

Let There Be Stoning!

by Jay H. Lehr

Let there be an end to incredibly boring speakers! They are not sophisticated, erudite scientists speaking above our intellectual capability; they are arrogant, thoughtless individuals who insult our very presence by their lack of concern for our desire to benefit from a meeting which we chose to attend.

We attempt to achieve excellence of written presentation in our journals. We can require no less in our conferences. It is an honor to be accepted as a speaker who will spend the valuable time of hundreds of scientists at a conference. Failure to spend this time wisely and well, failure to educate, entertain, elucidate, enlighten, and most important of all, failure to maintain attention and interest should be punishable by stoning. There is no excuse for such tedium, so why not exact the ultimate penalty?

Not long ago I became so enraged by a speaker at a conference I moderated, that I publicly humiliated him before 200 hostile attendees. This young man chose to read in a monotone from a secretarial pad, flipping pages for 30 minutes of a scheduled 20-minute speech while complex slides tripped incomprehensibly across a screen behind him. At the conclusion of this group insult, he had the nerve to summarize his presentation, looking up for the first time, by stating that he hoped he had helped us to understand the relationship between the rain in Spain and the crumbling of the Rock of Gibraltar, or some such ponderous chain of reasoning. As I awakened the remaining audience, who had not the nerve to walk out as others had, I explained to the young man that he had done no such thing. Trembling as I spoke, I told him and the audience that his paper was an insult which had obviously bored and irritated a kindly group of scientists who deserved better. Those who kept awake refrained from stoning him, though they surely had adequate cause. The young man collapsed into his seat in shock as I proceeded with my vocal condemnation, the audience was pleasantly aghast, and this editorial was born.

What I said then I write now. It needs saying and writing. We have all experienced this insult, and many of us have been guilty of purveying it. It must stop. It is not funny. The penalty must be severe.

I recognized the problem when attending my first conference with my thesis advisor as a graduate student in the '50s. I was appalled at the dreadful presentation I was subjected to. The professor tried to calm my immature ravings by explaining that all meetings were like this and that their value was in the halls, not the auditoriums. I could not see why value could not be attained in both places, but I have remained quiet too long. And so to begin.

The average conference paper is 20 minutes in length. It is not a college lecture where students are to absorb the minutest detail of a subject planned and presented as part of a 10 to 16 week curriculum. Rather, a conference paper offers an up-to-date capsule summary of a particular piece of ongoing or completed research for the purpose of bringing fellow scientists up to date on activities in their field.

A speaker cannot hope to teach the audience the specifics of his work, but he can elicit a valuable appreciation of the research effort and imply the value of the contribution to the growing body of knowledge on the subject. To achieve this he must convey enlightened enthusiasm for his subject and the advances he has attained.

Without exception a presentation with the aforementioned goals can and should be made extemporaneously. A scientist who cannot retain in his head the essence of his latest work can hardly be said to be enraptured by his subject. If a speaker is not excited enough by his area of expertise to weave it comfortably into the fabric of his cognitive thought processes, then how can he hope to excite an audience to an acceptable level of appreciation?

There is never an excuse to read a paper. True, it is the rare speaker who can articulate verbally the same elegant phraseology he commits to paper with the benefit of editing, but fewer still are the preachers of science who can bring the **written word** to life and the audience to the edge of their seats. Better to lower the level of verbal excellence and raise the level of extemporaneous energy. The audience will never know what perfect phraseology they are missing, and the speaker must not allow himself to be frustrated by the inability to turn a perfect phrase in the air. In any case, a paper written for publication never reads well out loud. It's really a different medium. If the speaker excites the audience with his energy, they will want to read the paper later, and then they can rapture in the precision of the written word.

A few notes or an outline are all that are required to maintain order and organization. Slides, of course, can serve the same purpose, but never subject your audience to poor slides just because they serve as an outline for your talk. Poor slides are just a distraction from your hopefully vivid words. They must be brightly lit and convey a simple thought. If you need a pointer to indicate an important concept or location on a slide, it is probably too crowded or difficult to comprehend. If you can't read the print on a slide clearly with the naked eye (reading glasses are permitted) when holding it in your hand, it is inadequate for viewing with a slide projector in any size room with an adequately sized screen.

Never, but never (remember stoning) show a slide and then apologize for it. Don't show it. What did you think of the last speaker you heard say "I apologize for the poor quality of this slide," or "I realize no one past the front row can read this slide," or "I'm sorry you can't read the columns of numbers on this slide but I just wanted to point out . . . "? Point out what, fella—we can't read it, remember? Well, what did you think of these speakers? Dumb at best; *&!*&!*@*, at worst! Resist! Resist! Don't show bad slides! They never help; they always hurt. Don't be afraid to use no slides. Word pictures can be great if you practice painting them with a bit of rehearsal. Many of the best college professors you've heard do just fine in their lectures without slides. You can too--kick the crutch! But if you want to use slides, make them good ones. Good ones are not cheap. You can easily spend a few hundred dollars on a good set of slides for a talk, but look at the dividends:

- Your audience will sit up, take notice, and think you're great, someone special!
- You will invariably find many opportunities to use good slides over and over.

- Your audience paid good money to come and hear you. You probably got in free or at a reduced rate. Reinvest the savings in good slides and give your audience a dividend on their investment.

Don't stay on one slide too long; put blanks between slides if you have a lot to say before the next slide. The old slide is distracting. Don't let the slide lull you into a monotone; keep a high energy level with lots of enthusiasm. When you are giving a paper, you are an actor on a stage. You may be an incredible dullard in real life, putting people to sleep right and left, but at that podium, you're a star. You're an entertainer, an educator; put on a happy face and kick ass . . . or get off that stage. Science is sensational; working in a factory is boring; seeking scientific truth is a turn on, so turn on or you'll turn your audience off. You ought to know, your colleagues have been doing it to you for years. Dare to be different. Use your hands, move around, not to the point of distraction, but look alive! Unless you're a pro and I'm boring you with the obvious, rehearse. Rehearse before a friend or relative and to yourself in the quiet of your mind, on a drive, a run, a swim, a cycle, a daydream, anywhere! Listen to yourself. Your wife, kids, and friends won't want to listen to you; bribe them, they will. If you tell them to be tough on you and let you know what's really bad, they'll love it. Think of the time the audience is collectively giving you. One hundred people times 20 minutes is 33 hours. Don't you owe them a few hours of effort in return?

Get your timing down. No one minds your going a minute or two overtime, but five or eight is inexcusable. Face it, there is extraneous material in your talk. You may love it, but the audience can do without it. Get to the point earlier, and spend more time on the meat and less on the soup and nuts. In the beginning, tell the audience what you're going to tell them. Then tell them, and be sure to leave time at the end to tell them what you told them. It sounds simple, but it works and they will appreciate it.

Make sure you talk into the microphone; tell the audience to let you know if you're too loud or not loud enough. You will lose 20 seconds regaining your composure and properly modulating your voice, but that beats 20 minutes of deafening silence or a rumbling sound system.

Avoid jokes unless you're a stand-up comic. Nothing is colder than a failed attempt at humor. If there is anything humorous in your subject, milk it. That's real and will be well received.

When all is said and done, more is said than done. Don't waste words, but if you must, remember that attitude is 75 percent of nearly everything in life; enthusiasm is at least that in public speaking. Brim with enthusiasm; if you don't have it for your work, how can an audience have it for you? Come alive!

A few words for moderators—you're the master of ceremonies, and you can set the tone for all of the speakers. Show an interest in the session. Open with 30 seconds of well-planned comments. Introduce each speaker with five pertinent points of information which you committed to memory in the past ten minutes, i.e. college degrees and colleges attended, two significant past work affiliations (if pertinent), current work affiliation and activity focus. Do it like you know the speaker well, even if you never laid eyes on him before. You can do it. It takes just three minutes to learn five facts for a

short duration. If you're not willing to put in the time, don't accept the job of moderator. When the speaker finishes, keep order during the question period and don't hog the microphone yourself, but do tie it all up with 30 seconds of concluding remarks, if appropriate. A good moderator can really help; a bad one gets in the way, wastes time, and impedes the performance of the speakers he is there to assist.

When on the speakers' platform, unless you have a natural wit and air of showmanship, you cannot afford to be yourself. You must be an actor who is privileged to educate and entertain. The latter must come first or the former has no hope of attainment. But there is one simple rule that can make us surprisingly as comfortable before a group as with a single friend. **Be intimate with your audience.** Make them feel that you are there because you care about informing each and every one of them; no matter if there are 40 or 400, **be intimate.**

When you see the rare speaker who has an air of showmanship that allows him to get into the minds of his audiences, do you comment on how lucky the speaker is to be a natural? Are you sure you can't hope to emulate such a performance? A stage is meant to be acted on, whether to perform in a play or exhort a college student into a broader and deeper understanding of the subject at hand.

We have classrooms in college and stages at conferences because we know that the learning process can be enhanced by animated oral presentations which transcend the capacity to learn from the written page. Unfortunately, most of us achieve less, not more. We deliver an unenthusiastic reading or account which falls more dead on ears than dead prose falls on our eyes.

Don't get up and do what comes naturally if what comes naturally is a dull, witless, monotonous presentation of unexciting facts. If your work is in fact dull and unexciting, don't burden any audience anywhere with a conference presentation. Publish somewhere if you must, if you can!

If, on the other hand, your work has substance that can be brought to life, do just that. Waste no more time saying you can't do it. Do it or have a colleague do it. There is no longer any excuse to be dull. Regardless of the fact that TV evangelists have given enthusiasm a bad name, **be enthusiastic!**

I studied astronomy under a dullard and thought it was a dead science. Carl Sagan taught me differently. I studied biology under a bore and saw no future for it in my mind. Paul Ehrlich showed me differently. My first economics professor put me to sleep, but Paul Samuelson awakened my interest.

I became a geologist because my earliest mentors, Cary Croneis, John Maxwell, and Harry Hess made the earth live for me. Make your subject—no matter how esoteric—live for your audience if only for 20 minutes.

If everyone takes my message to heart, there need be no more public humiliations and even fewer stonings. But if egotistical, pompous, cavalier, obtuse, inconsiderate ignoramus insist on ignoring these words to the wise, let there be stoning!