

How to read... aloud

Introduction

Reading aloud is an art.

At its simplest, the everyday skill of reading scans letters and the words they form to make meaningful sense of them. Reading aloud may seem to be merely an 'out loud' version of the same thing, but it is more than that.

Because this dissimilarity usually goes unrecognised and un-investigated, few read well aloud.

Reading or speaking in public involves the use of several skills, which, if not mastered, becomes painful to some degree for both the speaker and (perhaps more importantly) the listener.

If the skills needed are properly understood—and practised diligently—it transforms the experience for speaker and audience alike. Later, when the skills are well developed, reading or speaking to an audience becomes a joy, a joy to do and a joy to listen to. By then it has transcended skill and become an art—and art moves people! It lifts them out of where they are and takes them to where they may never have been.

Reading aloud is an act of discovery and generosity by the reader, a creative action that finds a treasure and generously gives it away—immediately! In this way it literally becomes an act of love in pursuit of beauty.

If reading aloud is not like this for you, it can be, regardless of the difficulty and complexity of the text. All it takes is a little effort and a willingness to let go and expand.

Above all, it requires listening.

Let's begin by understanding some relevant facts.

Reading is communicating

When reading silently, communication is from the author to you, the reader. When reading aloud, that communication is handed on (delivered) to the listener.

This 'handing on' requires the reader to be more than a mere flat, mechanical dispenser of the author's words. The reader needs to intelligently lend his or her voice to the author so that the author's intended meaning is fully and accurately presented to the listener in all its richness.

For this the reader needs to abandon any current views of himself or herself and be wholly given to the art of communication.

If that happens, the reader's voice becomes for a time the author's voice. The author is, in this way, brought 'alive' from the page and is as though speaking in the room. Anything less serves both author and listener relatively poorly.

To read is to speak; to speak is to listen

All competent speakers recognise that the most important thing they can do when speaking is listen. Why? Because they need to hear what they are saying as they are saying it—they need to hear what the audience is hearing! They need to appreciate, objectively, how their words are being received moment by moment. If they don't, they literally lose contact with their audience and tend to become shunned.

If a speaker is not listening, his words may become incoherent, mumbled, his sentences not completed before new ones are begun. Alternatively, in his enthusiasm to 'communicate', he may so disconnect from his audience as to drown it in a torrent of words whose unrelenting flood overwhelms any capacity or willingness to understand. Unsurprisingly, his audience follows his example and stops listening.

Just as importantly, a speaker, in order to communicate with his audience, needs to be sensitive to the significance of the words he is using, choosing them appropriately and delivering them with all the subtlety and impact needed to make his point.

It's almost the same for an author; only he relies on the reader to pick up his intended meaning with all its nuances. Should that same reader then read aloud, he needs, like the speaker, to deliver the words well and in a manner in which his audience can receive them. For that he too needs, first and foremost, to listen.

Is there a test for an adequate level of listening? Yes. If your listening is good you will hear yourself as if it were someone else reading or speaking. At first this can be a bit of a shock, but if it is not happening you are not listening well enough—and your audience may already be wishing you would be silent!

Your listening assists the listening of others in the room: the more there is listening, the more there is listening. In this way, listening grows... amplifies... in the room... naturally... almost contagiously. Then you become aware of an altogether richer level of listening... and beauty beckons, and you follow, taking your audience with you.

Speaking is projecting

Whenever we speak, we project something. This applies to any and all forms of speech: conversation, public speaking, reading aloud.

What we project varies with our mood or our current or prevailing view of ourselves and literally touches or (sometimes) hits the listener, leaving an impression—not always for the better. In this way, all too easily, people can inflict themselves in an unwelcome way on others, either deliberately or unknowingly.

Many people's view of themselves is so fixed that it is projected every time they open their mouths: these are those who live in an almost permanent state of pride or self-doubt or worry or self-pity or cynicism or conceit. They include the habitual complainers, the know-it-alls, etc.

A speaker or reader therefore needs to be aware of what he or she is projecting and find a way to leave aside the unnecessary and the unwelcome. With a speaker this obviously includes his body language, with a reader it usually does not, but otherwise the situation is the same.

That much-needed awareness can be cultivated through the simple practice of being in the present moment, unflinchingly observing what is going on within oneself. Once again, listening, because it brings us into the present moment, is extremely helpful, as is the sense of touch. Being in touch with one's present state of mind begins most easily at the physical level through, for example, feeling the weight of one's feet on the ground or one's body on the chair, the tightness of one's grip, the play of air on the face, etc.

Practising in this way increases one's alertness to one's own personal projections before their infliction risks becoming a problem for others (and thereby for oneself!). Such practice can validly be considered to be a minimum standard of courtesy that every speaker owes every listener.

HOW TO HANDLE A SENTENCE

What is a sentence? The word itself comes from the Latin verb *sentire*, to feel. Clearly, it's a group of words arranged to express something thought or felt: a statement, assertion, question, command, wish, etc. But it's more than that, it's a complete thought or feeling that, in revealing the thinking of the writer or speaker, as it were sentences him to live for now with the thinking it expresses, and perhaps even to reap its results.

Every complete thought has a beginning, middle and end. The beginning launches it, the middle continues its expression and the end concludes it.

More than just a beginning, middle and end, a sentence contains one or more pieces of information: "Anna, who loves tennis, lives in York." Each piece has to be clearly distinguished from the others. Punctuation attempts to do this and the signals that punctuation provides need to be reflected in the speech of the reader.

Since the listener often cannot see what the reader is reading (and even if he can) the listener, in lieu of seeing the punctuation on the page, needs to be given aural signals at the points where the pieces of information begin and end, and when the sentence begins and ends.

What follows in this section is not new; it reflects natural speech. It's simply a set of instructions that, when practised, make conscious and available what is natural in ordinary conversation. Reading aloud, because it's a performance, tends to make us restrict our speech, usually due to nervousness. Practising what follows can remove such blockages. The aim is naturalness, a conscious, responsive naturalness that takes its lead from the text and the audience rather than from the speaker's habits or fears or prevailing state of mind.

Begin a sentence with energy

The beginning of a sentence, should, in the spirit of it being a launch pad, be given some impetus, some energy, to signal the beginning of the expression of the thought. We naturally do this in speech when we say, for example, "Oh, by the way..."

How much energy we give is a matter for personal judgement, in the moment. Don't overdo it.

End a sentence with a slight drop in tone, but for a question (perhaps) raise the tone of your voice

Signal the end of a sentence (the conclusion of a thought) by a slight lowering of the tone of your voice. However, if the sentence is a question, it may be best to

raise the tone of your voice a little at the end. Both tones are typical of natural, everyday speech, but need to be done consciously, for the benefit of the listener, when speaking or reading aloud.

Follow the punctuation

Commas, semi colons, colons, full stops, etc. are there for a purpose. Do not ignore them (unless they are used incorrectly). They each signify the need for a pause in the delivery of the words of a sentence, and when used well are essential in the communication of meaning.

Generally, commas merit the least pause and (in the order shown in the previous paragraph) full stops merit the most.

Some readers or speakers mechanically hurtle, without the slightest pause, from one sentence to the next, refusing the listener time to properly receive and appreciate the phrase or sentence just gone. This breaches the most fundamental requirement of speech: meeting the needs of the listener.

A listener needs time to register, comprehend and perhaps savour words, phrases and sentences. A considerate, practical speaker or reader understands this and allows the listener an appropriate amount of time for it.

So, how long should one pause at punctuation?

Practice consciously pausing at each punctuation mark

To break the common habit of hurtling unthinkingly, without any break, through each and every sentence, practise for a couple of hours deliberately pausing at every punctuation mark, pausing longest at a full stop and (in the order shown above) pause the shortest at a comma. This may mean you pause three times longer at a full stop than at a comma, but it is not being seriously suggested that the length of a pause at a full stop is always three times that for a comma. There is no fixed rule. The proportions vary with the needs of the listener: some words, some phrases, some sentences need more time than others for their meaning and significance to register with the listener.

These artificial pauses serve only to remind you to always allow the listener sufficient time to really hear what is being said. Soon you will become expert at judging how much time the listener needs at each punctuation mark. Then the pauses will no longer be artificial but responsive, natural and appropriate.

Pause at the hidden, unmarked commas

The natural pauses in a sentence (pauses needed for proper comprehension by the listener) are not always marked with commas. Nevertheless, they need to be

recognised and followed. For example, in the phrase, “I want you to understand that wherever there is...” there’s a natural, slight, unmarked pause both before and after the word ‘that’. It’s not marked with a comma, but it’s there. The one before is optional, the one after isn’t. Without it the words are read poorly.

A good reader, one who wishes to communicate meaning, notices these unmarked pauses and uses them, because, in conjunction with the marked punctuation, they help to reveal meaning. Using aural cues (pauses) to separate out and present to the listener each piece of information in each sentence is essential to comprehension. Again, it’s a natural (although mostly unconscious) feature of everyday speech, one that needs to be brought consciously to the act of reading aloud.

Often, these pauses or unmarked commas can give drama to a sentence, a drama that will be lost if they are missed. For example, notice the unmarked pause after ‘why’ and the effect it can have on the following sentence by its presence or absence: “Why did you say that?”

These unmarked pauses are detected by quickly analysing the sentence before reading it aloud. This is not difficult; we do it all the time when reading, simultaneously judging which words to emphasise and which not.

Articulation

As well as delivering sentences well, a good reader or speaker needs to pay attention to the accurate articulation of words. For example, on Harvest Sunday, it’s best if the worshipers don’t hear: “Lettuce pray.”

Emphasis

As already hinted above, some words need emphasis, perhaps by speaking them more loudly than others, perhaps by speaking them more softly, or more gently, perhaps even by stretching them or by slowing down their delivery.

We see which words need emphasis and how to give it to them by seeing the author’s intended meaning. If, for example, someone being quoted in the text is angry or sorrowful, your voice should exhibit the appropriate degree of anger or sorrow. Act the part.

Responsively giving emphasis where it is clearly needed, in the way and to the degree in which it’s needed, is a natural feature of good reading or speaking.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND

As with any speaker, what the reader should listen to is his own voice—not the words, the sound. Since words are merely intelligible sounds, listening to the sound of your own voice naturally means you hear the words too (seeing the water, you cannot help seeing the waves) but you hear much more! You hear, for example, whether you are too quiet, too loud, too fast, too slow, whether your articulation is garbled or clear. Then you begin to ‘hear’ your emotional state and whether that is doing the words justice. You may ‘hear’, become aware of, your anxiety, or your over-confidence, or your fear of what others may be thinking of you.

Listening to the sound of your voice as you speak helps clear away such things, helps you return to the present moment, to the job in hand. Then you become free to appreciate the effect of the words in the room, and hence whether you are delivering them to their best advantage, properly communicating every nuance of meaning for the benefit of all. Through listening you know what to change in your voice and how to change it, moment by moment, to facilitate the best communication of that particular word or phrase or sentence.

Only then does proper reading (or speechmaking) begin.

Sound conveys subtlety; words often convey relatively superficial meanings. Take, for example, the sentence: “You are right and I am wrong and I should apologise.”

By changing the sound as we speak those words we can change the meaning to its exact opposite with no change at all to the words or to their order in the sentence!

1. “You are right and I am wrong and I should apologise.”
2. “**You** are right and **I** am wrong and **I** should apologise!?”

The first is sincerely apologetic, admitting that you’re right, I’m wrong and that I should apologise to you. The second is clearly not apologetic! By angrily emphasising the three pronouns and then turning the sentence into a question by lifting the tone of my voice on the word ‘apologise’, I show I am strongly rejecting your view, insisting that mine is correct, claiming that no apology is due from me and that one is instead due from you! Yet the eleven words in both sentences are identical and their order is unchanged. This dramatic reversal of meaning is achieved entirely via sound.

Another demonstration of the importance of sound (and hence emphasis) is to read the following sentence five times, emphasising the first word on the first reading, the second word on the second reading, and so on. The meaning changes dramatically each time. The sentence is: “I didn’t hold her hand.”

HOW TO HANDLE NERVES

Nervousness when addressing (or reading to) a group is caused by the agitation involved in imagining that we are speaking to many people at once. However, the truth is we only ever speak to one person. Really understanding this dispels fear and nervousness.

Look at it from the listener's perspective: no matter how many people are present, each experiences individually what the speaker says. The hearer only ever hears by and for himself, not others. 'I am hearing' is a fact of experience. 'We are hearing' is merely a projected thought or belief. You may imagine 'the group' is hearing you, but it cannot be so because hearing is always an individual matter.

Therefore, whenever speaking or reading to two or more people, remember that each one hears you individually and speak accordingly. Do not speak to the apparent 'many'.

It's easy to speak one on one, we do it all the time. The fact is, we never do anything else. There is literally no other form of verbal communication, in spite of appearances to the contrary.

Understanding this is how intimacy in broadcasting is achieved. Great broadcasters, such as Alistair Cooke, certainly know this. Terry Wogan was once asked how many listeners he had. He could have answered, more than eight million, but instead revealed the secret of his success by replying: "Only one." The instruction 'speak to the microphone' is similarly a way of helping the speaker achieve simultaneous intimacy with each and every audience member.

Simply remember that it is the individual alone who is listening. There may be lots of them, but each is an individual. Speak to the individual, to that one person, not to some 'aggregate'.

Speaking to the one individual always evokes a better audience response than 'addressing the room'. This must be so because the 'room' is only a fiction or concept, a representation of the individuals present, and no-one wishes to be treated as a concept.

Do, however, let your gaze rest on four or five individual faces in various parts of the audience if speaking or reading 'live' in a room. That simple eye contact, as it shifts from one person to another, helps create a touch of intimacy with all who are there—if your gaze continuously rests on only one person, everyone else is likely to feel ignored and will resent that.

May you read and speak well, to the benefit of your listener!