

THE POWER OF THE PEN AND THE VOICE

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Writing skills will help your speaking — and vice versa.

Mentors give new Toastmasters this speaking advice: “Grab their attention right off the bat, then keep them listening.” Similarly, writing teacher Julie Larios advises students, “If you can’t write an opening sentence that motivates the reader to keep reading, it’s all over.”

The importance of this cannot be overstated. The opening hook is one of the many similarities between writing and speaking. It is the impetus for my question: “What skills can speakers and writers share with each other to enhance outcomes?”

“Speakers and writers tell stories,” says author Betsy Dillard Stroud, ACS, CL, a member of Park Central Toastmasters in Phoenix, Arizona. “As two equally powerful instruments, the pen and the tongue have many commonalities.”

Stories, spoken or written, have an introduction, a body and a close. Within this three-part structure, writers and speakers find many ways to boost each other’s confidence and augment the quality of their presentations.

Writing Skills for Speakers The audience of 35 writers buzzed as the speaker jumped to the lectern and asked, “What is your number one challenge today, at this hour, at this moment?” The presenter spoke about his challenges as a writer. He described solutions that worked for him, varying the volume and pace of his speech. He employed nimble body language and good eye contact but did not use notes, which unfortunately, forecast the lack of substance in the speech. The absence of meaningful content dissolved the audience’s early excitement.

By initially writing out a speech in full, presenters can be more certain that their speeches impart ample substance and tell a story in an organized and compelling manner. Dillard Stroud finds that writing out her speeches also stimulates originality. “Writing is a godsend, because as I write, ideas emerge from the ether,” she says.

In writing, as in speaking, brevity is key. The Toastmaster’s red timing light and the red editing pen deliver the same message: “too many words.” Speaking in her Toastmasters club forces Dillard Stroud to pare down to the bare bones of a theme. It tightens her thinking from stream of consciousness to talking points. Her mantra? “Edit, simplify and delete.”

Writing out a speech also provides the opportunity for more creative word use and helps with building word pictures. Both elements make a speech stronger. At a recent meeting of the Park Central Toastmasters, members railed against worn phrases such as “Let’s get on the same page” and “Think outside the box.” At the same meeting, a speaker used unusual metaphors (“the abyss of pain” and “the shock absorber of the soul”), stimulating the audience with fresh word pictures.

Writing provides the opportunity to think through sentence structure and check the dictionary or thesaurus for a word that fits and flows with the rhythm of the speech. The act of writing the most fitting word or phrase makes it easier to remember that word or phrase when you need it later. There will be less need for filler words (uh, ah and um) to plug a momentary mind void.

Speakers can also learn to paint word pictures by reading, imitating or actually borrowing (with acknowledgement) the words of good writers. For example, Oliver Sacks in *The Mind's Eye* writes, "When she flipped open the score of Mozart's Twenty-First, she found it, to her bewilderment, completely unintelligible.

Although she saw the staves, the lines, the individual notes sharp and clear, none of it seemed to hang together, to make sense." Even if you know nothing about music but want to speak about a moment of confusion, Sacks' words are a model for expressing the bewildered experience.

When you are both the writer and the speaker, you may end up motivating and inspiring yourself, as well as your listeners, to greater heights. Jon Favreau, President Obama's head speechwriter, said in a 2008 *Newsweek* magazine article, "You always hope that the person [speaking] can match the lofty moment that the writer dreams up." As a speechwriting Toastmaster, perhaps you can match that peak of speaking performance.

Speaking Skills for Writers

A newly published author recently presented a lecture and book reading. With a soft, tremulous voice, she said, "I must apologize in advance. I'm not at all a public speaker. I'm sure I can't keep your interest or attention for the length of time allotted, but I'll try." She then read from a written script for 50 minutes. I thought to myself, Even just a brief time in Toastmasters would help this writer improve dramatically. She had depths of unfolding substance, but not a pinpoint of panache.

Authors marketing their books must speak publicly. In the current world of publishing, writers build a platform and persuade readers to buy their books. Writers can learn from speakers how to overcome their early anxiety and become comfortable in the public eye. They also can learn to influence their audience.

Fear of public speaking becomes a new angst that often shrinks writers' confidence. The fears of both writers and speakers originate in negative self-talk: the inner critic saying, "I can't do this. I'm a private person, a writer. I can't be a public speaker." Here are some techniques speakers use to succeed:

Block out negative thoughts with a repetitive mantra such as, "One step at a time. I can do this."

Reframe your role from an old, negative frame such as, "This is me. I can't do this," to a new, realistic frame: "This is me. I write and tell stories."

Breathe deeply and slowly, saying re upon inhaling and lax, with your inner voice, upon exhaling.

Writers usually face a warm audience when they speak at a book signing or book discussion group. Readers show up to find out more about the author, as well as the book. Answering readers' questions is like telling a true short story, with a beginning, a middle and a close. It's simple, because you know the answers. "Who was the inspiration for the main character?" "How do you manage the writing life?"

"What do you like to do in addition to writing?" People tend to listen for commonalities — these serve to increase their attraction to you and your book.

Know Your Work

As you begin giving speeches to promote your writing career, use your writing skills to describe your work in one sentence. Next, describe it in one paragraph, and then again in one page. Write out answers to questions you think people may ask. "The writer-turnedspeaker is well served by note cards highlighting topics he can expand on extemporaneously," says Tony Brenna, a member of U Speak Easy Toastmasters on Bainbridge Island in Washington. "What you have to say as a speaker should not sound 'written.' It should sound friendly, sincere and colloquial."

The writer-speaker delivery has the power to attract an audience. Read a piece that calls for emotion on your part. This leaves listeners curious and anticipative. Practice by speaking out loud when alone. This helps you gain a greater understanding of how words feel and sound to both the reader and the listener. Practice in front of a mirror, and practice again with family or friends — or anyone who can give you realistic, constructive feedback.

Give your speech a trial run in your Toastmasters club before giving it to a more critical audience. "The speaker-audience connection available in the Toastmasters laboratory remains a unique way for me to sharpen my skills as a speaker, writer and more effective thinker," says poet Tom Cleary, ATMB.

Writers and speakers are potential collaborators who can offer each other empathy in regard to their fears and struggles. They can draw upon one another's experiences and gain information on how to improve their respective skills.

"Skillful writers and speakers become more efficient thinkers," says Cleary, "and they can engage in a process that refines and enhances thought, just as a sculptor shapes stone into an image of solidity and significance." What a word picture! In my mind's eye, I see Auguste Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker" surrounded by writers and speakers with open mouths and pencils in hand, emitting little balloons of brilliant words.

What do you see?