GETTING THERE:
TRANSITIONS IN ORATORY
by
John Buettler

"Hey, buddy! Can you tell me how to get to the baseball stadium?"
"Sure, go down the street here and turn left . . . no, that's not right. OK, go down the street here four blocks and then turn right, then . . . no, that won't do it. Let's see, turn around and go back till you get to . . . Nope, that won't work either. Hmm. You know what? You can't get there from here!"

"You can't get there from here." So many times those of us who spend our weekends listening to and evaluating speeches by young people either consciously or unconsciously have a similar reaction to a speech we hear. Student after student stands before us, warning of the dire consequences of his or her problem, and we, the judges, fail to see the problem. Or we can't quite understand how what the speaker is presenting as a problem will result in the harms that he or she claims it will. We get to the end of the speech and hear the speaker tell us that *we must do* _____, and we are still asking ourselves, "*Why* must I do this?" or "Why will *this* help to solve the problem (which I'm still not sure of anyway)?" When a judge or listener reacts this way to an orator's presentation – that is, fails to see the reality of the problem, or fails to see how the material presented in the speech supports the existence of the problem, or fails to understand the connection between the problem and the proposed solution – then, most of the time the fault is that of the orator. Either the material itself is not strong enough to convince the listener of his or her thesis, or the speaker has failed to make clear the connections that exist between his own reasoning and the material from which he derives support. In the latter case, the most likely cause of the problem is that the speaker has not provided enough transitions or, in many cases, clear transitions from point to point as he or she travels on the train of thought intended to carry the listeners along the journey from indifference to conviction that is the journey of oratory.

Transitions are among the most difficult, yet most important skills to master in oratory (or any kind of writing for that matter). At the same time, transitions serve fundamental and necessary purposes in writing. Among them are the following:

1. They point the listener in the direction that the speaker's thought is going
2. They helps to summarize where the speaker has been
3. They keep the listening audience from being intellectually "disoriented"
4. They enable the listener to discern and follow the order of events and thoughts that the speaker is presenting
5. They are the "glue" or the context that makes clear the connection between the following intellectual pairs: idea-idea; idea-example; idea-statistic; idea-testimony; statistic-testimony; example-statistic; example-testimony

In essence, a transition acknowledges what has gone before and prepares the way for what is to come.

There are three types of transition which we will consider in this article. Are they the only kind? Probably not, but, at the very least, mastering these transitions will take the speaker a long way toward clarity in the organization of his or her oratory.

Transitions of Order

Transitions of order are perhaps the easiest to accomplish in practical terms, while being among the most difficult to accomplish creatively. Order may refer to chronology, location, importance or significance, etc. Obviously this kind of transition may move in either ascending or descending order. The simplest transitions of order are the ordinal numbers, "first," "second," etc., or the adverbs derived from them, "firstly," "secondly," and so on. Other adverbs which indicate the these relationships are: "chiefly," "primarily," "more/most importantly," "here," "there," etc. As you can see, these things are not the stuff of creativity, and it would be a mistake for the speaker to rely too heavily on these one-word adverbs or short adverbial phrases to move from point to point in his/her presentation. Few things sound as pedestrian as a speech that progresses with transitions such as, "my first point," "my second point," etc. For this reason speakers may sometimes make use of some sort of vehicle or device in their presentation which allows them to conceive of the speech topic as, for example, a three-course meal or a journey which goes through different stages to its destination, or the three acts of a play and so forth. This enables the writer to make use of the analogy as he/she moves from idea to idea in his/her speech. These too can be overdone and should be approached with caution.

Transitions of Relationship

A transition of relationship, as the name implies, is one which establishes or makes clear the relationship or connection between two elements of a speech. For example, notice how the following underlined transition sets the stage for the contrast between the statistical information that comes before and the statement which follows:

According to the National Institute of Diabetic and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, more than half of U. S. adults are overweight and more than one quarter of Americans are actually obese. These statistics, however, hold little meaning for a sizeable group, though obviously not the majority, of people in our country. These

are the thousands of people, young and old, who suffer from anorexia and/or bulimia.

Likewise the following transition establishes the connection between the testimony of the psychologist and the example which follows:

Psychologist Mary Contrary states that eating disorders are among the most destructive emotional illnesses facing young women today. Few things can illustrate this better than the case of Sally Johnson. Sally was a young, happy, bright teenage girl . . .

In both of these examples, the transition binds or "glues" the information which came before it to the information which comes after and establishes what kind of connection that there is.

In order to write this kind of transition, the most important thing is that the writer know exactly what the relationship is between the two thoughts that need to be connected. Although this sounds obvious, for many young orators just learning their craft, it is not. In the first example, element B *contrasts* with element A. In the second example, element B *illustrates or provides an example of* element A. Element A could be a statement that the writer is making and element B could be a statistic or testimony whose purpose is not just to illustrate but to *prove* what has been said. Some other relationships which can be clarified by providing a good transition are:

generalization: "this is but one example of a situation that is becoming widespread throughout our country."

results: "the results of _____ are clear.

conclusion: From all this information it not only reasonable but necessary to conclude that _____

Transitions of Movement

A transition of movement is one which guides or directs the audience from one part of the argument to the next part while making clear the logical connection between the two parts. Consider the following: In the first example, the author is alerting us to the perils of information overload.

The most noticeable hallmark of this age is undoubtedly the Internet - a giant spiderweb, capable of seducing anyone. For instance, me. Now, I sit down to write my speech with the usual necessities - laptop, looseleaf, and one super cold, 64 oz., cherry-flavored Icee. First, I start out by finding some useful information concerning my speech topic on the Internet. But then I make the fatal mistake of gulping down the mighty shake. Convulsions, and Icee aches of the worst kind follow. Finally however I simmer down into a state of sugar sedation. And that's when it happens – www.Icee.com. I peer at the address on the bottom of the Icee cup and its campy lure is irresistible. I enter the hallowed site. I'm immediately awestruck with the endless bounds to which I can increase my knowledge of the Icee kingdom. How does the mysterious Icee machine work? Is it possible to fully clothe myself in its red, white, and blue paraphernalia? All answers are contained within. Awwweeesome...Hey, Steve, how's the speech coming? - oh it's not. And that's the problem. Today with e-mail, junk mail, and Internet ads, information is literally thrown in our paths, making it easier to be drawn away from our purposes.

Icee aches and unfinished oratories are one thing, but unfortunately this problem has grown up and moved into the real world of migraines and unforeclosed business deals. For many men and women, competing in the workplace means having to deal with statistics, faxes, reports and other such paperwork. Today, with the amount of information, both useful and useless, constantly growing their jobs are becoming increasingly hectic, and quite understandably they often feel overwhelmed. Many times the data they compare, though conflicting, seem equally reliable, and this sense of being overwhelmed turns into mental gridlock what British psychologist David Lewis calls "analysis paralysis." A study conducted by Reuters Business Information shows that half of senior managers believe that vital decisions are delayed due to "analysis paralysis."

– from *Furnishing the Future* by Stephen Buettler

The underlined transition has the effect of moving the speech from a section which expresses and clarifies the problem in a highly personal, semi-fictitious and humorous way to the next section which applies the problem in practical terms to the real world in which actual harm results.

In the next example, the author is describing the dangers of a world in which no one accepts responsibility for his or her actions. The transition *moves* the speech from the section which summarizes these effects to a consideration of some of the causes of the problem.

Passing the buck inhibits progress, it prevents us from evaluating ourselves, identifying problems, and looking for answers. Quite simply, passing the buck is a solution saboteur.

So why do we blame others? Perhaps it would be better to ask, why not? I mean let's face it, there are definite benefits to passing the buck. It's easy. It's usually less expensive. It's non-threatening. If someone else is at fault, then I'm not. It's convenient.

From *Passing the Buck* by Graham Baird

Both of these transitions, to one degree or another, accomplish purposes #1, #2, #3 and #4 in the foregoing list.

A Transition is a Bridge

One way to think of a transition, and therefore to write a transition, is as a bridge between the opposite sides of a river. For a bridge to be able to bear the traffic from one side to the other, it is necessary for it to have legs on either side of the divide. Likewise, an effective way to write a transition is to plant one foot of the transition or bridge on each side of our metaphorical river. We can probably best see this in the transition underlined in *Furnishing the Future.*

"Icee aches and unfinished oratories are one thing, but unfortunately this problem has grown up and moved into the real world of migraines and unforeclosed business deals."

The previous paragraph consists of the humorous, somewhat hypothetical and completely personal example of the student's discovery of the Icee web site and the resulting distraction from writing his speech. So we see that one leg of the "bridge" is on that side of the riverbank: "Icee aches and unfinished oratories are one thing. . . ." Then we begin to cross the bridge: "but unfortunately this problem has grown

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up and moved into . . . ." Finally we land on the other side, where we will encounter the problem in ways that are of "the real world of migraines and unforeclosed business deals," as the rest of the paragraph goes on to illustrate.

How Long Are Transitions?

The transitions which have been presented are single phrase or sentence transitions. Depending on the situation, however, transitions may be whole paragraphs. Consider the following

"For me, computer work is like a drug, I can't give it up." The effects on the family do not go unseen, for the same Reuters study shows that two-thirds of managers believe their family life is suffering due to info-overload.

A problem which can leave original orators speechless, business managers clueless, and poets emotionless deserves our immediate attention. Today, unlike any other age, we must be adept at handling and accessing information in our homes, schools, and jobs. Every time we allow our desks or rooms to be come stockpiled with clutter, our minds, too, become disorganized and confused. And when this happens we can no longer function effectively in these environments. Like cleaning our desks or rooms, then, we must sweep our minds free of any inhibiting factors.

I think a quote from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel A Study in Scarlet *helps to better illustrate this point. In it, Doyle's eccentric sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, explains why he has no knowledge of the solar system : "I consider the man's brain to be originally like an empty attic and you have to stock it with the furniture as you choose. Now the skillful man is very careful as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which aid his work."*

This full paragraph transition moves the listener from the ideas of the previous paragraph which summarizes the effects that information overload can have on people in the professional world as well as their families to the following paragraph which begins to present practical solutions to the problem, beginning with an idea from Sherlock Holmes.

The moral of the story, then, is that a transition can be as long or as short as you need it to be, **but it must be.** It is important for you as orators to keep in mind the fact that your listeners do not have a copy of the speech in front of them. They do not, therefore, have the luxury of going back to find the material that they missed or to work their way through the line of thought that they are having difficulty following. You get to present the argument once and the audience must process it on the spot. Whether you are using a transition of order, relationship or movement, a good transition will help your audience to follow your line of thought by making them aware of your reasoning and it will aid them in processing the information and arguments you are presenting. The best transitions are those which, like the ones cited in this article, relate clearly to the content of what has gone before and what will follow, and which keep the audience focused on the point of the speech. With the help of your careful attention to transitions, the audience can be reassured that, at least as far as your speech goes, they can get there from here.

*(**John Buettler** coaches at Holy Ghost Preparatory School (PA). He has coached several NFL and NCFL finalists including his son Stephen who won National Oratory Runnerup in 1999)*