

How To Or Not To Present Your First Paper At Athenaeum

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After having sat here on the receiving end for lo these many months I have come to realize that certain unwritten rules direct the selection of topics and the delivery of papers. I thought it might be worthwhile to look at these.

First, one must avoid a topic about which he is totally ignorant. The speaker should be the expert. There have been clear exceptions to this rule, taking for example Wynn Radford's evident inexpertise in buying a bottle of Roquefort dressing. I thought of all the esoteric areas of my interests such as the Lakota dialect of the American Sioux, programming computers in Pascal for Windows, backpacking at altitude, or spelunking through Christian County caverns. But clearly there was one area in which I could fear no peer. Not having previously presented a paper to this conclave I was clearly expert on how *to* or *not* to deliver ones first paper. So that is my topic tonight.

Secondly, one should steer clear of wandering. How often we are lulled to sleep by the drone of disconnected sentences. The speaker just wanders along with no evident destination. He should keep to the subject, be succinct, and stay organized.

Organization is key. Now, I don't mean here the sort of organization like NATO, North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And you must admit that **that** alliance is being replaced by the European Union, as those of you interested in history will know. William Turner, for instance, is keenly interested in history, not keen like the detective but sharp like musical notation. He's a half step high. Now I don't mean he's high like drunk, but still..... you know. No, not still like making moonshine. I just said he wasn't drunk. Still like "yet", not like still waters of the twenty-third psalm. Where was I? Oh, yes. Point number two is maintain organization and **stay on the subject**.

Thirdly, one should avoid inappropriate areas, such as profanity or sex. I considered using profanity as my topic tonight, or sex, but I realized my inadequacy here among real professionals.

I actually spent some time looking at profanity, in preparation for a paper on that subject I mean. A most useful source is Hugh Rawson's book by Crown Publishers in 1989. And *just so you'll know what to avoid in your next paper*, I'll spend a moment on certain aspects of profanity.

What is profanity? Well, it depends on your culture and viewpoint. In general it is an expression one should avoid in polite or gender-mixed company. The word profanity comes from the Latin words *pro*, meaning in front of or outside of, and *fanum*, meaning

temple. Profanity was language unfit for use inside the divine precincts. Profanity, or at least what is considered to be profanity, changes with time. How often I had to admonish my sainted mother, born in 1906, not to say such and such a woman was "on the make", even though I knew she meant that person was a social climber. At least as early as 1813 the phrase "knock up" had its contemporary sexual meaning, but even in Britain today it means simply to summon, as in "I'll knock you up at 7 tomorrow morning". Jane Austen in 1816 wrote that boarding schools were places where "young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity".

And unacceptable language varies by culture. To the British the word "bloody" is studiously avoided in polite society. To the German of breeding what could be more offensive than "to the thunderweather" (zum Donnerwetter!)? The Lakota language, an American Indian tongue, has no profanity as such. It does have a huge array of expletives, some said only by men and some only by woman, to be used in times of dismay or frustration.

And remember: the word "duck" is 75% obscene!

Are there categories of profanity? Certainly. These are most often scatologic-hyphen- excretory, coital, or references of legitimacy. I have decided not to provide you with detailed examples of each.

Profanity must have a purpose. It actually has multiple purposes. It is employed, often with aforethought, to shock (this is especially useful with mothers-in-law), to release frustration (the hammer hit the thumb routine or the how-did-I-get-lost-in-this-automated-telephone-system-again routine or the perplexity of where-is-the-government-form-to-get-more-forms-with), to condemn or curse in the classical sense (Lakota and ancient Egyptians alike had formulae to heap curses and bad luck upon enemies), or spontaneously as a venting of astonishment, such as "I'll be ..."

Profanity, as I said, should be avoided. And sex. We should all avoid sex, **at all costs**. Sex that costs is dangerous and should be avoided.

Fourthly on our list of how not to present a paper, one must avoid logorrheal baggage; the speaker should be simple and direct, concise and clear. Never obfuscate with circumlocutions and platitudinous verbiages inundating your audience with rotamontadous sesquipedalian gobblydegook. Be simple.

Fifthly, never fail to use humor. I pause here to offer a footnote; any humor used in this presentation, successful or unsuccessful, probable derives ultimately from Charles Tilley. Humor is the spice of life, not the converse. Spices, like **hot peppers**, may not

be humorous. Don't fall into that labyrinth, what might be called the Fred maze.

Humor takes on many forms, from the limericks of Charles Tilley to having your pants fall off at the right moment. And what is humor to one person is droll at best to another. To illustrate: My secretary came rushing in recently to tell me there was an invisible man in my waiting room. I said I simply couldn't see him. Somehow she took me seriously and replied that he did seem well dressed, his tongue was coated and his breath coming in short pants. When I finally consented to talk to him, he said his problem was more legal than medical. It seems he wanted to divorce his wife.

"Do you have any grounds?" I asked.

"About ten acres", he responded.

"No!" I exclaimed. "What I'm saying is, do you have a grudge?"

"Nope. Just a carport".

"Let me put it this way", I sighed. "Does she beat you up?"

"No, sir. I get up at five and she sleeps late".

In exasperation I asked word by word, "Why.. do.. you.. want.. a.. divorce?"

He looked at me, at least I think he looked at me. Telling where invisible men are looking can be difficult. Slowly for emphasis he replied, "The fool says I can't communicate with her!"

The Greeks thought there were only four humors, but Bob Hope disproved that.

Finally, one should be brief. Don't belabor your subject. If you can't say what you want in ten minutes, abandon the effort. Brevity is not only the soul of wit, it's appreciated by captive audiences. So say your piece and sit down.