

Speechwriter's Newsletter

The insider's guide to writing and delivering effective speeches

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FOR YOUR SPEAKER ■ WILLIAM RUSH

Identify your speaker's perfect pitch

It is useful for speakers to be aware of several vocal properties before they even start to work.

Among these properties are the proper breath support to assure a firm, clear sound, the proper inflection to convey the meaning intended, the proper shaping to give appropriate focus to the message, and the proper pitch to ensure that the necessary vocal signals are possible.

The last of these, vocal pitch, gives a wealth of information to the listener about us and our belief in our product, our commitment to our ideas and our sense of priority in our presentation. All of us speak on an identifiable pitch or note that anyone with a good ear could reproduce on an instrument or with their voice. Since vocal pitch controls so much, it would seem simple to make the best choice **and get on with our work**. Unfortunately, we have several booby traps to get past.

In our culture, we associate lowness of pitch with authority. Based on that observation, we would probably choose the lowest pitch possible to show power. Lower is not necessarily better

unless one's instrument can support the effort. Some of the consequences of using a note that is too low: inaudibility outside of a rather small setting; an angry-sounding voice at moderate volume levels; flat, monotone voicing; and the inability to give the necessary vocal cue at the ends of declarative sentences. A sharply descending last syllable must be vocalized in order for the listener to perceive the enthusiasm or conviction for the ideas expressed.

The other problem that the majority of us must deal with is our inability to hear ourselves as others do. Remember the last time a colleague came to work with a head cold? Most likely that person explained often **that he/she had a cold and sounded horrible. To their own hearing, that was true.** But in truth, **most of us would not notice much difference.** This disparity between the perceptions of the listener and the speaker over the issue of vocal quality is called a "hearing inversion."

The hearing inversion is directly responsible for a vocal usage I call the "Ted Baxter Syndrome" after the character on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

It is a consequence of a pitch that is too low and forces the throat open. The speaker marvels at the sound of his own voice, while the audience labors with being courteous with a pretentious, phony-sounding speaker.

The proper pitch should have several properties: It must be far enough from the floor of the voice to allow the last syllable of a declarative sentence to descend sharply without scraping; it must be high enough from the bottom to allow easy audibility without effort (a lower voice requires more pressure to achieve the same volume); and it should allow the speaker to work for periods of time without vocal fatigue. For most of us, this ideal is five to seven scale tones above the lowest note we can sing without forcing. This best note (also called the "optimum pitch") is the note at which we should be uttering all the framing, descriptive and unimportant words in our sentences.

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