

# READING ALOUD



Last issue we looked at how to give an author talk. This month **Moira Beaton** concentrates on reading extracts from your book and explains how to turn a trial into a triumph

Many people are worried about speaking in public, and this includes authors who have been asked to read out an excerpt from their book. On the face of it, a reading seems easier than an author talk. The words have already been written, of course, and you are presumably happy for people to read them. But taking these words – which you forged alone in private – and saying them out loud to an audience can still be a daunting prospect.

Why put yourself through such torture? The answer is simple: it's a great way to gain exposure for your book. Giving the audience a good experience will not only make them remember you and your book, but may encourage them to buy it and then tell their friends about it.

## Communication

Reading aloud is the ancient art of storytelling. It's not just reading words, it's interpreting them, communicating the ideas and emotions, forging a connection between the audience and your story.

One of the secrets of a successful reading is enthusiasm – yours. In his bestselling book *Lend Me Your Ears*, public speaking guru and consultant Professor Max Atkinson says: 'If you sound bored with your own subject matter, the audience can hardly be expected to feel any differently about it.'

How then do you sound enthusiastic as your knees are knocking together, how do you look confident and even enjoy yourself while making your story come alive?

This is where the other secret of successful reading comes in – preparation and practice.



## Choosing what to read

Prepare a passage with a beginning, middle and end, a crisis leading to a climax. Try to choose contrasting characters that the audience can distinguish, for example, male and female or young and old. Also, remember that your narrator is a character with his or her own voice.

If you want to read a few shorter passages rather than one long passage, you will need to prepare transitions in advance to connect them.

## Marking your script

It's worth taking the time to prepare your passage for reading. You will not only sound more professional and polished on the day, but knowing what you are going to say and how you are going to say it, will give you more confidence and calm any last-minute nerves.

Once you have decided what to read, photocopy it – you're going to mark it with coloured highlighters or pencil. Now read the passage again, more

slowly this time, with expression. Highlight or mark the words or sentences you want to emphasise; where you need to slow down or speed up; where you need to raise or lower your voice; and where you will pause.

## Practice

Your reading should appear spontaneous and the key to appearing spontaneous is practice. Mark Twain said: 'It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.' You won't need three weeks but the more you practise, the more your reading will appear effortless.

Read your script as often as you can, including the introduction and any transitions. The aim is not to memorise but to internalise.

Practise in front of friends or family who haven't read your book. Ask if they could follow everything you said. Were they able to make out every word? Did they find anything confusing?

Read with feeling. Unlike

public speaking where you have both hands free, in reading your main tool is your voice. Audiences stop listening to readers who speak in a flat monotonous voice, swallow their words or speak so fast that their sentences run into each other.

Luckily, you can develop your delivery to make it more interesting. Below are a few things to work on.

**Pace** The average rate of speaking is between 120 and 160 words per minute. Aim for 120 or even slower. Speed up if your character is excited, nervous or joyful. Slow down and speak more deliberately to convey a sense of drama, foreboding or tension.

**Emotion** Practise reading the same sentence using different emotions – happy, sad, angry, surprised or excited. Try reading the words when you are smiling and again when you are not smiling. Notice how emotions can change your voice.

**Pitch** Raise your pitch to denote excitement or joy. Lower it to convey drama, sadness or foreboding.

**Pauses** One of the most important tools in speaking, a pause gives your audience a chance to catch up and process your words.

A well-placed pause can also signal that an important fact or passage is coming up so they should listen intently. Pauses can also add drama, suspense, anticipation or uncertainty.

How long should a pause last for? Use your punctuation as a guide. Pause for two beats at the end of a sentence. Pause



for one beat at a comma, colon, semi-colon or bracket.

**Inflection** An upward inflection at the end of a sentence adds tension or anticipation, as if something else is about to happen. A downward inflection signals that something has ended.

You can also use inflection to emphasise certain words, for example:

Who ate all the CHOCOLATE?  
WHO ate all the chocolate?  
Who ate ALL the chocolate?  
Who ATE all the chocolate?

**Verbal clutter** Everyone uses the odd speech filler – um, ah, er – in everyday conversation. But using too many during your reading can interrupt the flow of words and distract the audience.

Rehearsing your reading, including your introduction and any transitions, can help to cut the clutter.

**Body language** You have less scope for body language in a reading than you do in delivering a speech. However, appropriate hand gestures, facial expressions and upper body language can enhance a reading. Using body language effectively comes with practice. The more you practise your reading and really get into it, the more natural your body language will become.

#### On the day

If you are using a microphone, remove jangly jewellery. Microphones are sensitive and can pick up and amplify the slightest noise. If you are not using a microphone, you will have to project your voice more, especially to the people at the back of the room.

A tip I learned was to breathe in at the start of a sentence, then speak on the out breath. Practise this at home when you are rehearsing and hear the difference.

#### Using a lectern...

Usually you will stand to read. When you are invited to speak, walk to the lectern, place your

book and/or print-out on top and open it at the passage you will have bookmarked in advance. Balance yourself by standing straight, feet hip-width apart, with your knees bent slightly so that they don't lock. Place your hands lightly on the open page.

#### ... or sitting to read

Sit up straight in your chair – this will help support your back. Hold the book in the palm of one hand, so you can project out rather than down, and rest the other hand lightly on the page. Resist the temptation to clutch your book in both hands as this will tense your arms and neck and make you look nervous.

#### Connect

Once you are settled, either at the lectern or in your seat, look up at the audience and smile. Your aim is to connect with the audience and smiling creates an instant rapport. It will also make you look and feel more relaxed and confident.

Now, breathe in and deliver your introduction as you look at the audience. Then, begin your reading – and take your time.

If you have prepared and practised, you will be able to look up at the audience occasionally. When you do, keep your eye contact steady. Don't sweep round the room – this is known as the 'lighthouse effect'.

#### The end

At the end of a reading, many authors close their book and scuttle away to the safety of their seat, relieved that their terrible ordeal is over. A confident reader signals the end of the reading by pausing, looking at the audience, closing the book and then walking slowly back to their seat. Or if they are already seated, they sit up a little straighter, pause and look at the audience.

Reading aloud is not easy, but neither is it difficult to learn. And it's a great skill for an author to have.

So the next time you're invited to read your work, say yes. You won't regret it.

## WRITING OUTLETS

with Janet Cameron

### Story-writing opportunities

#### Alt Hist

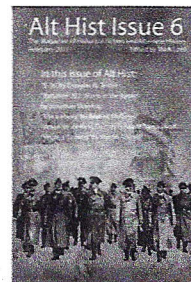
[althistfiction.com](http://althistfiction.com)

*Alt Hist* is the abbreviated title of the excellent *Historical Fiction and Alternate History* magazine. If your work is accepted you will receive payment of \$10 or a copy of the print version. You can buy *Alt Hist* from Amazon or get the digital version from ebook retailers.

Sample a free issue via the home page of the website.

**Tip:** Although the genres of this magazine include alternate and fantasy fiction, the editor prefers stories that are character-based rather than of the 'what if?' style.

**Submissions:** You may submit your story online, up to 10,000 words. Go to the user-friendly online submissions system on the website.



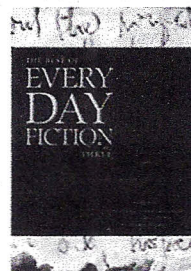
#### Every Day Fiction

[www.everydayfiction.com](http://www.everydayfiction.com)

This site just seems to get better and better. If you like your fiction in bite-sized chunks, subscribe online for free and look forward to a daily flash fiction story in your inbox. The editorial team is looking for well-written stories of up to 1000 words that will intrigue and inspire. All genres of fiction are acceptable, but no 'edgy' content please. They pay \$3 per story.

**Tip:** They prefer traditional story formats – action, tension and climax. The resolution need not be spelled out.

**Submissions:** Submit only through their online form. No more than one story per form. Their guidelines are specific so read them carefully before submitting.



#### Short Fiction Journal

[www.shortfictionjournal.co.uk](http://www.shortfictionjournal.co.uk)

*Short Fiction* is an anthology published by Plymouth University in November each year. Their reading period runs from 1 September to 31 December for work to be published the following year. The anthology costs £10 at the time of writing.

**Tip:** The editors' tastes are wide-ranging, and they're happy with stories that range from character-driven to 'non-conformist work of extraordinary innovation'. It has to be good but you are free to choose your style and genre.

**Submissions:** Up to 6000 words. After reading their guidelines, email to [shortfiction2010@googlemail.com](mailto:shortfiction2010@googlemail.com) or send to the postal address on the website.

