Writing Speeches – For the Ear

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Speech writing is a highly developed art. In the West, Aristotle wrote his founding book *Rhetoric* over two thousand years ago, initiating a formalised study that identified dozens of tropes, figures and other devices to make speeches more persuasive and powerful. If you analyse some of the great speeches, such as the *Sermon on the Mount*, Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, you will find that, consciously or otherwise, these speeches employ many rhetorical devices in a highly effective way.

For most of us speech writing is a more mundane matter. Those in the civil service may be called on to translate or to draft speeches for their minister or department head. These speeches will not aim to change people's hearts and minds on fundamental human questions, but rather to announce a policy initiative, welcome a delegation, or farewell a colleague. In these cases, a manual of rhetoric may be far less useful than a down to earth checklist of questions such as the following:

- **Are the purposes of the speech clear?**
- **Does it achieve these purposes?**
- **Will it be relevant and interesting to its audience?**
- **Is it appropriate to the place and the occasion?**
- **Is the length appropriate?**
- **Is it logically constructed?**

And above all: is it written for easy oral delivery and easy aural comprehension?

This is the key question I want to address here: *is the speech written for the ear*? The reason why this is an important question is that it calls on us to write in a way that may be somewhat unfamiliar. In the civil service we are used to dealing with the language of policy, administration and regulation. Most of the documents and memos we read are written not for oral delivery but for the eye.

Writing for the ear demands that we try to be *simple, brief, concrete, fresh* and *active* in our use of language. Let us start with *simplicity*. There are of course no inflexible rules for good expression, but speechwriters should look out for dependent clauses. For example, we will often read the following kind of sentence in print:

> **Our new Chancellor rose to prominence in the administration of the last Premier, who, in recognition of his contributions, recommended him for a knighthood.**

This is the sort of sentence that many will write, but almost *nobody would actually say*. If you listen to the way people speak in ordinary conversations, you will very rarely hear them use dependent clauses like this at all. If you put a sentence such as this into a speech, it will sound like *a written sentence being read*. The aim is to try to write what somebody might naturally say, as follows:

> **Our new Chancellor became prominent under the last Premier. Mr Smith valued his work and recommended him for a knighthood.**

This sounds more like somebody talking: it is more direct and simple. Breaking the sentence up into shorter units makes it easier to comprehend via the ear.

At the same time, the substitution of "contributions" by "work" achieves another aim: *freshness*. Not only is "work" a shorter, simpler, more everyday word, but "contributions" belongs to a family of over-used metaphors that have become clichés, especially in official contexts. Other examples are "challenges", "enhance" and "facilitate" — words that are almost standard "officialese". Sometimes such words are very hard to avoid, but the effort to replace them is usually worth it. Speeches gain in vigour and interest, whereas too many repetitions of the clichés help to produce a mind-numbing effect on the audience.

Polysyllabic nouns can be inert and abstract. For example, the phrases "health promotion, disease surveillance, control and prevention" are written very much for the eye. In fact, apart from "and" all the words there are nouns, some of them used adjectivally — all of which helps to produce an indigestibly abstract effect. Rewriting these phrases as "promoting health, controlling, monitoring and preventing disease" achieves more vigour. The present participial forms "promoting" and so on introduce the dynamism of verbs: they invite us to imagine activities and so are also more *concrete* than the more abstract noun forms.

Finally, there is a tendency in official writing to use passive forms, partly because the action referred to may be done by any number of unspecifiable agents. "Offenders will be fined up to $500 for a first offence" is a good example of the language of regulation. Little wonder that civil servants, when they come to draft speeches, naturally fall into the passive voice. "A saving of $10 million will be achieved in the first year" is not so effective in a speech as the following: "The taxpayer will save $10 million in the first year". This is more active, economical and concrete.

These are just some of the things that are involved in learning to write for the ear. Clearly, where many listeners are using a second language, the need is even greater for speechwriters to employ language that is as simple, concise, fresh, concrete and active as possible.