

WELL SPOKEN

TEACHING SPEAKING TO ALL STUDENTS



ERIK PALMER

FOREWORD BY KELLY GALLAGHER

WELL
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TO MY PARENTS:

*Victor, in memoriam, for inspiring me,
and Marian, for her unwavering support*



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FOREWORD

By Kelly Gallagher

In this Age of Testing, there is often a disconnect between what students need to learn and what students are actually being taught. Multiple-choice assessments have driven deeper reading out of our classrooms, and writing has been pushed to the back burner. But of all the language arts, there is one that has been especially shortchanged by this blind adherence to state testing: the art of speaking. This vital life skill has been all but ignored in many classrooms simply because the ability to give an effective speech is not tested on most state assessments.

Veering away from teaching students how to speak effectively does not bode well for our children. Students sitting in our classrooms today will soon enter a world where virtually every business survey emphasizes the importance of verbal communication skills—a world where one’s ability to present, perform, and persuade will prove more important than ever. Clearly, for the next generation of students, speaking well is a foundational skill.

In *Well Spoken*, Erik Palmer recognizes and addresses the fundamental difference between talking and speaking. All of our students know how to talk; unfortunately, very few of them know how to speak. If our students are going to become effective speakers, they need us—their teachers—to teach them the art of speech. This is where *Well Spoken* excels. Clearly written and full of numerous effective strategies, *Well Spoken* offers invaluable advice and tools for teachers who recognize the importance of teaching the art of speech.

Palmer’s approach to teaching speech mirrors what we know about effective teaching of the writing process. He begins by teaching his students the importance of understanding purpose and audience and how these two elements play an integral part in crafting a speech. In subsequent chapters Palmer offers numerous helpful tips, including how to start speeches with “attention-holding elements” (hooks), how to help a student organize a speech into a coherent sequence, how to craft effective transitions, and how to leave listeners with a powerful conclusion.

FOREWORD

Well Spoken is more than a guide for helping students write better speeches. It also contains many practical ideas for teaching students how to *deliver* better speeches. As Palmer notes, “How a speech is performed may be more important than how it is built.” With this in mind, *Well Spoken* offers excellent strategies to help students be poised, to capture the right tone and voice, to achieve the right kind of eye contact, and to be aware of how one’s appearance and actions affect a speech.

After reading *Well Spoken*, I am motivated to give the teaching of speech a more prominent place in my classroom. I am especially grateful for Palmer’s insightful work and his concrete steps to help me become a better speech teacher. If, like me, you are striving to prepare your students for the demands of the real world, I’m certain you will recognize the significance and value of Palmer’s ideas and strategies, and will be energized to include them in your teaching repertoire.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How did I get here? I don't ask myself that often, though it seems that I often end up someplace quite different than originally planned. When I asked the question, "How did I end up writing a book?" it led me to the realization that I needed to acknowledge many people who led me to this point.

I taught with Judi Herm. Her sons went to a different school, and when she saw how I taught speaking skills she wanted her sons to get that instruction. She contacted the school and suggested they hire me. They did, year after year. Thanks, Judi, for leading me to expand my audience and for opening many other doors.

Midge Kral worked at the school Judi sent me to. Midge could not have been a more enthusiastic fan and supporter. When she left that school, she began working at a bookstore and connected me with the store's owner. Thanks, Midge, for your wonderful support and spirit, as well as for the connection.

Sue Lubeck owns the bookstore. The Bookies is a warm, inviting place full of book lovers and helpful employees. Sue saw the first version of this book and thought it had promise, so she contacted Philippa Stratton at Stenhouse Publishers and put in a good word for me. Apparently, if Sue talks, people listen. Thanks, Sue, for promoting my ideas to Stenhouse, for running a fine independent bookstore, and for hosting my first book signing.

Philippa Stratton called me and asked for copies of my writing, which she sent to various readers for input. Thanks, Philippa, for believing in the book and advancing it.

Holly Holland at Stenhouse was one of those readers. She gave me detailed feedback on the book and a very positive response. She was instrumental in persuading Stenhouse to publish it. As my editor, Holly offered consistently brilliant advice. I always thought, "Yeah, that *is* better" when I read her suggestions. Thanks, Holly, for helping the book along and for improving my writing.

Kelley Gaskill worked for Academy School District 20 in Colorado

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Springs. She came to a presentation I did for the Colorado Language Arts Society and said, “Can you come train the teachers in my district?” Kelley was the first to think of implementing the ideas district-wide, years before oral communication was added to the state standards. At one of the workshops, a participant asked, “Why isn’t there a book on this for general classroom teachers?” which gave me the idea to write one. Thanks, Kelley, for your foresight, your support, and your positive comments about my work.

Debra Fine is a successful author and the mother of two former students of mine. She always says great things about her children’s experiences in my class. She also taught me how to go through the process of writing and publishing a book. Thanks, Debra, for your positive thoughts and for your mentoring.

I have to acknowledge my sons, Greg and Ross. They were the test cases. They took the lessons I taught them and proved beyond any doubt that my approach to teaching speaking works. In many realms—theatrical performance, speech contest, interview, corporate event management, wedding officiant, social occasion—they have had enormous success. I could not be more proud of them.

And what is it worth to have someone who totally believes in you? Many times have I heard, “You *should* do that. You would be great at it!” when I thought of moving into a new venture. My wife, Anne, has always been encouraging and uplifting. She is a powerful person and that power inspires me. Thank you, Anne.



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PART I

THE ART OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

Speaking well really is an art, though most of us have been speaking since we were young children. Carefully choosing our words, organizing our ideas so they are easy to follow, captivating an audience by employing effective gestures, or pacing our speech for emphasis—these are the building blocks of good public speaking. Every student can learn them, practice them, and perform them. But first, they need conscientious teachers who will show them how.

That's where you come in.



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CHAPTER 1:

Can We Talk?

What percentage of communication is oral and what percentage is written?

Think about your typical day. Start at your home. How often do you communicate with people around you in writing? As a parent, are you handing notes to your children? E-mailing them? Texting them? Occasionally, perhaps, but overwhelmingly you are talking to them. Are you using paper and pencil to communicate with your spouse or roommate? Maybe you leave a note on the counter as a reminder to take out the garbage, but when the discussion shifts to whose turn it is and who took it out last week, you talk.

And when you get to school, how do you interact with coworkers and teammates? Yes, you can iChat them with a quick question, but the vast majority of your interaction is verbal. You tell stories about what happened of interest in your classroom today, you discuss team plans for the future, and you ask your colleagues about their home lives. How do you interact with the principal? If you write an e-mail to an administrator, isn't it often a request for a face-to-face meeting? And what about your students' families? They want to talk to you. Send a note sometime and suggest that you don't need to meet them and would rather handle things with e-mail. Imagine the response. Your students' parents want to hear your voice.

Step back in time. How did you select your mate? After many long conversations, right? How did you get your job? A résumé might have gotten you in the door, but an interview most likely got you the job. Your ability to speak well (or at least better than the other people applying)

was crucial to getting hired. How many other significant events in your life can you think of in which your ability to speak well mattered? A wedding toast? A eulogy? Inspiring the tee ball team you got conned into coaching? If these events haven't occurred yet in your life, they will. There are many, many opportunities for meaningful speeches in a normal life. Simply put, oral communication is our predominant way of communicating.

LET'S STOP SQUEEZING OUT PUBLIC SPEAKING

Now, let me make a radical statement: the mission of education should not be to make students better at school but rather to prepare them for life. As schools focus on high-stakes testing, there is a tendency to forget that mission and to see the test as the ultimate outcome of our instruction. As a result, many important parts of a well-rounded education that do not directly contribute to the test score can end up on the cutting room floor, including art, music, physical education, home economics, health, and civics. Another skill commonly sacrificed is speaking.

There is some evidence that the atmosphere is changing. Colorado, my home state, revised its state standards in 2010. The 1995 standard "Reading and Writing" became "Reading, Writing, and Communicating," and "Oral Expression" is the first thing mentioned under the standard. The Common Core State Standards Initiative suggests adopting the standard "Speaking and Listening." More than forty states had adopted the Common Core Standards by the end of 2010. Some school districts have added formal speaking assessments to the curriculum, though such districts are still the exception, not the rule. I believe that, to a large extent, these changes are driven by a new concern for workplace readiness and a desire to think beyond the classroom and beyond the high-stakes test.

While speaking skills may have been somewhat underemphasized in schools, they have not been underemphasized in the real world. Look at the business section of your local bookstore. There are many, many books on the shelves about public speaking. Some focus on general presentation skills, some on specific skills like closing the deal, some on overcoming fear, and some on speaking in social settings. All of them recognize the importance of being well spoken.