

Principles of Public Speaking

Module 5: Delivering Your Speech

Vocal Aspects of Delivery

Though we speak frequently during the course of a day, a formal speech requires extra attention to detail in preparation of a more formal speech presentation. What can one do in advance to prepare for a speech? The challenge is partly determined by the speaker's experience, background and sometimes cultural influence and existing habits of speaking. Articulation, Pronunciation, Dialect, Tone, Pitch, and Projection each depends on long-term practice for success. These aspects are like signatures, and should be developed and used by each speaker according to his own persona.

Voice, or vocal sound, is made when controlled air being exhaled from the lungs, passes over the vocal cords causing a controlled vibration. The vibrating air resonates in the body, chest cavity, mouth, and nasal passages. The vibrating air causes a chain reaction with the air in the room. The room's air, set in motion by the voice, is captured by the listener's ear. The vibration of the air against the eardrum is transferred to electrical impulses that are interpreted by the listener's brain. Thus, the sounds we can make are predicated on the breaths that we take.

TRY THIS! BREATHING

Talk without breathing. It cannot be done. So if you are screaming (like a baby), you are also breathing!

The first word of advice on speaking to an audience:
BREATHE!



"Crying baby" by Brazzouk.
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Articulation

We are often judged by how well we speak in general. A measure of perceived intellect or education is how well we **articulate**. That is: how well and correctly we form our vowels and consonants using our lips, jaw, tongue, and palate to form the sounds that are identified as speech. **Diction** and **enunciation** are other terms that refer to the same idea. For instance, saying "going to" instead of "gonna" or "did not" instead of "dint" are examples of good versus poor articulation. Consonant and

vowels are spoken with standard accepted precision, and serious students and speakers will strive to practice the clarity of their sounds. Proper diction is as integral to the English language as proper spelling, but it takes practice.

Pronunciation

Proper **articulation** applied to a given word is that word's **pronunciation**. The pronunciation includes how the vowels and consonants are produced as well as which syllable is emphasized. For generations, speakers depended on "markings (such as the International Phonetics Alphabet or similar Dictionary Symbols) to discover or decide how words were officially pronounced. With online dictionaries now readily available, one needs only to "look up" a word and select "play" to hear an audible recording of the official and precise way a word should be pronounced. Now there is no excuse for mispronouncing a word in a speech. A mispronounced word will obliterate a speaker's credibility, and the audience's attention will be focused on the fault rather than the message.

TRY THIS! PRONUNCIATION

1. Flip through a book, article or scholarly work until you come to a word that is unfamiliar and you can only guess its pronunciation.
2. Go to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary website, and look up the word.
3. When the definition appears, click the icon of the loudspeaker. The word is audibly pronounced for you.

The online dictionary is useful in both articulation as well as pronunciation.

Accent, Dialect, and Regionalisms

Subtleties in the way we pronounce words and phrase our speech within

a given language are evident in **accents**, **regionalisms**, and **dialects**.

An accent refers to the degree of prominence of the way syllables are spoken in words, as when someone from Australia says “undah” whereas we say “under.” A **regionalism** is a type of expression, as when someone says “The dog wants walked,” instead of “the dog wants to go for a walk.”

Dialect is a variety of language where one is distinguished from others by grammar and vocabulary. In

Pennsylvania you might hear people say that they are going to “red up the room,” which means “to clean the room.”



“Iraqi speaker” by Office of United States Rep. Ellen Tauscher. Public domain.

Those who depend on speaking for a career (broadcasters, politicians, and entertainers) will often strive for unaccented General or Standard English. Listen to most major network newscasters for examples of **regionalism-free** speech. A given audience may be prejudiced towards or against a speaker with an identifiable accent or dialect. Though we would wish prejudice were not the case, the way we speak implies so much about our education, cultural background, and economic status, that prejudice is inevitable. Any speaker should be aware of how accent, **dialect**, and regionalisms can be perceived by a given audience. If you speak in a way that the audience might find difficult to understand, make an extra effort to pay attention to the accent and phrasing of your speech. Ask a sympathetic and objective listener to help you when you practice.

We often refuse to accept an idea merely because the tone of voice in which it has been expressed is unsympathetic to us.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

Vocal Quality

The quality of the voice, its **timbre** (distinctive sound) and texture, affects audibility and can affect the articulation. Our voices are unique to each of us. It is a result of our physical vocal instrument, including diaphragm, vocal cords, lungs and body mass. Some examples of vocal quality include warm, clear, soft, scratchy, mellow and breathy. Each speaker should practice at maximizing the vocal effect of his instrument, which can be developed with vocal exercises. There are numerous books, recordings and trainers available to develop one's vocal quality when needed. The quality of one's voice is related to its range of pitch.

TRY THIS! INFLECTION

Your voice goes UP, and then your voice goes d o w n.

Pitch and Inflection

Identical to musical parlance, the **pitch** is the “highness” or “lowness” of the voice. Each of us has a range of **tone**. Vocal sounds are actually vibrations sent out from the vocal cords resonating through chambers in the body. The vibrations can literally be measured in terms of audio frequency in the same way music is measured. When the **pitch** is altered to convey a meaning (like raising the pitch at the end of a sentence that is a question), it is the inflection. **Inflections** are variations, turns and slides in pitch to achieve the meaning.

In his writing “Poetics,” Aristotle lists “Music” as an element of the Drama. Some scholars interpret that to include the musicalization of the spoken word with **dramatic inflection**. The meaning and effectiveness of a spoken line is greatly dependent on the “melody” of its inflection.

Though archaic, the study of **elocution** formalizes the conventions of inflection. In some contemporary cultures, inflection has been minimized because it sounds too “melodramatic” for the taste of the demographic group. It would be sensible to be aware of and avoid both extremes. With good animated inflection, a speaker is more interesting, and the inflection conveys energy and “aliveness” that compels the audience to listen.

When public speaking was known as elocution, sentences were “scored” like music, and spoken using formal rules. Sentences ending as a question went UP at the end. Sentences ending in a period, ended with a base note. And everyone had fun with exclamation points!

For most of music in history, including Opera, Broadway, and early Rock and Roll, songs were written so that the melody (raising and lowering the pitch) was consistent with what would be spoken. Many of today’s songs, notably Rap songs, depend solely on rhythm. There is little if any inflection (melody) to enhance a lyric’s meaning. Certain languages differ in their dependence on inflection. Japanese and German seem monotonic compared to Italian and French, which offer great variety of inflection.



“Ice-T” by Tino Jacobs. CC-BY.

The human voice is the most beautiful instrument of all, but it is the most difficult to play. – Richard Strauss

Even someone one who is not a singer can be expressive with inflection and pitch. Like the “Think System” of Professor Harold Hill in the musical *The Music Man*. If you THINK varied pitch, you can SPEAK varied pitch. Think of pitch inflections as seasoning spices that can make the speech more interesting. Sing “Happy Birthday.” You do not have to concentrate or analyze how to create the melody in your voice. Your memory and instinct take over. Notice how the pitch also provides an audible version of punctuation, letting the audience know if your sentence has ended, if it is a question, and so on. The melody lets the audience know that there is more to come (a comma) and when the phrase is ended (a period). Remember that in a speech, the audience does not have the written punctuation to follow, so you have to provide the punctuation with your inflection.

TRY THIS! VOCAL VARIATION

Find a listening partner. Using only the sounds of “la” ha,” and “oh,” convey the meaning of the following:

1. It’s the biggest thing I’ve ever seen!

2. I’ve fallen and can’t get up!

3. I’ve got a crush on him/her.

4. That soup is disgusting and spoiled.

5. I got an “A” in my Speech Final!

If you cannot relay the meaning with just sounds, try a second time (each) with gestures and facial expressions until the listener understands. Then say the lines with the expressive inflections you have developed using only the sounds.

Those who do not use inflection, or use a range of pitch, are speaking in monotone. And, as the word implies, it can be monotonous, boring, and dull. A balance between melodramatic and monotonous would be preferred. The inflection should have a meaningful and interesting variety. Be careful not to turn a pattern of inflection into a repetitious sound. Think through each phrase and its musicalization separately.

Many speakers have developed the habit of ending each sentence as though it is a question. It may be becoming increasingly common. In the wake of the Valley Girl syndrome of the 1980's, a bad inflection habit has entered the speech pattern: Some speakers end a declarative sentence with the inflection of a question.

Do you know what I mean?

A word of caution: Inflection and varied pitch must be “organic,” that is to say, natural for the speaker. You cannot fake it, or it sounds artificial and disingenuous. It is a skill that needs to develop over a period of time.

Rate of Speaking

Table 12.1: Finding the Right Pace for Your Speech	
If you speak too quickly...	If you speak too slowly...
the audience might get the impression you have nothing important to say.	the audience might think you are too tired to be presenting.
the audience has a difficult time catching up and comprehending what you are saying. They need time to digest the information. So plan on periodic pauses.	the audience can forget the first part of your sentence by the time you get to the last! (It happens!) And they lose interest.
the audience might think you really do not want to be there.	the audience might think you are wasting their time by taking longer than necessary to relay your message.
As a speaker, you cannot race with the audience, nor drag their attention down. Like Goldilocks, look for the pace that is “just right.”	

In order to retain clarity of the speech with articulation and inflection, the speaker must be aware that there is a range of appropriate **tempo** for speaking. If the tempo is too slow, the speech might resemble a monotonous peal. If it is too fast, the articulation could suffer if consonants or vowels are dropped or rushed to keep up the speed. An audience could become frustrated with either extreme. The tempo needs to be appropriate to the speaker's style, but neither paced like a Gilbertian Lyric (as in “Gilbert and Sullivan”) patter nor a funereal dirge. A

comfortable and clear pace is the best. An ideal speaking rate will allow you to comfortably increase your pace to create a sense of excitement, or slow down to emphasize the seriousness of a topic.

It is simple nonsense to speak of the
fixed tempo of any particular vocal
phrase. Each voice has its peculiarities. –
Anton Seidl

Pauses Versus Vocalized Pauses

A text that is read has punctuation that the reader can see...miniature landmarks to define the text. When spoken, similar punctuation is needed for comprehension, and the speaker's responsibility is to offer the text with pauses. Space between phrases, properly planted, gives the audience the opportunity to understand the structure of the speaker's sentences and paragraphs. It also gives time for the audience to "digest" crucial phrases.

Generally, spoken sentences and paragraphs need to be simpler and shorter than what can be comprehended by reading. Pauses can help increase comprehension.

However, pauses that are filled with "uh's," "um's," etc., are called **vocalized pauses**, or **fillers**, and should be avoided. They can be distracting and annoying, and give the impression of a lack of preparation if used excessively. Even worse is the use of vernacular phrases like, "y'know" (a contraction of "Do You Know") which gives the impression of lack of education or lack of concern for the audience. The use of vocalized pauses may be the result of a habit that deserves an effort to be overcome. Avoid using phrases such as "Uh," "OK?," "y'know", "like..., I mean," "right?"

Vocal Projection

The volume produced by the vocal instrument is **projection**. Supporting the voice volume with good breathing and energy can be practiced, and helping a speaker develop the correct volume is a main task of a vocal trainer, teacher or coach. Good vocal support with good posture, breathing, and energy should be practiced regularly, long before a speech is delivered. There are numerous exercises devoted to developing projection capabilities.

While there is no need to shout, a speaker should project to be easily heard from the furthest part of the audience. Even if the speech is amplified with a microphone/sound system, one must speak with projection and energy. As with your rate of speech, you should speak at a volume that comfortably allows you to increase the volume of your voice without seeming to shout or decrease the volume of your voice and still be heard by all audience members.

Do not expect to walk up to the podium and have a full voice. Actors spend about a half-hour doing vocal warm-ups, and singers warm up much more. You might not have an opportunity to warm up immediately before your speech, but when you can, warm up with humming, yawning (loudly) or singing scales: all while breathing deeply and efficiently. It will loosen your voice, prevent irritation, and fire up your vocal energy.

TRY THIS! PROJECTION

Go to the room in which you are to speak. Have a friend sit as far away from the podium as possible. Rehearse your speech, talking loudly enough so your friend can hear you comfortably. That is the projection you will need. When you mentally focus on the distant listener, you will tend to project better.

One final note: If public speaking is or will be an important part of your career, it would be sensible to have an evaluation of your voice,

articulation and projection done by an objective professional so you can take any remedial action that might be recommended. There are courses of study, private lessons, and professional voice coaches to work with your voice projection, tone, and pitch.

Words mean more than what is set down
on paper. It takes the human voice to
infuse them with deeper meaning. –
Maya Angelou

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