

HE WANTED TO TALK

But it Was Not So Easy

(Some Notes by the Talks Supervisor)

"GOOD morning. You would like to give a talk? Well, what do you want to talk about? H'm! Well! That's pretty hackneyed; it looks to us like one of those well-worn travel subjects. You know you've either got to say something new, or something old in a new way. If you think you can treat this in a fresh way, we are prepared to look at the script, but we must warn you that we don't think there is much prospect."

Some Advice

"You will give it a go? All right. But may we give you some advice?"

"First of all, the technique of writing a broadcast talk is not the same as the technique of writing for print. The printed word can be read back as far as the reader likes, and even if he doesn't read back, he always has a line in front

of his eyes; but when he listens to a broadcast talk the listener can't read back. Words reach him only through his hearing. It follows then that you must not only be very clear in your delivery, but you must construct your talk in such a way that it can be easily followed. You must write simply and intimately. You see, you have not what we call audience psychology to help you along. You are not speaking to an audience gathered in one place which you can watch and play upon, so to speak; you are talking to a lot of isolated cells. So the best plan is to imagine a man at his fireside. You've got to interest him, you've got to hold his attention, so plan the talk in such a way that it will be a talk and not an essay read to him.

Here is a little booklet which will give you the main points about what to say and how to say it."

Briefly, that is the sort of thing that is said to prospective talkers when they come to the NBS. Sometimes, of course, the subject is quite unacceptable from the outset, and the applicant is told so. Sometimes the Supervisor of Talks or the Station Manager will jump at the offer, because the applicant has something new. Then there is the process of reading the script, perhaps correcting it, and instructing the speaker.

The Commonest Fault

What is the main fault with scripts? That they are essays rather than talks. They are written in a literary way. The sentences are rounded, the phrases are literary, or what is considered to be literary. People "announce their intention" of doing so and so, whereas in a talk they say they are "going to do so and so." They "proceed" instead of "go," and so on.

Hint from John Hilton

John Hilton, one of the best talkers in England, who has studied the construction of talks, in an article which the NBS uses in the instruction of speakers, quotes the first few lines of a letter written to the English "Listener" by an eminent author and critic:

Sir: Your note on the increasing emoluments which modern developments bring to the author is merely quantitative and might lead to unfounded complacency if not qualified by a consideration of other aspects of the question.

Now, Mr. Hilton says that this might be all right in print, though he himself doesn't think it's very good even in prose (and we agree) but it is completely unintelligible over the air. In order to get the sense of it over the air you've got to pull it to pieces and put it together something like this, perhaps:

About authors and what they earn. You, Sir, had a note. It said they did quite well nowadays. That's only true for some . . . and so on.

A Booklet to Study

This may look like an extreme example, but it illustrates the point we are trying to make, that a broadcast talk has its own technique. The sentences are constructed differently — the phrasing is different. Talkers are advised to use the shortest words wherever possible, and cut down their sentences so as to avoid long periods and parentheses. This and a lot more information is contained in the booklet of instructions and advice that is given to prospective speakers.

So the applicant goes off with a book in his pocket and writes his script. We shall see later on what the next steps are.

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