

HEY, ORATORS! ARE YOU CONFUSED? IF SO, I DON'T BLAME YOU!

by
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COOPERATION AND SYMBOLISM

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Are some or all of the above markings confusing? They need not be, for history reveals that human beings through cooperation with one another can make any marking, sound, or object stand for anything. For example, they can make paper,

.....The most developed and complicated form of symbolism is language. All human accomplishment, including study of the past, treatment of the present, and prediction of the future, rests upon language. Like air, food, and water, language is a human need.

metal, and plastic stand for affluence or poverty; ribbon, metal paper, and animal skin stand for intellectual and physical achievement; a dove and hawk respectively stand for peace-seeking and war-mongering; a white ball and turned-up thumb or black ball and turned-down thumb respectively stand for acceptance and life or rejection and death; and a donkey and elephant stand for political ideology and political power or weakness.

Through cooperation with one another human beings can make crossed pieces of wood, glass, iron, or plastic stand for religious conviction; colored fabrics stand for patriotism; white, hooded robes stand for ethnic or racial hatred; sirens and whistles stand for medical emergencies, natural disasters, and law enforcement; green, yellow, and red light respectively stand for proceeding, becoming cautious, and stopping; and lighted flashlights and cigarette lighters stand for aesthetic approval. The process by which certain things stand for other things is **symbolism**.

The most developed and complicated form of symbolism is **language**. All human accomplishment, including study of the past, treatment of the present, and prediction of the future, rests upon language. Like air, food, and water, language is a human need, and the need was well identified by Peter F. Drucker,

an economist, when contending in *How to Be an Employee* that the values of learning to write and speak are unmistakably the responsibility of the school in the instruction of students. Drucker says:

Expressing one's thoughts is one skill that the school can really teach, especially to people born without natural writing or speaking talent. Many other skills can be learned later—in this country there are literally thousands of places that offer training to adult people at work. But the foundations for skill in expression have to be laid early: an interest in and an ear for language; experience in organizing ideas and data, in brushing aside the irrelevant, in wedding outward form and inner content into one structure; and above all, the habit of verbal expression. If you do not lay these foundations during your school years, you may never have an opportunity again.

The human need for skillfully expressing one's thoughts includes style, and students of oratory are not exempt from having to learn this language mechanism.

THE PROBLEM OF OMISSION OR ABUSE

The learning of style can be problematic for several reasons. For instance, some students of oratory tend to rely mainly on oral composition textbooks that either ignore style or treat it in ways that range from inferior to jejune to confusing. Some authors seem to know little about style and its functions and elegance and, thus, ignore it. Other authors treat style rather haphazardly only because their publishers believe it ought to be included. None of these reasons are commendable, but they are operative. Whatever the reason, style all too often is ignored or mistreated, and these errors of omission or abuse should be expiated.

THE PROBLEM OF PLETHORIC DEFINITIONS

Another significant problem for students of oratory trying to learn style is that definitions of style are plethoric and, therefore, contribute to exaggeration of style. For example, some authors define style as the choice and combination of words. This approach is typified by Elizabeth Andersch and Lorin Staats who in *Speech for Everyday Use* report that "a study of language in speech, then, must deal with words and ways of putting words together in a proper way."

Andrew Weaver and Ordean Ness in *An Introduction to Public Speaking* present style as an individualized manner of expression, stating that “style, the manner in which the speaker or writer uses language, varies with each other.”

Other authors present broad, inclusive concepts of style. For illustration, in *Basic Principles of Speech* Lew Sarret and his colleagues present a fusion of style and delivery by contending that style “is the product of the individual mind expressing ideas through combination of language, vocal utterance, and bodily action.”

Charles Lomas and Ralph Richardson go beyond the fusion of style and delivery by insisting in *Speech: Idea and Delivery* that style is “the product of one’s interests, personality, orderliness of mind (or lack of it), use of language and delivery .”

To learn multiple and varied definitions of style is impractical, especially for students beginning their pursuit of oratorical effectiveness.

THE PROBLEMS OF EXCESSIVE COMPARTMENTALIZING

Another reason for problematic learning of style is the pervasive, fruitless, and even pernicious attempts to compartmentalize style according to multiple types and qualities. For example, the following types of style appear in contemporary textbooks on public speaking.

Apathetic	Austere	Bold	Brisk
Burlesque	Concise	Diffuse	Dignified
Dry	Elaborated	Elegant	Energetic
Erudite	Firm	Flowing	Impersonal
Loose	Lucid	Middle	Nervous
Noble	Opulent	Oral	Patronizing
Penetrating	Periodic	Personal	Perspicuous
Picturesque	Plain	Sonorous	Stately
Stoic	Sublime	Truncated	Vehement
Vivid	Volatile	Weighty	Whimsical
Wholesome	Witty	Written	Zealous

The above list is far from being exhaustive, and each type has its own characteristics. What exaggeration! To learn so many types is impractical, especially for students pursuing oratorical effectiveness.

The following qualities also appear in contemporary textbooks on public speaking, adding to the problematic learning of style.

Acceptability	Accuracy	Appropriateness	Clarity
Concreteness	Correctness	Directness	Ease
Efficiency	Embellishment	Energy	Explanation
Familiar Word	Force	Grammar	Imagery
Impressiveness	Liveliness	Movement	Originality
Parallelism	Pleasantness	Precision	Propriety
Repetition	Rhythm	Sentence	Simplicity
Specificity	Variety	Vividness	Word Choice

Indeed; but to learn so many qualities is impractical, especially for students pursuing oratorical effectiveness.

A USEFUL POINT OF DEPARTURE

About 95 A.D., the Roman educator Quintilian introduced his *Institutio Oratoria* in which he asserts that “nothing should be done for the sake of words since words were invented merely to give expression to the thoughts of our mind and produce the effect which we desire upon the minds of the judges.” In other words, Quintilian argues that the style of language is an indivisible element of persuasion, and that the orator should study style for what it does for the message rather than for what it is.

Contrary to the aforementioned impractical approaches to

style, Quintilian’s dictum has not gone unheard. For example, in his *Discours Sur Le Style* delivered before the French Academy, M, De Buffon contends that “style is simply the order and movement one give’s to one’s thoughts,” and that “style supposes the united exercise of all the intellectual faculties. Ideas and they alone are the foundation,”

In *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* Hugh Blair states that “style has always some reference to an author’s manner of thinking. It is a picture of the ideas which arise in his mind, and of the manner in which they arise there. . . , style is nothing else than the sort of expression which our thoughts most readily assume,”

In *Literary Remains* Samuel Taylor Coleridge stresses that style “is nothing else but the art of conveying the meaning approximately and with perspicuity, whatever that meaning may be”; and that to have a good style “the primary rule and condition is not to attempt to express ourselves in language before we thoroughly know our own meaning.”

Arthur Schopenhauer in *The Art of Literature* says that style is “the physiognomy of the mind”; that style “shows the *formal* nature of all his thoughts”; that style “receives its beauty from the thought it expresses”; and that style “is nothing but the mere silhouette of thought; and an obscure or bad style means a dull or confused brain.”

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* Lewis Carroll instructs his audience to “take care of sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.”

Austin Phelps insists in *English Style in Public Discourse* that “qualities of style are qualities of thought. Forms of style are thought in form. In every specimen of perfect style this principle tolerates no question of its authority. Not only is thought primary, and expression secondary, thought is absolute, it is imperial. Expression as an independent entity is words without sense.”

Glen Capp argues in *How to Communicate Oral*ly that style is “language used in expressing your ideas,” and in *Speaking from the Pulpit* Wayne Mannebach and Joseph Mazza insist that style “is the manner by which language is used to make ideas acceptable to a given audience.”

The above definitions of style that endorse Quintilian are useful points of departure, for they stress the relationship between the orator’s conceptual process and his or her language. They emphasize that style is an indivisible element of persuasion, and they urge students of public speaking, **including oratory**, to study style for what it **does** rather than for what it **is**. In other words, style must be **functional**; its primary purpose is to convey the intended thoughts of the speaker in a manner that is favorable to the audience.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF STYLE

To improve oratorical effectiveness, specifically style, four steps are recommended.

Students of oratory who apprehend and comprehend these elements and appreciate certain self-possessed strengths and liabilities tend to be better prepared to maintain, or even enhance, the strengths and make appropriate corrections to improve, or even eliminate, the liabilities.

The first step is to define style as **the manner by which language is used to make intended ideas understood and acceptable to a given audience.**

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The second step is to concentrate on a **single type** of style, namely a **Pragmatic Style**.

The third step is to promote **only two qualities** of style, namely **Clarity** and **Impressiveness**. The line of distinction between these qualities is not always clear; nor need it be, for the two qualities admittedly interact. However, Clarity and Impressiveness are the two most important instruments of style which contribute to oratorical effectiveness. Hopefully students of oratory will learn other stylistic qualities, but only after having mastered **Clarity** and **Impressiveness**.

The fourth step is to study the orations of select people who were masters of clarifying their language and making their intended thoughts impressive to their audience. In her essay on "The Criticism of Rhetoric" Marie Hochmuth well explains the practicality of such study. Hochmuth says:

Orators, of course, have been agents in history and, like all agents, must be supposed to have effects. Greece without Demosthenes, Rome without Cicero, England without Burke and Churchill, Germany without Hitler, and the United States without Patrick Henry and Lincoln would have been different. To believe otherwise is to succumb to the notion that human effort counts for little or nothing. Along with the other arts—painting, sculpture, drama, poetry—oratory has sometimes transformed abstractions into meaningful patterns and directives in our lives, has projected and given impetus to ideas that have become the values by which we live.

Recommended examples of oratorical excellence are:

Susan B. Anthony	Thomas Hart Benton	Albert Jeremiah Beveridge
William E. Borah	Henry Brougham	William Jennings Bryan
Edmund Burke	George Canning	Lord Chatham, William Pitt
Winston Churchill	John Philpot Curran	George William Curtis
Georges Jacques Danton	Clarence Seward Darrow	Camille Desmoulins
Henry Emerson Fosdick	Charles James Fox	Henry Grattan
Alexander Hamilton	Patrick Henry	Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.
John Fitzgerald Kennedy	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Lucius Q. C. Lamar
Abraham Lincoln	Douglas MacArthur	Compte de Mirabeau
Dwight L. Moody	Wendell Phillips	William Pitt
Franklin Delano Roosevelt	Theodore Roosevelt	Richard Brinsley Sheridan
Adlai E. Stevenson	Robert Walpole	Daniel Webster

CONCLUSION

Students of oratory are not exempt from having to learn the concept and appropriate treatment of the mechanism called style, and the above recommendations should prove helpful.

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