



# HOW TO CONSTRUCT A TALK

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Looking back at the Lincoln College Farmers' Conferences for the last four years, I have come to the conclusion that the papers given by farmers have given rise to more interest among the audience than papers given by professional men. However as secretary of this Conference I find that farmers are reluctant to give their experiences. In part this is because they feel they have not the ability to construct a talk.

The purpose of this Bulletin is to fill this gap. Like any other skill preparing a talk is easy when you know how. I hope that as a result of reading this Bulletin farmers will no longer feel reluctant to give the farming community the benefit of their experience at field days, meetings and conferences. This hope is based on the belief that much of the credit for new developments in the practical application of scientific ideas to farming must go to progressive farmers who try new methods. These men can and do make a major contribution to the prosperity of New Zealand farming when they communicate their methods to others.

Now there is a misconception abroad that speaking in public is a matter of how you hold your hands and the tone of your voice. These points of delivery usually stem from confidence, and confidence to a large degree stems from having a good message and knowing how to put that message together. Points on delivery are important. Scratching the back of your neck may distract the audience, but that will hardly be noticed if you have something worthwhile to say.

Success in constructing a talk depends on defining the aim of your talk and then searching for the best way to achieve this aim. Once

this is decided you make an outline of what you are going to say. You can use the outline to write out a paper for a conference or give a talk off the cuff at a field day.

## Defining the Aim

The purpose of all communication is to produce a response in the audience. When you ring your stock agent the response you require is your order delivered on the farm by the end of the week. Similarly when a farmer is asked to speak at a field day in his district, he must ask himself what response he wants from the audience, what action he wants them to take as a result of his talk.

We would define the response, aim or purpose of the phone call to the stock agent, as "Agent to deliver order on my farm by the end of the week". Similarly the response we may require from the audience may be "Audience to develop their farms," if the aim of the talk is to persuade. If it is to inform them, then the response you may require is a mental one in terms of extra information. Then you would define your aim as, "Audience to know the methods I have used to develop my farm".

All this may seem rather ponderous. However I have found that the reason that many talks fail, is due to a lack of a defined aim framed in terms of a response required from the audience.

Next we must remember that the aim of the talk must suit the audience, the speaker and the occasion.

No message will gain a response unless it meets the needs of the audience. Sometimes you hear scientific people giving information

to farmers which has no bearing on their problems. Consequently there is no interest in it. Few farmers are interested in the inner working of soils, plants and animals unless these have practical consequences. However successful farmers will have no trouble in finding a topic which will interest their audience and this is one of the reasons that farmers' papers at conferences are so well received.

The topic must also suit the speaker. Farmers are often reluctant to give talks because they feel that they are not authorities on some of the technical sides of the subject. For instance, while a farmer may have found that selenium has solved an ill thrift problem on his farm, he may be unsure how it works and the extent of selenium deficiency in the district. He fears he might get questions afterwards on problems he cannot answer. However you do not have to be New Zealand's authority on a problem to talk about it. You can give your own experience and if more information is needed, then your local farm advisory officer will no doubt be glad to provide you with it.

Finally the topic must suit the occasion. Flippant talks do not go down well at funerals. A common error is to choose a topic which is far too big for the time allotted for the talk. If you have only ten minutes in which to talk, it may be better to confine yourself to getting across one or two of the key factors in farm development rather than try and cover the waterfront with every detail.

### **The Subject Sentence**

Having defined your aim—the response you want—which suits the audience, yourself and the occasion we now turn to the subject sentence.

This may be one sentence which contains the main message or it can be two or three sentences.

Let us suppose the aim of your talk is for the audience to know the method you have used to develop your farm. Now put yourself in this imaginary position. You have just been awarded a Nuffield scholarship to visit the U.K. and while

waiting for the plane to leave Harewood you meet a neighbour who is very keen to follow your methods. The plane has just been called, so you have only a quarter of a minute to get the message across. In one sentence what would you tell him? Certainly it would contain only the important key factors for progress. It might run like this. "I ploughed out the browntop and resowed with 2 tons of lime, D.D.T. and 2 cwt of sulphur-super a year. I doubled my ewes, and I got the advice of a good accountant to help organise the finance and minimise the tax, goodbye."

Now this is your subject sentence, it contains the main message. The rest of the talk will merely develop this sentence so that the audience understands the meaning more clearly. You will find that once the aim of the talk and the subject sentence has been written down, the outline of the talk will quickly fall into place. These first two steps are half the battle.

The topic will need an introduction but we will leave this meanwhile. It is best to leave the design of the introduction and the conclusion to last. Next we will discuss the development of the subject sentence under main supporting statements.

### **The Main Supporting Statements**

The main supporting statements stem from the subject sentence. They are minor summaries of the material in each section of the talk. For instance the subject sentence given above might have these main statements.

1. "Fertility was the key to success."
2. "Growing more grass was coupled with putting on more stock."
3. "Advice from an accountant was most helpful for development finance and taxation."

You will notice that these subdivisions of the talk are general statements, not topic headings. It is much easier to give a talk when you have made a series of general statements, than when you merely give yourself a topic heading. It is much easier to develop the state-

ment, "Fertility is the key to success," than talk about a topic heading such as "Topdressing."

Each main supporting statement may be followed by sub-supporting statements.

For instance the first main statement, "Fertility was the key to success," could be followed by these sub-supporting statements.

- (a) "We ploughed up the Brown-top."
- (b) "We topdressed heavily with Lime, Sulphur and Phosphate."
- (c) "We controlled grass grub with D.D.T."
- (d) "The results in the pasture were successful."

The second main statement might be followed by

- (a) "Heavy stocking has meant slightly lower production per animal but much more per acre."
- (b) "We have overcome the pinch period in August by lambing later."

The third main statement might be followed by:

- (a) "Through advice we borrowed money for development."
- (b) "Through advice we formed a trust to save tax."

Having now laid out the key statements of the talk, we have the bare bones upon which to build some flesh. This flesh is called amplification.

### **Amplification**

Scientists go about communication in a most unscientific way. Usually they give you a full description of the research work they have done and then proceed to some recommendations. Now communications experiments have shown that giving the recommendation first and then backing these up with the research results is a better way of transmitting information.

The framework described above is a list of general statements, these need amplification to increase their meaning to the audience and to help maintain the audience's interest. When talking off the cuff it is simple enough to amplify these statements from your experience. This means that the talk

need not be written out. All that is necessary is the main supporting and sub-supporting statements with some notes to guide you in how you are going to amplify each.

Let us take the statement, "Heavy stocking has meant slightly lower production per animal but much more per acre." This statement could be amplified with the facts. For instance, ". . . 5 years ago we were selling 34lb lambs and the ewes clipped 12lb wool. Now the lamb weights have slipped to 28lb and wool weight is 10lb. However as we have doubled our ewe numbers wool per acre has risen from 24lb to 40lb per acre and lamb meat from 68lb to 112lb per acre."

Incidentally there are too many figures in this amplification for anyone to digest so make out a simple diagram giving the essential figures so that the audience can see and hear them. More information will be transmitted this way. Visual aids are an excellent way of amplification.

There are many ways of amplifying a statement with words. Here is a check list of possibilities.

1. Describe the facts.
2. Quote experiments.
3. State the principle.
4. Quote an example.
5. Make a comparison or a contrast.
6. Describe the cause.

Often a statement needs amplifying several times in order to get the meaning across. The statement that, "Heavy stocking has lowered production per animal but raised production per acre," may need further amplification. After all many farmers have entrenched views on this and one incident from your experience is not necessarily going to change a deep-grooved attitude so your statement may need more added to it. You might describe the cause of the situation by saying that under light stocking a great deal of the grass is never turned to profit because it is not eaten by stock and rots back into the ground.

Knowing the audience you are in the best position to judge how much amplification each statement needs and what kind of amplification will mean most to them.

## The Introduction

The plan for the body of the talk is now complete. We have a series of statements with notes on how each of these statements will be amplified. It remains now to put on the head and the tail—the introduction and the conclusion.

The most common mistake is to start off by saying that you don't know why you've been asked to speak and you're not much good at it. Don't write yourself down because people tend to take you at your own valuation. If they don't think much of you then you will find it hard to get your information across.

Introductions to talks need to be thought out in some detail. Most farmers who speak at farmers meetings are worried that their fellow farmers will think they have been presumptuous by agreeing to speak. There may be a slightly hostile reaction towards the man who is giving a success story. After all he may be showing up the rest.

Consequently an introduction which helps to quell this reaction would seem a good notion. This one pays tribute to the help of established farmers in the district.

"Thank you Mr Chairman (he's just said nice things about you in introducing you—at least he ought to have done). My job is to tell you about the methods we have used on this farm over the last 5 years to improve its production. At the outset I'd like to say that there are a good number of farms using the same methods and I owe a great deal to the advice and help I have had from experienced farmers in the district. Each generation builds on the experience of the past generation."

The next step in the introduction is to orientate the audience with information so that the subject sentence which follows will have a full impact. In this case it might be best to give a very brief thumbnail sketch of the farm and the progress it has made.

## The Conclusion

Dale Carnegie who started his career as a public speaker instructor used to stress the importance

of the beginning and the end of a talk. "The most common error," he said, "was the man who finishes with, 'That is about all I have to say on the matter; so I guess I will stop.' That is not an ending. That is a mistake."

The old recipe of, "First tell them that you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them that you have told them," is quite useful. This virtually means repeating your subject sentence and perhaps underlining it with a vivid example.

When the aim of your talk is action, rather than a mental response in terms of information transferred, then it is a good idea to finish the talk with a call for action. "Vote for Joe."

Finally always try to end with a few well chosen words. End with the blow of an axe if this is suitable. For instance, "... and I believe that while we have been able to make some progress we are really only scratching the surface!" Or perhaps, "While these methods seem to work, I have no doubt that new ideas will supersede them and in ten years time, if we don't keep continually modifying our methods, we shall be right out of date."

## Summary

To end this Bulletin I will take some of my own medicine and summarise the main steps.

1. Define the aim as a desired response in the audience.
2. Construct a subject sentence summarising the message.
3. Write the main supporting statements and sub-supporting statements.
4. Look for suitable material to amplify each statement.
5. Plan the introduction and conclusion.

The response I hope for from this Bulletin is that more farmers will be prepared to share their practical information with other farmers because I believe that this information is one of the most valuable resources we have for increased production.

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