Winston Churchill and the “Language of Leadership”

James C. Humes, Churchill biographer and speechwriter for nine presidents, has used the speeches of Sir Winston Churchill to reveal five steps to creating an effective speech. A summary of Humes’ advice, provided in his book, The Sir Winston Method, provides useful guidance for both students and teachers wishing to create effective speeches. The five secrets of the art of sounding like a leader, as described by Humes, are provided below.

1. BEGIN STRONGLY. Every speech should begin with a “hook”, or attention-getter, to grab the attention of the audience. Whether utilizing a question, a startling statement, a quotation, a personal anecdote, a reference to the occasion, humor, or some other technique, a speaker should immediately involve the audience before revealing the thesis of the presentation.

For instance, Winston Churchill began his address to the House of Commons when he became prime minister with one of his most famous lines: “I have nothing to offer but blood, tears, toil, and sweat.” And when he came to the United States to address Congress in 1941, humor was his tool: “I can’t help but reflect that if my father had been American and my mother English instead of the other way around, I might have got here on my own.”

1. FOCUS ON ONE THEME. After the hook, and before previewing major sub points of the speech, the speaker should reveal the thesis, or theme, to be developed. Major sub points within the body of the speech should all support the thesis, which should be referenced again in the conclusion of the speech.

Churchill once compared a speech to Beethoven’s 5th symphony: “A speech is like a symphony. It can have three movements, but it must have one dominant melody: dot, dot, dot…dah”.

1. USE SIMPLE, COLORFUL LANGUAGE. By using active rather than passive voice, choosing short words, and avoiding jargon, speakers can make their message more comprehensible and more memorable.

After the Nazi conquest of France in World War II, Churchill impressed the world with his simple, yet direct, words: “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” This instead of “Hostilities will be engaged on the coastal perimeter . . .”

1. DRAW A PICTURE IN THE LISTENER’S MIND. Imagery is a critical tool for any effective speaker; philosophical concepts must “come alive” if they are to be retained by the audience.

Churchill was a master of this technique. Whether referring to Italy as “the soft underbelly of Europe,” to an appeaser in the House of Commons as “one who feeds the crocodile hoping it will eat him last,” or to Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe as “an iron curtain,” he knew how to paint effective pictures in the minds of his listeners.

1. END WITH AN EMOTION. It may be pride, hope, love, or patriotism, but exhibiting sincere emotion can help “seal the deal” at the conclusion of a speech.

The conclusion to one of Churchill’s most memorable speeches produced one of his most memorable phrases, as he demonstrated his pride in the British people: “Let us…brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: ‘This was their finest hour.’”

Humes proceeds to illustrate how all five of these steps can be enhanced through the use of “CREAM” - Contrast, Rhyme, Echo, Alliteration, and Metaphor. These techniques are particularly helpful to utilize so that students learn that a speech is created to be heard, as opposed to an essay, which is designed to be read. And Winston Churchill, of course, was a master of all five of these literary techniques.

Churchillian examples are provided below. They, and many others, are contained in a different book by James C. Humes, The Wit and Wisdom of Winston Churchill.

CONTRAST:

“If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find we have lost the future.”

“Perhaps it is better to be irresponsible and right than to be responsible and wrong.”

“A nation that forgets its past has no future.”

“Criticism is easy; achievement is difficult.”

“There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them.”

“The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see.”

“This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It is perhaps the end of the

beginning.”

“The U.N. was set up not to get us to Heaven but only to save us from Hell.”

“We live in an age of great events and little men.”

“To try to be safe everywhere is to be strong nowhere.”

RHYME:

“It is a nuizenza to have the fluenza.”

“Of two cigars pick the longest and the strongest.”

“The more knowledge we possess of the opposite point of view, the less puzzling it is to know what to do.”

“The Socialist dream is no longer Utopia but Queue-topia!”

ECHO:

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

“I advise you to be in good fettle, as we are in for a good fight.”

“Broadly speaking, human beings may be divided into three classes: those who are billed to death; those who are worried to death; and those who are bored to death.”

“I hope that I shall never see the day when the Force of Right is deprived of the Right of Force.”

“Where there is a great deal of free speech, there is always a certain amount of foolish speech.”

“Never flinch, never weary, never despair.”

ALLITERATION:

“Vary the pose and vary the pitch. Finally, don’t forget the pause.”

“Law, language, and literature unite the English-speaking world.”

“I am sure we do not want any fingers on the trigger. Least of all, do we want a

fumbling finger.”

“There are two ways of securing cooperation in human action. You get cooperation by controls or you can get it by comprehension.”

“Some men change their Party for the sake of their principles; others change their principles for the sake of their Party.”

METAPHOR:

“A good knowledge of history is a quiver full of arrows in debates.”

“Trying to maintain good relations with a Communist is like wooing a crocodile. You do not know whether to tickle it under the chin or beat it over the head. When it opens its mouth, you cannot tell whether it is trying to smile or preparing to eat you up.”

“The Nazis are like the boa constrictors that first befoul their victim with the filthy spray of their propaganda before they engorge it.”

“The congestion of Parliament is a disease, but the futility of Parliament is a mortal disease.”

“Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with it is a toy, an amusement; then it becomes a mistress, and then a master and then a tyrant.”

“The soul of Poland is indestructible . . . She will rise again like a rock, which may for a spell be submerged by a tidal wave, but which remains a rock.”

“The United States is like a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lit under it, there is no limit to the power it can generate.”

“It was the nation and race dwelling all around the globe that had the lion’s heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”

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The above information was researched and compiled by Mr. Randy Pierce in September of 2013, to be made available to those teachers seeking help for their students preparing speeches. Teachers whose students are interested in competing in the oratory contest sponsored by the National Churchill Museum in Fulton, MO, may find these suggestions particularly helpful.