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Excellence in Journalism 2012

Unlock Your Potential

A Workshop with Joanne Stevens

Joanne Stevens works with TV, radio, print and online news companies and trains the journalists who work for them. She is based out of NYC and is in her 32nd year of business.

Thank you for participating in my workshop. The terminology and analytical applications that we discussed and tried out are listed below. At the end of the document you'll also find the practice phrases and sentences that we tackled. I hope that your new skills will serve you well. Good luck!

Breathing- Contrary to common thought: Your torso should expand as you breathe in.. and contract as you breathe out. It might be easier to think stomach- instead of diaphragm: ie. stick out your stomach as you breathe in.. pull it in to breathe out.

Phonation- Vocal cord vibration as you exhale. It's how you apply sound to exhaled air.

Resonance- The sound quality of your voice. It should come mostly from the vibration of your torso. Resonance in your head/face should be mainly from the nasalized sounds /m/./n/.. and /ing/.

Pitch- The high and low 'pitch' of your voice comes from the vocal cords in your neck. It is completely separate from resonance. Some people erroneously try 'talking' or projecting from their neck- which therefore tightens up their throat and vocal cords. This clearly has negative impact on your anatomy and on the sound your voice. It may make your pitch sound higher.

Home Base- The neutral sound, or pitch, that each of our bodies produces when we phonate without- or with minimal-semantic intent. It is the pitch from which most of our spontaneous utterances naturally begin. We can only start speaking from 3 spots: Home Base.. slightly higher.. or slightly lower.

Articulation- This is the shaping of the sounds to form words. Consonants are shaped by the lips and tongue placement. Vowel sounds come from jaw and lip position.. and tongue position.

Loudness- The most efficient, logical way for your body to create a louder voice is by sending the air from your lungs with a stronger propulsion. Think of quickly [tightening your stomach and pulling it in] in one quick act. It's a bit like getting an invisible punch to the stomach.

Projection- Loudness with a psychological overlay. You'll use the same principles- but now you're thinking about sending your information out to the folks you want to reach. You're arcing out your voice- that has now formed words and information- to the folks who are listening to you. You might also picture reaching out to those who are currently not actively listening- an implied 'hey, this is [interesting.. important.. etc.] !'.

Frogs- This imagery seems to help many of my clients. As you speak: envision that your words.. phrases.. sentences are arcing out from your mouth like frogs. Similar to projection- they're gracefully leaping out and landing about 2 feet in front of you .

Landing- Our sentences are spoken on puffs of air. We are not finished speaking until the last sound of the last word has completely landed in front of you. Ie. We don't finish a sentence by letting it 'die' in our throat. Many people unwittingly do this by either stopping the air-pump prematurely or by tightening their throats to cause the last word of a sentence to crackle and dissipate before it can fully get out and land. I call this crunching.

Breaststroking In- We constantly start and stop speaking: to begin a standup or track.. after a SOT.. after each sentence.. during a Q and A. Each time we begin speaking it should feel pleasant and smooth. Picture walking into someone's fabulous outdoor pool after a long hard day. There's a beautiful sunset. When you get to about chest-high in the water- you push off and breaststroke in. The push, or the smooth exhalation, comes from our stomach- not from our neck or face. Same with speaking.

Speaking on the Flow- We've learned to write in short, syntactically simple sentences. These sentences are freestanding units of information. If we are breathing correctly- we should be able to share what we want to say as one cohesive fact- without worrying about 'running out of air'.. or 'where to breathe'.

Tracking- I may be pushing it a bit but this should be an act of love for your journalism. You've worked hard on a story.. and this is the last phase. You track it- and move on to your next story. You'll go back in time to the discovery- and perhaps the marvel- that went into your reporting. You'll bear this in mind as you recount the information you've elected to share. Approaching your tracking with a dull, resigned or negative attitude will only take away from the natural 'soul' of your track.

Semantics- The changes in the meaning of a word or message created by speech

The 4 Semantic Levels- I suspect there may be an infinite range – but for the sake of ease and argument:

Level One- A straight fact or statistic

Level Two- Secondary Information

Level Three- Background or more edification re. the subject

Level Four- A seemingly spontaneous utterance or statement

Cognitive Chunks- The Cognitive Chunk concept is crafted to remind you of the richness of orally language. You may have written one simple sentence (one chunk).. or your sentence may contain phrases that represent several, discrete chunks of information. Some chunks may have underlying innuendo based on a greater story which they represent. There are no rules .. nor right/wrong perceptions re. how you do or don't break up your sentences.

Pauses- Pauses should just 'happen' and never be planned. Too many pauses in one sentence interrupt the flow and our full appreciation of what you are telling us. It's rare that we use a real, solid pause. In fact, we can perhaps slice up lengths of pauses into an infinite count. Most pauses are of a 'touch-go' nature- like the baseball player running from first to third. He/she touches 2nd base just long enough for the umpire to see it- before heading to 3rd .

Emphasis- It means highlighting information for the ear. We almost always emphasize a chunk of information- not an individual word. Contrary to a commonly misconstrued concept- 'emphasis' is not the highlighting of one word by making it louder.. or by imposing different pitch. If you find yourself wondering 'which word do I emphasize?' or 'what should I emphasize?'- you're losing sight of the cognitive chunks and semantic levels that are already in place .

Oomphing- We rarely speak in just one word- although I sometimes wonder if this is how cavemen first spoke.. perhaps with words like Mammoth! Run! Hungry! Kill ! If a journalist 'oomphs' just one word when telling me that "Company X was sold for 2 **billion** dollars".. I'm hearing "billion!".. and that one word isn't telling me what I need to know. Or if "the bridge **collapsed** from the weight of the redirected traffic"- as a listener I'm hearing 'collapsed!' .. which is a bad thing under most circumstances- but doesn't communicate the intended information.

Onomatopoeia- This is the cool concept most of us learned in middle school- or perhaps earlier. An onomatopoeia is a word or phrase said in a manner that belies its meaning. Eg.' There was a [long line at the movie theater]'. or..' [Hundreds of birds fought for the grain][that spilled from the trucks'.] In your delivery- try extending the onomatopoeia throughout the entire chunk of information it describes- rather than just playing with an isolated word. In the sentence describing the birds, you might even consider 3 onomatopoeias depending on how remarkable the scene actually was.

Coming in Through a New Door- This is how we flag a new paragraph with our voice. We do it all day long without realizing it. By slightly changing the pitch from which we 'enter' a new sentence we're advising the listener that we're introducing a new element of information. In journalism- due to our truncated form of writing, you may give yourself quite a few discernible paragraphs as you write your story. A New Door opportunity may also lurk as a contiguous sentence within a 2- 3 sentence paragraph. The term 'Coming in from a New Door' refers to the old British comedies in which one person played all the characters. Picture sitting in the audience- facing the stage. On the stage is a flat wall- with 2 levels of doors. Each time the actor assumes another character he/she pops out from a new door- having quickly changed an outfit.. wig.. facial hair.. or whatever else visually cues us about the change.

Put Each Sentence on a Slide – It's akin to first looking at amoebas under a weak microscope. A stronger magnification reveals more: their cilia.. their babies.. With your new skills- each sentence will hopefully reveal a variety of riches to hone into. Eg. Where might semantic levels change? Which concepts merit different types of emphasis?

A Ride in the Country- Similar to the slide concept above- but a more bucolic analogy. A country road curves.. gets hilly.. flat.. steep.. You pass meadows with sun.. shaded areas with trees.. It can be a continuous change. Such is the case with the elements within one sentence.. and among all your sentences.

House-Popping- In a taped standup you are speaking to one person at a time. Every fact in your information is significant to someone for some reason. Each of us thinks you are speaking only to us.

Twinkle of Recognition- With reference to the above: in all standups, we think you're not only seeing us.. but that at the nano-onset of your standup, you're 'speaking to us with your eyes'. Eg. Nice to see you again.. or hi.. I don't believe we've met but nice to see you..'. This is obviously not quite as literal as it sounds.

Taped Standups

Do you have a set-up sentence?

Is there something to show us?

Standups can serve as handy bridges

The issue of 'movement'

2 or 3 steps can be ok but don't go for a gratuitous walk

Ideally you have something to explain or to show us that requires movement- even of just your arms and hands

Just standing can be OK

Hands: No posing!

Live Standups

We just want the facts!

It's ok to use notes

Blackberries vs. pads

Start up- End up: Keep eye-contact for at least your entire first and last sentence

Roll cues- don't hit them too hard

Implementing your New Skills on the Job

It can be daunting if you take on too much at once. My best advice: Take baby steps when beginning to use your new skills.

Pick one skill at a time that you will practice.

Focus only on the first sentence- or on another sentence you'd rather try. Knowing that you have just one, small focused goal takes the pressure off.

Listen to your playback. Your sentence will hopefully sound much better with the implementation of your new technique. Acknowledging this becomes positive reinforcement... which in turn makes you relax. And a relaxed state is the best vehicle for effecting physical change. Remember- talking is a complex physical act. It also helps motivate you to continue forging forward with your new skill(s).

Next time- 2 sentences.. or that same sentence with a second added goal.

After that- plan an incremental strategy that you can tolerate. The crucial factor is **not** to impose too much pressure on yourself! This can only serve to get you tighter or crazed- neither of which you want.

Practice Material

We all assume a writing styles that best suits us. Please recall that these practice sentences are lifted from clients' scripts. The original presentation- complete with their use of caps and/or commas (which I don't recommend) are left intact.

Practice Phrases for Breaststroking In

Other red flags are..

Lee also warns..

Cisco shares jumping the most in four years

But neighbors are asking the city for more- a new truck route sign..

Practice Sentences for Speaking on the Flow

People in Central Park say that daytime raccoon sightings have become commonplace at Rudin Playground.

STROUDSBURG BOROUGH COUNCILMAN ERIC SCENZA TAKES FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHAT HAPPENED.

The new sanctions come a day after President Obama warned that the U.S. and its allies are going to turn up pressure on Iran.

Practice Sentences for 4 Semantic Levels

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has arrived in East Timor, and his visit is already newsworthy.

DURING THE HEIGHT OF THE RECESSION, DASA GAVE UP his SIX FIGURE SALARY TO BECOME A MONK AND LIVE FULL-TIME AT A HINDU MONASTERY IN LOWER MANHATTAN

As rescuers search for survivors, aid workers say it is impossible to estimate the number of people killed in the flooding, although one puts the number into the thousands.

After his party placed second in last year's election, it joined a coalition government, sparking protest action from fellow members of the European Union.

Practice Sentences for Cognitive Chunks

The homeless mom is accused of stealing her son's education and costing taxpayers thousands when officials say she used her babysitter's address to enroll her five year old in Brookside Elementary.

TSA screeners will soon randomly start swabbing passengers' hands at checkpoints and airport gates to test them for traces of explosives.

After his party placed second in last year's election, it joined a coalition government, sparking protest action from fellow members of the European Union.

Sentences for Not Thinking About Pauses

It was a short-lived but violent storm.

They promised another victorious year for the Yankees if they are selected.

"Bungie Studios" will focus solely on games for Microsoft's X-Box video game system, and build on the success of the "Halo" brand.

Remembering that Oomphing One Word is Often Wrong

The borough's school district stands to lose 1.8 million dollars in state aid, which is a nearly 40% cut compared to last year

This quarter's earnings will be **reduced** by a \$30 million dollar charge.

The suit says their company earned more than \$50 million dollars in fees.... and millions of dollars in commissions... by conspiring with insurers to **over-charge** 180 clients.

Exceptions:

(A story about raccoons invading outdoor festivities)

SOME PARENTS WE SPOKE TO SAY PEOPLE ARE TO BLAME

North Carolina is announcing eighty percent of precincts closed.. While polls in Colorado remain open for two hours more.

Practice Sentences for Onomatopoeia

Hundreds marched on the football field Friday, armed with signs and spirit to protest Governor Christie's budget cuts.

Upset parents understand belt tightening, but think the state should look elsewhere.

Sunday's heavy rains hit the Ginebra Valley about 450 kilometers south of the capital Bogota. The storm swelled rivers and caused mudslides, sending huge boulders careening into the valley.

Practice Sentences for Coming in through a New Door

He says yesterday's floods, overtook his property for the second time in four years.

Today he walked his insurance adjuster through his damaged home.

IT'S PART OF A LARGER PLAN THE NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION HAS TO INSTALL 54 TRAFFIC MONITORING SYSTEMS IN WESTCHESTER COUNTY. ALL BUT 18 OF THEM ARE USING SAFER, UNDERGROUND FIBER OPTIC TECHNOLOGY. TWO OF THOSE EIGHTEEN ARE GOING UP IN PLEASANTVILLE. TOWN MAYOR PETER SCHERER SAYS THAT HE HAS BEEN MEETING WITH THE STATE D-O-T TO TALK ABOUT MOVING THE TOWER LOCATION, OR SCRAPPING IT ALTOGETHER.

Practice Sentences for Putting Sentences on a Slide or A Ride in the Country

Rescue workers are struggling to reach those in need, but witnesses complain the emergency crews are not doing enough.

The Staten Island Yankees are gearing up for what they hope is another winning season-singers came from the Island and beyond to try to wow the judges and earn a spot to perform the national anthem during this year's season.

POLICE SAY 22-YEAR-OLD MATTHEW BOISVERT SOMEHOW LOST CONTROL OF HIS CAR, CRASHING THROUGH A FENCE AND INTO A HOUSE ON HARTFORD AVENUE EAST, LAST NIGHT.