

## The Art of Being Concise and to the Point

End Your Speaking While They Still Want More.

If ten people are asked after the sermon what the sermon was about, will at least eight of them give the same (or similar) answer? -adapted from Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric: or a Course of Lectures on Preaching*, 1870.

I would guess that of the sermons I've heard in the last 25 years, 15 percent had a discernable point; I could say, "The sermon was about X." Of those 15 percent, however, less than 10 percent demonstrably based the point on the text read. --T. David Gordon, PHD, Professor, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church. "Why Johnny Can't Preach. The Media Have Shaped the Messengers"

When discerning the main point, complete this sentence: "If you walk away from this message with one thing, I want it to be \_\_\_\_\_."

For those of us communicating the gospel, the methods we use are of the utmost importance. We need to be clear, concise, relevant, wise and anointed with the Holy Spirit. Social media has made us lazy and sloppy, and we have lost the art of expressing ourselves well. I have rarely seen an email message (even from trained journalists) that wasn't full of errors, so that in the long run brevity is cancelled by the time it takes to decipher what has been said.

-Les, a UK preacher and online Christian blogger.

The goal of self-editing your sermon should not be to find a way to somehow fit all the fine points of the subject into one message. Rather, it must be the difficult task of deciding which points should be given emphasis and which ones must be culled.

It helps me to remember my years of land development experience. When improving an overgrown plot of land, it's a tough decision to decide which trees to cut down and which to preserve. What I've learned is that once the culled trees and bushes are removed the focus is always on the trees that remain, not on the ones that are missing. The trees that remain immediately become more visible and healthy, more enjoyed and appreciated. In the end the overall appearance of the land is noticeably improved and the culled trees are never missed.

Dr. Paul King, Texas Christian University, Communication Studies:

"If you're really concentrating, critical listening is a physically exhausting experience. Listening as an audience member is more draining than we give it credit for."

King refers to "cognitive backlog." Simply put, information acts like weights--the more you pile on, the more likely you are to drop everything. A 5-minute lecture produces a relatively small amount of cognitive backlog, while a 30-minute lecture produces a relatively large amount of cognitive backlog. The longer the presentation, the more the listener has to organize, comprehend and remember.

Biologist John Medina studies how the brain processes information. Medina has found that--given a topic of moderate interest--people will begin to tune out after approximately 10 minutes. Now, that doesn't mean you should end your presentation after 10 minutes, but it does suggest that you should re-engage the audience at the 10-minute mark. Showing videos, giving a demonstration, and telling stories are simple ways to bring your audience back from their daydream.

A recent study found that the average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000 to eight seconds today. (It is reported that goldfish have a 9-second attention span). We live in an age of over-saturation. Each day, the typical office worker receives 120 emails. According to the latest statistics, the average person spends over 145 minutes per day on social media, Modern attention spans are over-taxed and under developed. Like it or not, good communicators often must take this into account.

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The rule of three, simply put, states that the human mind can consume only about three "chunks" of information in short-term, or working memory. As more and more items are added to a list, the average person retains less and less. Four items are a bit harder to remember than three. Five items are even harder. Once the list hits eight, most people have little chance of remembering the entire sequence. - *Carmen Gallo, Talk Like TED.*

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TED Talks (Technology, Entertainment, Design) on almost every subject are now viewed over three billion times annually. One of the keys to its success, says curator Chris Anderson, is its unwavering commitment to the 18 minute-rule. He believes this is the ideal length of time for a presentation. "It's long enough to be serious and short enough to hold people's attention. The 18-minute length ...works much like the way Twitter forces people to be disciplined in what they write. By forcing speakers who are used to going on for 45 minutes to bring it down to 18, you get them to really think about what they want to say. What is the key point they want to communicate? It has a clarifying effect. It brings discipline."

Nobody, no matter how famous, wealthy, or influential is allowed to speak more than 18 minutes on a TED stage—it doesn't matter if your name is Bill Gates, Sheryl Sandberg, Bono, or Tony Robbins.

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According to visualthesaurus.com, "The average person speaks at somewhere between 125 and 150 words per minute. It's always better to speak more slowly than quickly. Thus, if you're speaking for 20 minutes, you want a total word count of about 2,500 words."

The Sermon on the Mount delivered by Jesus is recorded in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. Depending on the translation, it's about 2326 words in length.

So, doing the math, Jesus likely delivered his sermon on the slower side of between 15-1/2 and 18-1/2 minutes. Let's say 20 minutes to be safe, which would include pauses as he looked across his audience.

--The Apostle Peter's sermon on Pentecost is about 5 minutes (and 3000+ got saved)

--John F. Kennedy persuaded a nation to reach for the moon in 18 minutes at Rice University in 1962.

--Steve Jobs gave one of the most popular commencement speeches of all time in 15 minutes at Stanford.

--Dr. Martin Luther King, I Have A Dream speech, 17 minutes.

--The Historic Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln is arguably one of the most famous speeches in American history. He spoke for less than two minutes, and the entire speech was fewer than 275 words long.

The Politician who spoke before him had a speech that lasted 2 ½ hrs.

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--"The more you say, the less people remember. The fewer the words, the greater the profit." - François Fénelon,

--"If you want me to give you a two-hour presentation, I am ready today. If you want only a five-minute speech, it will take me two weeks to prepare."- Mark Twain

--"If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter."- Marcus Tullius Cicero

--"Be sincere, Be brief, Be seated."- Franklin Delano Roosevelt