount of uncertainty—in it. That may seem counterintuitive. Uncertainty seems the antithesis of information. But what Shannon meant was this: real information should tell us something we do not already know; it should therefore be unpredictable.

—John Coates, *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf: Risk Taking, Gut Feelings, and the Biology of Boom and Bust* (2012)

(1) Peek-a-Boo Pedagogy: The learning benefits of surprise start early. As Lisa Feigenson of Johns Hopkins University explained while describing research she and fellow cognitive psychologist Aimee Stahl published in the journal *Science*, “When babies are surprised, they learn much better, as though they are taking the occasion to try to figure out something about their world.”

Studies done on adult participants have shown something similar. So consider building in opportunities to defy the expectations of your audience and create what the behavioral economist George Loewenstein calls “information gaps,” especially if you want your message to be something people not only listen to but remember.

(2) Star at Work: We met Robert Kelley, an organizational psychologist at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University, back in the introduction to this book. He’s the one who suggested that before every presentation, you should ask yourself the following question: “What is the most creative way (within the confines of the law) to lock in the audience I want to reach?”

In *How to Be a Star at Work*, Kelley shares his findings from over a decade of research studying high-performing employees

inside companies such as 3M, AT&T, Bell Labs, and Hewlett-Packard. His advice on how to persuade “the right audience with the right message” focuses heavily on leveraging the unexpected. He offers a grass-seed researcher named Josiah as an example.

“Most of us would have to be paid to listen to someone lecture on grass-breeding techniques,” Kelley writes. Yet Josiah’s lectures are standing room only. The reason: when Josiah talks about grass, he talks about something surprising—each strand’s sex life. Here’s how Kelley describes Josiah’s approach: “[Josiah] talks about the emotional state of various strains: their temerity, their fickleness, how the timing has to be right, how once they say ‘no,’ they mean ‘no’ and no amount of coaxing will change their minds. . . . He recounts setting his alarm clock for 2:00 A.M.—their prime mating time—to brush the male and female plants against each other, only to find later they have rejected his sex therapy and failed to reproduce.”

These details create a unique, engaging narrative, as well as a better chance that the audience will retain what Josiah says. By the end of the talk people are “captivated by the vividly drawn human personalities of the various grass strains,” Kelley explains. “They also learn about what they previously thought of as one of the world’s most boring topics: grass breeding.”

That’s a win.

(3) Cautionary Note: Don’t interpret Josiah’s presentation style—and Kelley’s endorsement of it—as a license to be scandalous or offensive. Part of what seems to make Josiah so effective is his sense of restraint and decorum. He doesn’t turn to bathroom humor as a crutch. He doesn’t go for shock value. He instead shows that you can be unexpected without being inappropriate.

Speaking Exercises: Supreme Surprise

On February 22, 1892, Oscar Wilde scandalized the first-night audience at London's fashionable St. James' Theatre by appearing in front of the curtain to commend the spectators on their good taste in applauding [his play] Lady Windermere's Fan. Wilde brandished a lighted cigarette (an unforgivable solecism given that ladies were present) and wore a green carnation in his buttonhole. What was the meaning of this mysterious affectation? Cecil Graham, the play's dandy and presumed mouthpiece for Wilde, had worn an identical green carnation in the third act. When the puzzled spectators turned to their fellows, they were dealt another surprise: Wilde had planted impeccably dressed men throughout the audience, each of whom proudly sported a green carnation.

—Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (2003)

Background

The following anecdote appears in the book *The Brethren: Inside the Supreme Court* by Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong.

It involves the Supreme Court justice John Paul Stevens, who served on the Court for over thirty years and whose legal acumen and technical proficiency earned him the reputation as both a “lawyer’s lawyer” and a “judge’s judge”:

“While Stevens was in private practice, before his nomination to the Court of Appeals in 1970, an opposing attorney noticed that Stevens always wore bow ties and implied that lawyers who wore clip-on bow ties could not be trusted. Stevens quietly stood up, slowly untied his regular bow tie, and retied it, all without saying a word.”

UNEXPECTED

Assignment

Build a nonverbal surprise into your next presentation or high-stakes conversation. It can be something sartorial, like Stevens's calm, calculated tie demonstration. But it need not be. Show a picture. Play a song. Use a prop. Some of the best surprises are never spoken.

SIX

Conversation

Treat the members of the audience as if they're friends, that you're going to talk to them the way you talk to your friends, with the same candor and trust and respect.

—Peggy Noonan, *On Speaking Well* (1999)

There are few auditory treats as enjoyable as hearing Maya Angelou read her poetry out loud, something that can still be done thanks to a number of wonderful recordings. Even at the age of eighty-six, which is when Angelou died, she never talked *at* her audience, and she cer-

tainly didn't talk down *to* them. Instead, she talked *with* them. She had a conversation.

The size of the audience didn't matter. In 1993, she became the second poet ever to speak at a presidential inauguration. (Robert Frost was the first, at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1960.) An estimated eight hundred thousand people

attended, and millions more watched on television. Yet despite the grand stage, there is a striking ease about Angelou's delivery that day, a way in which her words don't just express her ideas but also invite everyone into her intellectual and emotional orbit. The final lines of the poem she read, "On the Pulse of Morning," capture this quality.

*Here, on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, and into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope—
Good morning.*

It's tough to imagine a more welcoming end to an address than that.

A. Mrs. Bertha Flowers

Angelou wasn't always so comfortable with spoken words. One of the most famous parts of her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is

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also one of the most devastating: the silence she imposed on herself after being raped, at the age of eight, by her mother's boyfriend.

Because the man was killed soon after Angelou testified against him in court, she began to believe her own words were lethal. "I had sold myself to the devil and there could be no escape," she remembers thinking. "The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than [my brother] Bailey. Instinctively, or somehow, I knew that because I loved him so much I'd never hurt [Bailey], but if I talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people."

It would take the intervention of a local grandee, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, to break the spell. Angelou described her in the following way: "Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat of [the black part of town]. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. She was thin without the taut look of wiry people, and her printed voile dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer. She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town."

When Mrs. Flowers learned of Angelou's reluctance to speak, she didn't berate or bully her. "No one is going to make you talk," she said, "possibly no one can." But she did slyly insist that Angelou, an avid reader, would get more out of books if she read them out loud. Here is the specific advice she gave: "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning."

"I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words," Angelou writes of the observation. "It seemed so valid and poetic." She also, importantly, soon broke her silence.

B. Warren Buffett

The road other great communicators have taken to oratorical comfort has been less traumatic, though certainly not without its anxieties. Warren Buffett's folksy charm, for example, has helped him win over everyone from shareholders, to reporters, to members of Congress. But as an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, he was so scared of speaking in public that he actively tried to avoid classes where that was a requirement. It wasn't until after he graduated, began working

as a stockbroker, and then completed the second public speaking course he signed up for (he chickened out of the first) that he began to develop what would become his trademark style: unshowy, unhurried, and wonderfully conversational.

"You wouldn't believe what a good feeling you get when you listen to Warren and (his business partner) Charlie [Munger]," one attendee of Buffett's annual meeting for Berkshire Hathaway shareholders observed. Another added, "You feel like you're part of a group of people who share the same values—solid, honest people, hard workers." That is an amazing thing to say about someone who accumulated a fortune greater than the GDP of many countries.

What seems to have helped Buffett is also something that helped Angelou: being, at heart, a teacher. "I am not a writer who teaches," Angelou, who spent over thirty years as a professor at Wake Forest University, told *USA Today* in a 2008 interview. "I am a teacher who writes." Buffett took a similar position in 2018, telling financial journalist Andy Serwer that he would rather be remembered not as one of the world's wealthiest investors but as a teacher. "That would be very flattering," he explained, "if [the word *teacher*] was on my tombstone." A CNBC documentary about Buffett has taken at least one step in that direction. It's called *Warren Buffett: Investor. Teacher. Icon.*

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Not every teacher, of course, treats the chance to speak like the start of a conversation. Some aren't out to establish a bond, build a relationship, or engage in an open exchange of ideas and information. They just want to hear themselves talk.

But if you listen to speeches by Angelou and Buffett, you get the sense that they approached opportunities to address an audience as opportunities to relate to that audience, to get to know them, to connect. Oprah Winfrey, who had Angelou as a guest on her show several times, once said that Angelou's "presence was like a warm bath after an exhausting day." No pretensions. No ego. Just a genuine and comforting capacity to pass along a few insights and bits of advice.

That's not a bad goal to shoot for in all kinds of speaking situations. Don't try to impress your audience. Don't set out to sound smart. Focus instead on being helpful. Treat your words like a gift you really want to share.

In the end, that might be the quality that links Angelou and Buffett the most. There is a generosity in the way they addressed people, a big-heartedness that communicated equal measures of warmth and wisdom. Channeling even a little of that the next time you are in front of an audience could go a very long way.

Speaking Stories: The Language of Common Life

The key to [Abraham] Lincoln's success [as a lawyer] was his uncanny ability to break down the most complex case or issue "into its simplest elements." He never lost a jury by fumbling with or reading from a prepared argument, relying instead "on his well-trained memory." He aimed for intimate conversations with the jurors, as if conversing with friends.

—Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership: In Turbulent Times* (2018)

(1) The Language of Common Life: Frances FitzGerald won the 2017 National Book Critics Award for *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, a sprawling history of the remarkable influence evangelical Christians have had on American life. One of the figures she features is Charles

Grandison Finney, whose religious leadership during the first half of the nineteenth century earned him the title “The Father of Modern Revivalism.”

What helped make Finney so popular and effective was his commitment to speaking in what he called “the language of common life.” “He looked at people in

the audience straight in the eye,” FitzGerald explains, “and addressed them as ‘you.’ His sentences were short and cogent, and his expressions colloquial.”

That’s a good strategy for conversational connection, especially when faced with a big group. Eye contact is important. Jargon can be off-putting. Long, meandering sentences can tax people’s patience, and obscure references usually do more harm than good. The “language of common life” is a much better, more audience-friendly approach.

Using it may even earn you a compliment similar to the one the abolitionist Henry B. Stanton* paid Finney after listening to one of Finney's sermons: "It did not sound like preaching."

(2) Kayaking: "Getting the rhythms of spoken language down is crucial," wrote Judith Shulevitz in a 2016 issue of *The Atlantic*, "but it's hardly sufficient to create a decent conversationalist." She

was describing efforts by Apple, Amazon, and other companies to create natural-sounding voice assistants like Siri and Alexa. The approach Google has taken with its own "Google Assistant" is

particularly instructive. According to Shulevitz, when lead designer James Giangola was training the actress whose voice was recorded for Google Assistant, he gave her some charmingly specific details to help her inhabit the role and produce the exact degree of upbeat geekiness he wanted. She should sound as though all of the following things are true:

- She comes from Colorado, a state in a region that lacks a distinctive accent.
- She's the youngest daughter of a research librarian and a physics professor who has a BA.
- When she was young, she won \$100,000 on *Jeopardy! Kids Edition*.

* Henry B. Stanton was the husband of the women's rights leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton mentioned in chapter two. They were quite the nineteenth-century "power couple."

- She used to work as a personal assistant to “a very popular late-night-TV satirical pundit.”
- She enjoys kayaking.

A skeptical colleague focused on the last detail and asked Giangola how someone would sound if they enjoyed kayaking. Here’s how Shulevitz described Giangola’s response: “During auditions (hundreds of people tried out for the role), Giangola turned to the doubter and said, ‘The candidate who just gave an audition—do you think she sounded energetic, like she’s up for kayaking?’ His colleague admitted that she didn’t. I said, ‘Okay. There you go.’”

(3) Location. Location. Location. In *Reach*, psychologist Andy Molinsky of the Brandeis University International School of Business tells the story of Lucy Wong. Having graduated summa cum laude from Yale with a dual degree in math and economics, Lucy went on to Harvard Business School before landing a job at the prestigious consulting firm Bain and Company. She had everything going for her, Molinsky says, including being fluent in three languages. There was only one problem: she was terrified of speaking up at meetings.

As Molinsky explains, “Lucy had grown up in a fairly strict Chinese household where she was taught to respect hierarchy and to speak when spoken to. That, combined with her naturally shy and introverted personality, made it very hard for her to speak her mind—initially at school (where even as early as fourth grade her teachers praised her ability but hoped she’d become more outspoken over time) and then in college and beyond.”

So instead of trying to change her personality, which was probably always going to lean toward diffidence, she tried

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to change her circumstances. In particular, she changed where she sat during meetings: “She would consistently sit next to people who were of higher power, especially if they were clients, because she had noticed that when they had questions, they’d often turn to the person next to them—even if it was a junior consultant—to help explain. And Lucy realized that by merely positioning herself next to them, she could get to be that person—the one to explain a complicated idea to the client—and, as it turned out, look positive in the eyes of the client as well as the people from her firm who observed the situation.”

The tactic worked. Initially afraid of even calling partners at the firm by their first names, Lucy started to feel more and more comfortable at meetings and when given other opportunities to voice her opinion. What began as a reason to quit her job turned into a source of her advancement. Lucy, Molinsky tells us, was ultimately promoted.

Speaking Studies: High-Considerateness versus High-Involvement

I am a partisan for conversation. To make room for it, I see some first, deliberate steps. At home, we can create sacred spaces: the kitchen, the dining room. We can make our cars “device-free zones.” We can demonstrate the value of conversation to our children. And we can do the same thing at work.

—Shelly Turkle, “The Flight from Conversation” (2012)

(1) Conversation Styles: The linguist Deborah Tannen of Georgetown University is the author of several bestselling books. In one of them, *You Just Don’t Understand*, she identifies two types of conversation styles: “high-considerateness” and “high-involvement.”

People who exhibit high-considerateness will generally let you finish your thought before they take their own turn to speak, she explains. They don’t complete your sentences. They don’t add side commentary. They don’t interrupt.

People who exhibit high-involvement, on the other hand, interrupt all the time. They’re not trying to be rude. They simply take a more active role when listening. They nod along. They interject words of affirmation (“Right,” “Yeah,” “Exactly”). They enjoy when ideas and observations are coproduced.

Not knowing the difference between these styles—and what the person you are talking to prefers—can lead to conversational friction. To some people, high-considerateness comes across as indifference. To others, high-involvement signals disrespect. So learn to be adaptable. Whether in a one-on-one situation or in front of a big group, a good conversationalist is a flexible conversationalist.

(2) Conversation Starters: Imagine you are on a bus, subway, or commuter train. You have your coffee. You have your briefcase. And you also have a stranger sitting next to you. Should you talk to them?

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To find out, two psychologists—Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago and Juliana Schroeder of Berkeley—divided a pool of commuters into three groups:

- Some were told to strike up a conversation with the person next to them.
- Some were told to remain in solitude.
- Some were told to do whatever they normally do.

Epley and Schroeder found that people tend to think neither they nor the stranger would enjoy chatting. Yet what the data showed was just the opposite: the research subjects who were randomly assigned to talk had the most pleasant commute.

“This pattern of results demonstrates a severe misunderstanding of the psychological consequences of social engagement,” Epley and Schroeder explain, adding that the mistake is “particularly unfortunate for a person’s well-being given that commuting is consistently reported to be one of the least pleasant experiences in the average person’s day. This experiment suggests that a surprising antidote for an otherwise unpleasant experience could be sitting very close by.”

(3) Mirror, Mirror: In 2016, the *Wall Street Journal* ran an article summarizing research on “mirroring,” which is a conversational strategy of adopting anything from the gestures, posture, vocal pitch, or tone of the person you are interacting with. “It is seen most often between romantic partners,” the article’s author, Sue Shellenbarger, notes, “but it happens at work, too, in networking sessions, meetings, and conversations with colleagues.”

One study she points to involved a retail store. Salespeople who were told to mirror the nonverbal and verbal behavior of

customers ended up selling more merchandise than the control group, and the customers they interacted with left with a more positive opinion of the store.

A different study, from the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, focused on mirroring in the context of a negotiation: “Those who mirrored others’ posture and speech reached a settlement 67% of the time, while those who didn’t reached a settlement 12.5%.” The thought is that this kind of mental and physical alignment can create a helpful sense of trust and familiarity.

Improv troupes use a version of mirroring to build rapport among their members. So do scientists, or at least the ones who train at Stony Brook University’s Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science. Here’s how the center’s namesake, award-winning actor Alan Alda, describes one of the exercises, in his 2017 book *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?*: “[The two young scientists] work at it for a while, and before long are surprised to find they can actually sync up, even if no one is leading. There is delighted laughter. An expression of surprise, even a little shock. They’re beginning to read each other’s bodies, learning to pick up clues that will lead eventually to reading each other’s feelings and thoughts—and in this way it will be as though they’re what’s called ‘reading each other’s minds.’”

Yet there is a danger with this approach. Mirroring that seems excessive, awkward, or overt can come across as creepy. As Chris Frith, a neuropsychologist at University College London who studies mimicking, told Shellenbarger, “We tend to like people who imitate us—as long as we don’t notice that they’re doing it.”

So perhaps a safer strategy is simply to adopt the kind of open, empathetic comportment that you might want mirrored

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back to you. Showing that you are really interested in listening can be the most comforting sight of all.

You can also try what Alison Brooks and Leslie John of the Harvard Business School have identified as one of the best ways to connect with somebody: ask follow-up questions.

This technique is its own form of mirroring, especially if your questions borrow language from your partner's answers. "Follow-up questions seem to have special power," Brooks and John write. "They signal to your conversation partner that you are listening, care, and want to know more. People interacting with a partner who asks lots of follow-up questions tend to feel respected and heard."

**Speaking Exercises: Friendly Advice,
Follow-Up Questions, and Talking to Strangers**

I prize the mechanics of conversation.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Society and Solitude* (1870)

(1) Friendly Advice

Imagine a friend of yours is about to do one of the following:

- give their first presentation to a board of directors
- argue a motion in federal court
- lead a training session for health care workers
- explain, as a consultant, the benefits of machine learning to a Fortune 500 company
- propose that school administrators fund a new student organization

Based on what you’ve learned in this chapter, what advice would you give them? Tailor your guidance to the specific scenario you choose but keep it brief—somewhere between ten to twenty-five words, the kind of thing you’d put in a quick email or text message in the following way: “Remember to _____.”

(2) Follow-Up Questions

The “Speaking Studies” section in this chapter mentioned that asking follow-up questions is an important skill to develop. This next exercise gives you a chance to observe that skill in action.

Step 1: Listen to a podcast that involves a host interviewing at least one guest. Here are some possible shows to pick from. But certainly feel free to choose something else.

- *Death, Sex, and Money*
- *Code Switch*

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- *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross
- *The Joe Rogan Experience*
- *WTF* with Marc Maron
- *Women at Work*
- *Radio Ambulante*
- *Asian Enough*
- *Revisionist History*
- *Freakonomics*
- *Griefcast*
- *Masters of Scale* with Reid Hoffman

Step 2: Evaluate how the host did asking follow-up questions.

- Which worked?
- Which didn't?
- Which might you try yourself?

(3) Talking to Strangers

The “Speaking Studies” section also mentioned research by Nicolas Epley and Julie Schroeder about the potential benefits of striking up a conversation with a stranger. Carry out a version of the experiment they created: pick at least one random person to talk to today. It could be the person standing in front of you in line at the grocery store. It could be someone sitting next to you in a coffee shop. It could be anybody at all.

Then use twenty to fifty words to answer the following questions:

- How did you expect the conversation with the stranger to go?
- How did it actually go?
- How did you feel after it was over?

SEVEN

Tact

*Step with care and great tact
and remember that Life's
a Great Balancing Act.*

—Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990)

It's not about you. That may be the most important lesson to learn when giving a presentation or delivering bad news.

It's also, unfortunately, one of the toughest to follow.

That's because these kinds of situations can be stressful. Your heart races. Your anxiety accumulates. And it can be hard not to panic, or at least not to get lost in your own head. But the more you can reorient your focus away from what the experience is going to be like for you and toward what the experience is going to be like for your audience, the better you are likely to perform.

Professor Bridgette Carr, the director of the Human Trafficking Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School, sent me a nice example of this reorientation after the two of us had been trying to prepare a group of students for a high-stakes presentation. The example came in the form of a short video clip of Benjamin Zander, the charismatic conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra who spent over forty years teaching at the New England Conservatory of Music. It shows Zander trying to get a very talented cellist to think

less about how she is doing as she performs and more about the contribution, indeed gift, her music could be to the people listening.

“You’re a wonderful player,” he tells her. “But you are very much contained in your own world.” What’s missing, he says, is an important awareness of two things: the experience of the audience and what her music could do for them.

To make his point, Zander asks a man in the front row to share his name. The man says his name is Andrew. Zander then gets the cellist to play again, but this time he insists that she play in a way that triggers in Andrew “an irresistible desire to dance.”

The Andrew-focused instruction is intended to help the cellist free her mind of anxious questions like “Do I sound sophisticated?” “Are my fingers in the right place?” and “Am I screwing this up?”

Instead, Zander wants her to focus on making Andrew boogie. “Andrew has had a very tough day at the office,” Zander explains, imaginatively creating a hypothetical scene for the cellist. “He’s tired. He’s sort of given up on a lot of things in his life, and he thinks it is pretty downhill from here. He’s feeling pretty hopeless. And into his life walks you, with a cello.”

Zander then brings the cellist down from the stage and places her chair right in front of Andrew’s. “It isn’t any more about you,” he reiterates. “We’re no longer interested in you. We’re interested in Andrew and what you can open up over here in terms of his capacity to dance.”

The cellist proceeds to play with much more feeling and verve, even getting Andrew to spring up and start waltzing around at one point, to the delight of everyone in the audience. Zander uses that moment to note the important transformation the cellist underwent. “I want to draw attention to this smile,” he says, pointing to her face. “You didn’t see the smile like that when she first played. She was up there worrying what all these people thought of her, and whether she was good enough and whether they would invite her back.”

“Instead of being about her, on the stage, and her worries and anxieties about whether she has been performing well,” Zander continues, “it became about a *contribution* to Andrew’s life, to remind him how joyful his life could be.” The result? The cellist did exactly what the music was designed for her to do. She played in a way that makes people get up and dance.

A. Contribution

The idea of making a “contribution” is key for Zander. In *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life*, he and his coauthor, Rosamund Stone Zander, title an entire chapter around that word. It’s called “Being a Contribution.”

The gist of their argument is that “unlike success and failure, *contribution* has no other side. It is not arrived at by comparison.” Instead, it helpfully focuses on what you can give to others. Your feelings of nervousness, stress, and self-consciousness may lessen as you shift “away from self-concern and engage in a relationship with others that is an arena for making a difference.”

They offer the following scenario to illustrate this shift.

Imagine you are a pianist and you meet someone who has no familiarity with—perhaps has never even heard—the E-Minor Prelude of Chopin. You might want to sit down next to him at the piano and say, “Listen to the theme in the right hand. See how it holds together over the arch of four bars, and then the melody goes down one step? Listen to the constantly changing harmonies in the left hand, how they ring every possible change on the melody note . . . and so on.” As you get caught up in the excitement of explaining and sharing the music with your companion, would you have time to be nervous? Of course not! It wouldn’t occur to you. But this is exactly what you are doing when you perform—you are pointing to the beauty and artistry of the music.

Getting “caught up in the excitement of explaining and sharing” is a wonderful way of describing the mindset you want to shoot for when presenting, whether you are in front of students, coworkers, judges, investors, or even paying customers. Another way is to say that you want to inhabit a “generosity of spirit.”

That phrase comes not from Zander and the world of music but from John le Carré and the world of literature (and espionage). We’ll learn about it next.

B. Generosity of Spirit

Le Carré has pulled off two difficult careers: he was a successful spy, and he was a successful novelist. Neither profession, you might imagine, is great preparation for public interviews.

“I love best the *privacy* of writing,” le Carré explains in his memoir *The Pigeon Tunnel*, “which is why I don’t do literary festivals and, as much as I can, stay away from interviews, even if the record doesn’t look that way. There are times, usually at night, when I wish I’d never given an interview at all.” Yet there is one interview that le Carré remembers with great fondness. The interviewer—the French journalist Bernard Pivot—treated him essentially like Benjamin Zander suggests you should treat all audiences: as a valued recipient of a wonderful gift.

Le Carré’s term for that treatment is “generosity of spirit.” He explains what he means in a glowing description of Pivot: “Watching Pivot perform in real-time before a live audience that is free-falling under his spell, it’s not hard to understand how he has achieved something no other television character on earth has come within shouting distance of imitating. This isn’t charisma. This isn’t just energy, charm, deftness, erudition. Pivot has the most elusive quality of them all, the

one that film producers and casting directors across the globe would give their eye-teeth for: a natural generosity of spirit, better known as heart.”

“In a country famous for making an art form out of ridicule,” le Carré continues, “Pivot lets his subject know from the moment he or she sits down that they’re going to be all right. And his audience feels that too. They’re his family. No other interviewer, no other journalist of the few I now recall, has left such a deep mark on me.”

C. Tact

“Generosity of spirit” and “contribution” strike me as linked ideas. What Benjamin Zander wanted the cellist to do is the same thing that John le Carré saw Bernard Pivot do. Put the audience first. Make them your priority.

The shift in focus requires a keen sensitivity to other people’s needs and interests. Which is why the title of this final chapter—and the word used in the last component in our P-R-O-D-U-C-T framework—is “Tact.” You can’t make a contribution if you don’t know what to contribute. Misreading the room will doom you from the start.

To help fine-tune your radar, consider a tidy formulation from Donald Bryant, who taught rhetoric for many years at Washington University in St. Louis and then at the University of Iowa: “Rhetoric is the process of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas.” It’s a useful definition and one from which we can generate the following set of questions. Consider them when thinking about what you plan to offer your next audience:

- What do I need to change about my material to make it easier for my audience to absorb, engage with, and remember?
- What would I be looking for from someone like me if I were in the audience? What, in other words, would I want to

receive in terms of content and delivery from a person with my combination of skills, experience, and interests?

- What would make the audience walk away feeling that the time they spent paying attention was not just worth it but a real bargain?

I include the word *feeling* in that last question to invoke an observation commonly attributed to Maya Angelou (from chapter six) but more likely a product of the religious leader Carl Buehner: “They may forget what you said—but they will always remember how you made them feel.”

If your audience feels bored, they’ll remember that. If they feel patronized or disrespected, they’ll remember that too. They may not stow away individual words, phrases, and examples from your presentation, but they will make a lot of mental room for the experience of sitting through it, especially if it is really good or really bad. So it is important to make what you offer as user-friendly as possible.

If it helps, channel the cellist whom Benjamin Zander prodded to play music that people might actually want to dance to. Or perhaps emulate Bernard Pivot and his “generosity of spirit.”

Either way, don’t try to impress people with your intellect. Don’t try to dazzle them from start to finish. Simply focus on giving them the sense that what they are receiving was specifically prepared with their interests and needs in mind. That, in my view, is the essence of tact.

Speaking Stories: Henry James, Warren Burger, and John Bassett III

Choose your words. Especially to those you hold dear.

—Antonio Elefano, “Italy” (2012)

(1) ***The Heiress*:** In the Tony Award–winning play *The Heiress*, which is based on the novel *Washington Square* by Henry James, one of the characters makes the following observation: “Women have more tact. They can persuade better.”

I am not aware of any research that compares the tact levels of men to the tact levels of women. But the comment is a

nice reminder of how important tact can be to effective advocacy, whatever your gender. Without it, you are going to have a hard time connecting with your audience. You may even offend them.

That happens a few times in *The Heiress*, a play that includes a father who alienates his daughter, a suitor who alienates his prospective wife, and a number of other characters who bungle exchanges. The tactlessness of the father is particularly glaring. A crusty and controlling physician named Dr. Sloper, the father is gruff, he’s impatient, and he consistently fails to communicate his thoughts and feelings to the people he cares about the most. His shortcomings provide a useful antimodel of tact.

(2) ***Roe v. Wade*:** A more legally consequential antimodel of tact occurred at the Supreme Court in 1972 during the oral argument in *Roe v. Wade*. Two female attorneys—Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee—represented the woman, “Jane Roe,” at the center of the lawsuit. After Weddington finished addressing the justices and answering their questions,

the lawyer on the other side, who was male, stood up, walked to the podium, and opened his presentation with the following attempt at humor: “It’s an old joke, but when a man argues against two beautiful ladies like this, they are going to have the last word.”

Nobody laughed. Instead, his comment was met with, as one account of the proceedings put it, “pained silence.” Apparently, Chief Justice Warren Burger’s face even reddened a bit in anger, although he was certainly not the only person who was uncharmed. Levity has its place, even at the Supreme Court, but not when it is tone-deaf to the context and stakes of the occasion.

(3) Factory Man: A key part of speaking with tact is understanding how your message will sound and feel to another person. John Bassett III, of the famed Bassett Furniture Company, is evidently brilliant at that, as Beth Macy shows in *Factory Man*, her bestselling account of his effort to battle offshoring and save the Virginia town that has been the company’s home since 1902. Here is how Macy describes the way Bassett connected with an important stakeholder, a member of the US International Trade Commission named Charlotte Lane:

The animosity troubled John Bassett, and when he shared that with Lane during the tour, it made a lasting impression. “The fact that he was so willing to go out there and fight for what was right in the face of so much opposition . . . it was so *personal* to him,” [Lane] explained.

His genius, of course, was that he also managed to make it personal to *her*. When he pointed out the vacant factories near his own, she recalled the plant closings she'd seen in her home state. She remembered newspaper articles about desperate people arrested for stealing copper out of abandoned plants, just like in Bassett. She felt for him when he described the sleepless nights he'd spent—staring at the ceiling, worrying whether he was going to have to lay off people whose fathers and grandfathers had worked for his family.

Bassett summed up the company's overall approach in an interview with the *Roanoke Times* after publishing his own book, *Making It in America*: "We never forgot about the people. So many times, the people are left out of the equation. Companies talk about education and innovation—and I do, too—but they've forgotten to include the people. [Chief financial officers] look at all kinds of figures, but they don't understand that if they lead people properly, those people can change the figures the CFO has. The people in Bassett, Virginia, made my family very successful. I feel obligated to give them a chance."

Speaking Studies: Firings, Apologies, and Forgiveness

Better slip with foot than tongue.

—Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1734)

(1) Firings: In 2009, the *Journal of Business Ethics* published a study that examined various ways to fire people. One of the options that produced a very negative reaction from the person getting fired was having someone else in the room. Employees interpreted this tactic as a sign of disrespect and left the interaction more hostile toward the organization than did people who were fired one-on-one.

A better approach, according to Stanford Business School's Robert Sutton, is to follow four principles:

- Give them as much predictability as possible. Firing someone without warning and on the spot sometimes happens, but good bosses are quicker to give people warning.
- Give them as much understanding as possible. There are studies that show that people who are told why it's necessary to let them go are less stressed about it.
- Give them as much control as possible for the way things will unfold.
- Have compassion.

In a 2016 piece for the *Harvard Business Review*, management consultant Dick Grote got a bit more granular. Here's his list of six "dos and don'ts":

- Don't say, "I understand how you feel." You don't.
- Don't say, "I know that this hurts right now but later on you'll realize that this is the best thing that could have happened." It isn't. It is a very bad thing.
- Avoid justifications. ("You should have known.")

- Keep a box of Kleenex available.
- Survival is a strong instinct—give it time to work.
- Remember the Golden Rule: treat others as you would want to be treated.

Grote also stresses that you should listen to what the person being fired has to say. “There are several predictable reactions to the news that one has just lost his job,” he explains. “The most common are shock, denial, anger, and grief. Listening to what the employee says will tell you which of the reactions he is experiencing. Your response will be more effective if you know how he is taking the news.”

As hard as firing someone can be, there are encouraging examples of what can happen when it is done right. Sutton, the Stanford Business School professor, offers one in *Good Boss, Bad Boss*. When Ann Rhoades was the head of the People Department at Southwest Airlines, she took on the tough responsibility of firing a fellow executive. “He wasn’t happy about getting fired,” Sutton writes, “but [he] was sufficiently impressed with how Ann handled this and other chores at Southwest that he hired her as head of human resources several years later when he founded JetBlue Airways.”

If, like Rhoades, the grace and understanding you show during the firing make the person being fired eventually want to hire you for a new venture, you know you’re definitely doing something right.

(2) Apologies: Rutgers University sociologist Karen Cerulo studies apologies—ones that go well, ones that go poorly, and ones that perhaps never should have been given at all. In 2014, she and another sociologist, Janet Ruane, published a study on 183 celebrity apologies offered from 2000 to 2012. The list included the following:

- Presidential hopeful John Edwards apologizing for having—and then trying to cover up—an extramarital affair while his wife underwent treatment for cancer
- Hip-hop artist Chris Brown apologizing for trashing his dressing room after an appearance on *Good Morning America*
- Olympic track star Marion Jones apologizing for using steroids

Few of the celebrity apologies were effective, at least judging by public opinion polls collected after each was delivered. Many instead made a common mistake. Rather than focusing on the victim of their actions, the apologizers focused on themselves.

Cerulo has a label for these types of apologies: “offender-driven apologies.” They begin, she says, with “the person talking about themselves and then giving all sorts of information about the context and the motivation of their apologies. That was one of the most common types of apologies. It was almost always ineffective.”

Here’s what Cerulo suggests as an alternative. It involves three important steps:

- “Number one: don’t wait. Forget your ego, forget the advice of your handlers. Unless you’re involved in a legal situation, where you’re advised not to speak, you should make an apology right away.”
- “Second, don’t apologize for what people thought. In other words, we’ve often heard people say, ‘I’m sorry that people misunderstood me; I’m sorry that people misinterpreted or misread my actions.’ Apologize for what you did—not for what other people might have thought about it.”
- “Third, don’t give context. . . . The why of what you did is less important to people than your regret and your remorse.”

Cerulo condenses these steps into a concise set of instructions: “Identify your victim right up front, then express remorse, and, if it’s possible, make restitution. That’s it. That’s really what people want to hear in an apology.”

(3) Forgiveness: Graciously delivering an apology can be hard. Sometimes, though, graciously *accepting* one can be even harder, especially if the goal is to eventually get to a point of forgiveness. Yet research by Fred Luskin, the director of Stanford University’s Forgiveness Project, suggests that making this extra effort can really pay off.

One study, for example, focused on people who had lost a family member in the violent conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. After going through the forgiveness training Luskin and others set up for them, “participants reported a 40 percent decline in symptoms

of depression.”

A different study involved a wider range of people, including ones who had been betrayed by their business partner or abandoned by their

best friend. “Six months after their forgiveness training,” Luskin explains, “these people reported a 70 percent drop in the degree of hurt they felt toward the person who had hurt them, and they said they felt more forgiving in general.”

Luskin is quick to point out that forgiveness is never easy. It takes patience. It takes self-control. It takes a willingness to confront painful feelings and events. But the long-term gains can be enormous. Perhaps the most fundamental, Luskin suggests, “is that over time [forgiveness] allows us access to the loving emotions that can lie buried beneath grievances and grudges.”

Speaking Exercises: Tact and Tragedy

The essential thing here is to respond with tact.

—José Saramago, *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1998)

Option A

One of the most important places to have tact is when speaking after a national tragedy. To compare different approaches, watch at least three of the six videos below. Each responds to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001:

US President George W. Bush (address to the nation)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbqCquD14k4>

British Prime Minister Tony Blair (address to the Labour Party)

- <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4514081/blairs-speech-2oct>

Jon Stewart (the *Daily Show*)

- <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/1q93jy/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-september-11--2001>

Katie Couric and Matt Lauer (*The Today Show*)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6158sdfRaB8>

Vince McMahon (World Wrestling Entertainment)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4NFIBaHn14>

Oprah Winfrey and guests (the *Oprah Winfrey Show*)

- <https://www.oprah.com/own-oprahshow/one-week-after-911-american-muslims-shared-their-experiences-video>

Then pick two to compare using fifty to one hundred words:

- What works in each address?
- What doesn't?
- Which parts of the P-R-O-D-U-C-T framework are used effectively?
- Which might have helped things go better?

Option B

You could do a similar exercise with eulogies. Here are a few to pick from:

Margaret Thatcher eulogizes Ronald Reagan*

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKAGWuDOX0o>

Maya Angelou eulogizes Coretta Scott King

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otGXTryeY6w>

Billy Crystal eulogizes Muhammad Ali

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XB3sD9QJCI>

Charles Spencer eulogizes his sister, Princess Diana

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VUy-wBwBvw>

Once you have selected at least one eulogy to focus on—and you can certainly choose something not on this list—follow the instructions below:

Step 1: Use thirty to fifty words to briefly describe the eulogy's audience.

Step 2: Identify at least two things that the speaker does that seem specifically tailored to fit that audience.

Step 3: Suggest an audience that wouldn't necessarily respond well to the two things you identified.

I include this last step because one way to test if you have sufficiently adapted your content to your audience is to ask whether you would have to change anything about that content for a different audience. If you would, that's a good sign. If you wouldn't, your content might be too generic. Interchangeability is not usually a feature of effective communication.

* Thatcher was told by her doctor eighteen months before Reagan died that, for health reasons, she should retire from public speaking. So she made a video instead. She did, however, make the trip to the actual funeral.

EPILOGUE

One of my favorite things about teaching the course that this book is based on is hearing from students weeks, months, even years after they complete it. Many report a new willingness to seek out speaking opportunities they used to shy away from. One even passed along a nice story about how understanding the concepts and doing the exercises gave her the confidence to volunteer to speak at the United Nations Human Rights Council while interning in Geneva, Switzerland. Her previous self, she said via email, would have bolted from that kind of stage:

Very few people enjoy public speaking. I found it to be physically intolerable. Not only did I dread giving presentations, but I fumbled through every “cold call” in class and could see the pity in interviewers’ eyes when I tried to convince them I was capable of doing a job.

But now I have the confidence—and the actual ability—to communicate verbally. In the last few weeks, I have made oral statements at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland . . . twice! As the other interns balked at the idea of making the statements, I excitedly volunteered. That would not have happened had I not developed such a vital skill.

This student’s experience is admittedly unique. Few people go from terror in class to confidence at the UN in the span of a semester.

GOOD WITH WORDS

Yet I regularly see the transformative effect that learning to become good with words can have on people. Timid students start to speak up. Domineering students start to become better team players. And pretty much everyone starts to realize that there are no membership restrictions on who can become eloquent. It's a club all of us can join.

P-R-O-D-U-C-T

Poise

Rhythm

Optimism

Dynamic

Unexpected

Conversation

Tact

For more materials and exercises, check out the four-part online series *Good with Words: Speaking and Presenting* on the educational platform Coursera: <https://www.coursera.org/specializations/good-with-words-speaking-and-presenting>.

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THANK-YOUS

Listen

*with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridges to
 bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you.*

—W. S. Merwin, “Thanks” (2005)

THANK-YOUS

This book began as a workshop, grew into a course, and eventually expanded into a four-part series on the online learning platform Coursera: <https://www.coursera.org/specializations/good-with-words-speaking-and-presenting>.

Along the way, it has received a ton of support from various institutions and individuals. The two main institutions have been the University of Michigan Law School and the University of Chicago Law School, where I have had the wonderful opportunity to teach and test out material for the past several years. The students, staff, and faculty at both of these places are the kind of people who can make you laugh, make you think, and make you grow, all at the same time. That's a pretty special combination.

I am also grateful to the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. Its Gilbert Whitaker Fund for the Improvement of Teaching provided an incredibly helpful and generous grant as much of this book's content was still being developed. I really appreciate their catalyzing vote of confidence.

As for individuals, the workshop version of the book received two important early boosts. One was from Alicia Davis, who first invited me to share my materials with the Problem Solving Initiative, the multidisciplinary platform described at the beginning of this book. The second was from Soojin Kwon, who played a big role in bringing the workshop over to the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Each of these experiences pushed me to expand and revise the content in ways that proved enormously useful.

I am similarly appreciative of the many people who read and improved specific chapters. These include Tamar Alexanian, Daniel Baum, Laura Boniface, Liz Brennan, Rachel Buff, Alice Choi, Matthew Ender-Silberman, Sarah Fallon, Cody Fisher, Hannah Hoffman, Christine Greeley, Bridget Grier, Christa-Gaye Kerr, Saket Kulkarni, Kylie Lynne, Julian Macintosh, Colleen Roberts, André Rouillard, Abby Schmit, Kiana Shin, Simran Singh, Danielle Therese

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Reagan had years of practice in public speaking away from the political limelight. He spent eight years as the host of “General Electric Theater,” which led him to give speeches to a combined audience of 250,000 GE employees at 139 plants across the country. See Carmine Gallo, *Great Public Speakers Are Made, Not Born*, *FORBES* (June 5, 2015) (citing to H. W. BRANDS, *REAGAN: THE LIFE* [2016]). By the time he rose to political prominence, he had had a chance to work out the kinks in a relatively low-pressure environment. *Id.*

Chief Justice John Roberts was a legendary appellate advocate before his appointment to the bench. But his oral argument skills weren’t innate or extemporaneous—they were the product of relentless preparation. Roberts would prepare for “a thousand questions,” knowing he would likely receive fewer than a hundred. Jay O’Keefe, *I Am John Roberts and So Can You, Part II: Oral Argument*, *DE NOVO* (May 24, 2011), <https://www.virginiaappellatelaw.com/2011/05/articles/oral-argument/i-am-john-roberts-and-so-can-you-part-ii-oral-argument/> (citing LAWPROSE.ORG, *Supreme Court Interviews: Chief Justice John Roberts [Video Interviews]*

<http://www.lawprose.org/bryan-garner/garners-interviews/supreme-court-interviews/>). Roberts would rearrange the key points of his argument over and over, memorizing and internalizing the logical connections between each point in randomized order so that he could move through his argument seamlessly, regardless of the path the court’s questioning took. *Id.*

Oprah Winfrey may have had some natural flair for public speaking—she went to college on a scholarship she earned for winning a public-speaking contest. Elizabeth Street, *Overcoming Obstacles: What Oprah Winfrey Learned from Her Childhood of Abuse*, LEARNING LIFT-OFF (Jan. 7, 2015), <https://www.learninglifton.com/overcoming-obstacles-what-oprah-winfrey-learned-from-her-abusive-childhood>. But natural talent wasn’t sufficient. Winfrey was fired from her first on-air reporting job because, in her words, she was “too empathetic.” *Celebrities’ First Jobs*, OPRAH.COM, <http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/oprahs-live-newscast-and-celebrities-first-jobs>. Rather than delivering the news with a reporter’s detachment and analysis, Winfrey involved herself in stories and turned them into emotional causes. *Id.* (It also didn’t help that the false eyelashes she insisted on wearing repeatedly fell off on camera. *Id.*) Not until she began hosting talk shows did her speaking style connect to its intended audience. Street, *supra*. That match between speaker and subject created the magic that a natural oratorical flair could not. *See* Street, *supra*; *Celebrities’ First Jobs*, *supra*. (Special thanks to Hannah Hoffman for tracking down—and crafting—the information in this footnote.)

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