

## The Noble Art of Reading Aloud

**READING ALOUD** is important for **children's bedtime**. Reading aloud also works well at the **family's main meal** when each character becomes a good friend of all the family — someone to talk about. See Gladys Hunt's *Honey for a Child's Heart*.

**Reading aloud is a regular** drill in good teaching:

1. It checks on the accuracy of silent reading.
2. It improves the accuracy of silent reading.
3. It can give much pleasure to others.
4. It is an important act of socialization.
5. It is a necessary life-skill for relaying information.
6. It is good practice for telling your own stories aloud.
7. It is practice for reading Sacred Scripture in church.

### PRELIMINARIES

- Reading aloud to someone else demands **most of the skills of reading silently to yourself PLUS many more**. Reading silently to yourself, you can go quite fast, but, reading aloud to others you must slow down!
- The Golden Rule for reading aloud is to **remember your listeners; you are reading to them and for them, not to yourself or for yourself**. Listen to your self on a tape recorder — then you will learn things that others are too kind to tell you...
- **Speed kills!** Speed is the biggest single killer in reading aloud... The gabble of speed garbles both meaning and feeling. Reading slightly too fast is bad for 'the passengers', i.e. the listeners; reading much too fast 'murders that traffic policeman' called Punctuation and jostles the passengers... Be merciful to your listeners and *slow down* to measured tones.
- Reading aloud means **loud** enough to be heard.
- Every word, every syllable, must be uttered **clearly**.
- **Bite your words**, especially the first syllable.
- **Do not slur** syllables (unless the author indicates the elisions usual in direct speech).
- **Pronounce** vowels and consonants accurately in every syllable. The meaning may depend on it; e.g. 'bow' as in rainbow and 'bow' as at a dance.
- Words should be correctly **accented**. Some accents change a verb into an adjective or a noun; e.g. *perféct* and *pérfect*, *condúct*, and *cónduct*. Accent can change the meaning; e.g. *refúse* (=no!) and *réfuse* (=direct).
- Read **accurately**: do not add or omit words; however, mistakes which do not change the sense of the narrative or spoil the gist of what is said are best let pass, rather than drawing attention to them by back-tracking. Speed spoils accurate reading: it clips the ends off words, makes illegal elisions, runs words into each other like an Irish stew or a mash of mixed vegetables.
- Use '**measured**' tones, neither too slow nor too fast. Speed up *a little* for action, slow down *a little* for suspense. Keep the voice up until you drop it at the end of a sentence (except, for questions and exclamations).
- Put **expression** and emphasis into reading; avoid a flat monotone. To sustain interest the voice must, convey both meaning and feeling. However, avoid the melodramatic expression of film-actors: in church, for instance, solemnity is desacralized by too much expression, and it only draws attention to the reader rather than the sacred message. Some such moderation is also required in stories read aloud to others.

### CORRECT PHRASING: an essential skill

**CORRECT PHRASING helps (1) express meaning, (2) give emphasis, (3) stir emotion and (4) sustain interest**. With correct phrasing, the author's thoughts can pass through the reader's mind and lips so they can be savoured by all who hear. Without correct phrasing, the message gets mangled.

### PAUSES

**Correct phrasing** means putting in **pauses** at the right places. Without pauses, the flow of words is like flood water: very confusing, and soon dull and tedious.

A group of words needs a pause after it to separate it from the next group of words. This is so whether the groups of words are paragraphs, sentences, clauses or phrases. Such pauses vary in length from a brief moment, to three or four seconds.

Pauses are like the mortar for bricks. Mortar keeps the bricks together and it also keeps them apart. In the same way, a bundle of words is like a brick and the pauses between bundles like the mortar. Pauses keep the words together in their own neat bundles, and they also keep the bundles separate.

As well as general 'bundles of words' called phrases, there are particular groupings of words called 'a phrase' in grammar. Grammatical 'phrases' are quite easy to recognize. They are made up of a preposition and an object, e.g. *into the fire*, *down the street*, *between you and me*. Note that 'on the floor' can be both an adjectival phrase in 'The pen *on the floor*' or an adverbial phrase in 'He looked *on the floor* for his pen.' In the more general sense, however, and for purposes of reading aloud, phrases include an adjective with the noun it qualifies, or an adverb with the verb it qualifies, a Christian name with its surname, or any other little grouping of words: all these need a small pause before and after them.

### PAUSES AND PUNCTUATION

**Punctuation is put in as a guide for correct phrasing** and thereby a guide for reading aloud.

**Silences at the full stops** and shorter silences at the commas make reading aloud more audible, more intelligible and therefore more interesting. Full stops are like STOP signs, commas like GIVE WAY signs.

Little children tend to make short shrift of 'little things' like full stops and commas. **They ignore punctuation when reading aloud and omit it altogether when writing**. Reading aloud, they often read each word like a bulldozer pushing over a tree — slow, inexorably and without pause. Or they tend to read too fast, like a speeding motorist running down the pedestrians on a zebra crossing...

On the other hand, when writing, older children often use a scatter-gun technique, hurling fistfuls of commas and full stops at the text and leaving them to lie where they fall...

The ancient languages in which the Bible was written had no punctuation. Thus they made much greater demands on a reader (whether reading to himself or aloud to others) and they have also left occasional ambiguities for translators to puzzle over.

It is not only children who ignore punctuation when reading aloud. Some readers at Mass are like hit-run drivers knocking down pedestrians. They run over the full stops with scarcely a pause. And they totally ignore the commas. (They have some excuse with certain lectionaries where the translation and typesetting make reading aloud even more difficult than it is.)

### PUNCTUATION AND MEANING

Consider the sentence, "John said Tom was naughty." This is an old chestnut which school inspectors ask children to punctuate. A really shrewd pupil would ask the inspector, "Is there a 'that' understood after the word 'said' to introduce a noun clause?"

If so, simply leave it alone. It is already punctuated and makes perfectly good sense as it is. If inverted commas are to be added, beware! the meaning changes. It could be: *John said, "Tom is naughty"*— or, *"John," said Tom, "is naughty."*

In the first interpretation, the reader keeps all the words together as a single group, a single phrasing: *John said Tom is naughty.*

In the second interpretation, the reader must group 'John said', then pause slightly before going on to 'Tom is naughty.'

In the third interpretation, the reader says 'John' as a one-word group, pause, then say, 'said Tom' and pause again, then finish with 'is naughty'. The phrasing depends on the punctuation and the punctuation expresses the meaning intended by the author.

### TYPESETTING

White space between lines of print and margins around it can make even small print quite legible — see the quality typesetting in the vinyl covered pocket edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. White space works in a similar fashion to pauses and silences: both help to convey meaning. White space helps accurate reading, both reading silently for oneself and reading aloud for others; pauses help accurate reading aloud, and thereby help accurate listening.

Specialized typesetting such as sense lines (i.e. thought lines) is another aid to correct 'phrasing' and to reading aloud. Such typesetting suits a poetic style with rhyme, rhythm, alliteration and cadences. Thus it is used to great advantage in altar Missals and other prayer books, in catechisms of Questions & Answers, and kindred texts. See *Handouts* nos. 1, 2 and 13.

### VOCATIVES

Vocatives (also called 'direct address') are easily recognized when they begin with an interjections like 'O' as in "O God, our help in ages past."

Vocatives are joined to the rest of a sentence by commas, exclamation marks etc. Do not fail to pause at the punctuation: omitting it destroys both the vocative and the meaning: e.g. "Praise the Lord, Jerusalem" — the comma, and hence the pause, are vital. Without it we get "The Lord Jerusalem" (i.e. a new god called Jerusalem!) and some unnamed third party is called upon to perform the idolatry.

### PARENTHESIS

Commas, clashes or brackets which introduce and conclude parentheses need pauses when read aloud,

### ADVICE FOR AUTHORS

Authors and translators can make reading aloud easier and more accurate by avoiding any possibility of **ambiguity**. Too often, the unsuspecting reader is trapped. Only *after* he has read it aloud in a particular way does he realize that it does not make sense in that context. It turns out that it can be read another way...

Authors should **foresee** problems by reading their own work aloud — 'talking to themselves', or by reading it to others, or into a tape recorder. And they should get someone else to read what they have written before rushing into print.

Passages in inverted commas can be tricky. Some authors set out a long dialogue which jumps back and forth, back and forth, between two (or more!) of their characters **making it hard to be sure who is speaking**. This is bad enough reading to oneself but disastrous for reading aloud. Those who read aloud sometimes supply this information to their readers by interpolating "said Andy" or "said Ann", (even though 'said' is repetitious and the author may have prided himself on avoiding it). Also church lectionaries sometimes violates a principle of typesetting by making it easy for a reader to put the vital *phrase* 'he said' with the wrong sentence — and thereby wreck the meaning: it is not clear to a listener who is saying what, whether 'he said' refers to what comes before it or after it.

Authors can help reading aloud by putting qualifications about the tone of voice etc. **before the initial inverted commas**. Such qualifications *after* the concluding inverted commas come too late, when a reader finds he is supposed to have whispered that passage...

Authors should observe the ancient tradition (or rule?) of one paragraph per speaker. A second speaker gets a new paragraph, even if he says only one word.

**In print** it is acceptable for one speaker to utter several paragraphs, all with initial inverted commas, but only the last with concluding inverted commas. However, for **reading aloud** it may be hard for the reader to convey that it is still the same speaker unless the author has put in, "He continued," or some such phrase near the start of each subsequent paragraph.

### TAPE RECORDERS

Try reading aloud into a tape recorder. Then listen to yourself critically with a view to improvement. It is like watching a video of yourself learning to drive a car. The first thing you will find is that you are far too fast: so slow down for the sake of the 'passengers'.

As an experiment, try reading as fast as you can: *it will sound like this without any gaps between words*. Then read .....as ..... slowly .....as ..... you .....can. This, too, can destroy the meaning and emotion, and the listeners' interest.

### ENCOURAGEMENT

Finally, we should be very patient with children and others learning to read aloud. Many, many skills are only gradually recognized, practised and perfected. Not everything can be mastered at once. Practice makes perfect, trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle. As with so much else, the best way to master an art is to listen to a master and carefully study the many subtleties of his technique.