

Review: What is rhetoric?

Rhetoric is the technical term for the art of public speaking and writing. It is the study of the *principles by which we please and persuade people with public speaking*.

Classical rhetoric, combined with biblical values and priorities, helped create modern **homiletics**, which is the art and science of biblical preaching. We could say that homiletics is a branch of rhetoric. We also mentioned a number of “rhetorical forms,” each of which has its own recognizable rules, conventions, and audience expectations.

Review: why study rhetoric or public speaking?

1. To become properly aware of our audience.
2. To become properly sensitive to our audience.
3. To learn to attract our listeners and hold their attention.
4. To learn to avoid distracting our listeners.
5. To become more poised in public.

Improving Our Performance

A simple rhyme will help you remember the three areas of presentation in which we can all improve: **attraction, distraction, and social interaction.**

Attraction: is your delivery attractive to your audience? How well will you hold their interest?

Distraction: what could divert people's attention onto undesirable mannerisms?

Social interaction: what kind of connection are you making?

Let's look at these in turn, but first take a moment to explore some realities of body language.

Body language and appearance: what are you saying... and displaying?

Much communication is *intuitive* rather than informational. Technological advances have not erased our biological and spiritual "hard-wiring" or how we are "acculturated" and therefore we often "hear" more from a person's non-verbal communication than his verbal communication. It's been said that 65% of communication is non-verbal. Some people have a disability in which they cannot read these cues, which renders life quite difficult. Think of how often we say things like "you know what I mean!"

And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. (Luke 24:28, KJV)

Again, these are things which we understand but don't typically study. Body language cues and displays can be more biological than cultural and so may not vary too much from one culture to another. Examples?

- Turning red with shame
- Turning red with anger
- Sweating when nervous
- Stomach growling when nervous
- Semi-vocal reactions such as gasping with shock or fear

There are a number of behavioral responses which take place in us as a result of visual stimulation. Studies have shown that we find mammals cute and cuddly if their faces are round and have disproportionately large eyes. Babies in mammalian species commonly have these features. This obviously applies to human infants as well. Is this evolution pushing us to take care of our offspring, or did God just like puppies? You decide.

Other reactions are more purely cultural –and vary widely from one culture to another. Outsiders coming in to a culture must not only learn the verbal language but also the unwritten rules and subtleties of verbal and nonverbal communication, such as the following (*give your own examples*):

- Titles

- Seating arrangements
- Who speaks first
- Who speaks last
- Special clothing
- Facial gestures
- Greetings: touching/bowing
- Extent of embraces
- Touching the opposite sex
- Touching children
- Behavior in front of authority figures
- Non-verbal (inarticulated) sounds
- Hand gestures while speaking
- Obscene gestures

Give me an example of an expression and/or a posture that says:

- *I am angry at you.*
- *I don't want to hear what you have to say.*
- *Give me a break.*
- *How would you stand in you were in charge of a room full of defiant people?*

Can you provide a concrete example of a gesture or behavior that could be misunderstood from one culture to another?

Attraction

To be well understood and to avoid offense in our own culture, we need to learn how to cooperate with these realities as best we can, not fight them. Here are a few pointers:

1. **Personal warmth.** Don't merely appear to be warm, be warm. People can easily detect forced friendliness and despise it. Genuine friendliness is important. As Christians we should have an advantage in this department. The love and life of God in your inner being should radiate out of you. Decide that you like the people you are speaking to and that will make all the difference. People can overcompensate to show warmth, sometimes out of anxiety, sometimes out of a desire to ingratiate themselves to you. *What behaviors would we see in this case? Exaggerated smile, loud speech, excessive embracing, overly vigorous hand-shaking, etc.*

2. **Smile.** The Bible makes much of a man's countenance and for good reason. The Lord is said to be the light of our countenance. From the time of infancy our eyes and brains are taught to read faces and expressions and react to people accordingly. People instinctively recoil from those with stern, nervous or depressed countenances. People instinctively feel more safe or at ease with friendly faces.

(Q: How does a warm person act or respond to others? What are his behaviors as opposed to someone who is standoffish?)

3. **Good posture.** As we've discussed, you do not need to be "ramrod straight," as that would appear forced to people (unless you are a U.S. Marine). However, good posture all the way through the neck is important.

4. **A relaxed overall demeanor.** More on this when we talk about distraction, but it's a good exercise to look at your resting position in a full-length mirror and see if you look like you are waiting for an injection.

5. **Humor.** The use of appropriate humor releases tension and makes you more likeable. *What makes for a good joke... in public?*

6. **Voice.** Adopt a conversational tone. Centuries and even decades ago, people adopted an elevated tone for speechmaking. Tone and other dynamics were also exaggerated by our standards – perhaps to avoid monotony, as speeches were longer. This included what we might today consider as exaggerated pronunciations, such as a trilled "r" or a clearer vowel "u" (assume vs. assoom). This is out of favor today.

7. **Diction.** Good diction means clarity in speech. Be sure that whatever you say can be understood and that you are not slurred words together. Practice listening to singers and see if you can make out what they are actually singing. Help your diction by practicing reading the Bible or a newspaper aloud. Listen to others speak and see how much is sloppy.

8. Appropriate use of **gestures**. Attractive, natural gestures can enhance your presentation. And, to be natural, gestures must meaningfully correspond to what is happening verbally. Also, let gestures be smooth, not harsh or jerky.

9. Appropriate use of **motion**. A little motion goes a long way, and a lot is too much. Try not to pace, rock or sway too much. Move around the room casually, and not too quickly as you have your “conversation.” People associate rapid hand or body motions with emotional states, not verbal content.

10. Engage people with meaningful **eye contact**. We instinctively feel that a person who does not look at us in the eye is “somewhere else” at the moment or has something to hide. You should make eye contact with some of your listeners, but without staring.

How is the modern trend toward texting and being continually online affecting attention and expectations of courtesy? What about the trend toward the “topless” meeting – no laptops or other devices allowed?

Thought Question: Is friendliness deceptive? In other words, shouldn't people just listen to what we say and deal with it as information?

Distraction

In this era of sound bites and short speeches, it's essential not to lose your audience.

- The easiest way to lose an audience is to forget that human beings have incredible senses. Create a visual or auditory diversion and you may never get some people back.
- You may also have verbal habits that make people dislike you or create tension.

Here's my short list of distractions:

1. What's that smell? Avoid hygiene problems at all costs. Of course, please smell clean and fresh, but don't overpower us with the latest fragrance either. What about other smells such as food preparation smells or environmental smells?

2. What's in his mouth? Hopefully nothing except tongue and teeth! Let's leave it to liquids, and make it quiet while we're at it!

3. What's that sound? Excessive throat-clearing, sniffing, etc. should be handled elsewhere.

4. Tell me she didn't wear that here! Is your clothing:

- un-ironed
- stained
- worn
- threadbare?

Are you immodest? To be blunt, how much leg is too much leg?

And is your bling-bling too showy or tinkling too much?

5. I wish he would stop playing with that. Learn once and for all that when you are speaking, it turns out that people (some of them, anyway) are actually watching you. For this reason you need to stop: scratching your head, rubbing your nose, brushing your hair off your face, licking your lips, playing with the change in your pockets, fingering a piece of jewelry, pushing your glasses up the bridge of your nose, playing with the car keys, having your cell phone go off, or pulling up your pants. (*Q: what else?*)

6. Did he really say that? A Top Ten list to avoid:

- Never use impolite or vulgar speech. It is probably best to avoid their euphemisms, too.
- Avoid jokes which are off-color or demeaning in any way.
- Do not boast, recite your accomplishments or attempt to pass yourself off as something you're not.
- Don't drop names.
- Avoid the TMI problem – don't reveal too many of your private matters nor those of others.
- Do not speak ill of other individuals.
- Don't speak ill of any group, even if your audience would support the sentiment.
- Avoid slander and libel. Slander, broadly defined, is something which harms another person's reputation. It may subject you to legal action unless it is true. Some statements are slanderous because they impute a crime or a condition to the person (*he is a thief; she is a prostitute*).

- You should avoid political speech – unless you are making a political speech.
- Avoid sarcasm.
- Avoid expressions that are too slangy, especially ethnic slang if you're not a member of that ethnic group.

That was 11. Were you counting? ☺ By the way, if you want to look professional, don't ever type smilies or other emoticons onto a paper.

7. Don't inoculate people against your speech before you get rolling. Never tell us how nervous you are, that this is your first time, or that you are really going to be terrible. We will believe you if you do!

8. Good grammar shouldn't, like, end with grammar school. Despite the best efforts of teenagers everywhere, ain't still ain't a word. Never be embarrassed to ask someone if you are saying something correctly – just don't do it in in your speech. Learn a few things on purpose, such as when to say “you and I” and when to say “you and me.” Learn what words exist and which don't.

9. Dear Lord, make her stop. Human beings tire very quickly of listening to voices that are:

- Too fast
- Too whiny
- Too sing-song

- Too monotonous
- Too shrill
- Too angry

10. Umm, could you, like, please, kinda, you know, ahh, hurry it up, like?

Stop thinking out loud. Train yourself to avoid space-fillers like the above. We create space-fillers

- Out of laziness
- Out of anxiety
- Out of a wrong perception that we have left too much “dead air.”

Social Interaction

1. Be on your best behavior when you are invited to speak somewhere.

Greet those whom you should greet with the social courtesies appropriate to the setting.

(If you need help in this area, ask your mom or dad.) Express due appreciation.

Continue to be on your best behavior after the speech, whether it be a more structured Q and A time or a relaxed coffee. Remember, the people you irritated before the speech will be there after you leave to talk people out of how good you were.

2. Time. Be respectful of the start time, the time allotted to you, and any other parameters which apply.

3. Determine your style of dress. Remember that the occasion will determine the formality of dress: casual, business casual, business attire, or formal.

4. Determine your style. Remember that the occasion will determine the choice of vocabulary: basic or technical; casual, formal, or elevated.

5. Determine the spirit of the address. Remember that the occasion will determine the degree of levity or solemnity: solemn, conversational, light-hearted, or comic.

Conclusion

As painful as it may be, try watching yourself on video and in mirrors. Listen to yourself on tapes. No one enjoys this and indeed most people find the sound of their own voices somewhat shocking and disturbing. (We find it hard to believe it's really us!) However, this practice will have real benefits to you and you will find your skills improving.

Honesty is the best policy, and the realm of public speaking is no exception. Be honest about your current level of proficiency and then take the steps you need to take to improve!