

**Book summary**  
**Lend me Your Ears - Professor Max Atkinson**  
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This book follows Professor Atkinson's research on influential speaking in the world of politics. He has taken his findings to discern how to use this knowledge in business, to make your conversations presentations and talks more influential. He is interested in speaker-audience interaction and its practical potential.

After reading his research, Granada television featured his work when he was challenged to coach a novice to make a speech at the SDP conference. Armed with all the most powerful rhetorical devices that trigger applause in speeches, the novice became the only non-platform speaker to win a standing ovation. Throughout his subsequent coaching he found that these methodologies worked regardless of the subject matter, audience or aims of the speaker. Read more.....

**Audiences are always right.**

The key to effective speaking is an objective understanding of the needs of your listeners. Take for example the current trend of 'death from a thousand slides', yet the extraordinary fact is that anyone who takes the trouble to ask an audience what they really think of the typical slide-driven presentation quickly discovers a groundswell of dissatisfaction. It seems very clear that most speakers choose slides for themselves not for their listeners!

**Keep listeners awake and engaged.**

There is a 'language of public speaking' which is subtly different from our normal conversational language - it also requires different skills. Many of us have difficulty concentrating (or even staying awake!) during presentations, speeches, talks, sermons or lectures. However, most of us have no problem at all staying focussed during conversations.

**1. Why conversation keeps us awake.**

In conversations people take it in turns to talk, therefore the listener is paying attention to some subtle cues about when it may their 'turn' to talk. Research shows that gaps of more than half a second is enough for us to start thinking that trouble is on its way. Studies of invitations for example have found that an immediate reply usually means the speaker is about to accept. So in conversation, the safest way of people getting the wrong impression is to pay enough close attention to be able to start speaking as soon as possible.

Another reason why people are concentrating in conversation is that you have to be continually at the ready to say something that relates directly to what was said in the previous turn.

**2. Why audiences fall asleep**

- Speeches & presentations are long, one person gets much more air time than in a conversation.
- Audiences know they won't have to speak for a while
- If audiences are confused, they stop listening. In a presentation, it may not be in 'the rules' to interrupt and ask for clarity- unlike a conversation. Presentations are not always designed so that an audience can follow them. Having a sense of sequence and structure play vital parts in helping us to make sense of what we are hearing.

### 3. The battle against boredom

Our level of attentiveness will increase if we have the opportunity to respond to what the speaker says. Take for example a pantomime - The 'oh no it isn't' - 'Oh yes it is' has worked for centuries. This also highlights the benefits of getting an audience to chant the same thing in unison. Many famous speakers have used this including Martin Luther King who used his Baptist style preaching to get audience response. Not an approach that all of us can use, however, other methods include:

- Collective audience response as incentives to pay attention. For listeners to be able to come in at the same time, they have to be continually on the lookout for the cues, therefore they pay close attention.
- Laughter, audiences enjoy laughing, not only this but it is a powerful spur to continued attentiveness. More generally if you illustrate a point with an example or anecdote that makes the audience laugh, it increases memory retention.
- Audience participation. Getting an audience to answer a question, keeps them on their toes. Once an audience realise that a speaker may ask them a question, they are more attentive.

### 4. Good eye contact

- The more you look at the listeners, the easier it is to monitor reactions
- The more you look at the listeners the greater pressure for them to pay attention.
- Using 'scanning' eye contact is more likely to involve everyone
- Looking people in the eye is more engaging than looking above or below their heads.

### Speaking in private vs. speaking in public

From Professor Atkinson's research he found that one of the major problems from presenters was that they talked as if they were having a conversation. Things like hesitations, pace, volume, and intonation combine in a style which is like having a 'chat'.

- Ums & Ers are normal in conversation, but distract and irritate audiences.
- Silences may distract in conversation, but pausing regularly in presentations is good practice as it slows down the pace of delivery, helps to clarify and convey different meanings, increases dramatic effect and gives you a chance to recover.

- Use changes in intonation, stress and emphasis. The most important of all of these is enthusiasm.
- Everyday conversational intonation flattens out across a distance, so you need to exaggerate your everyday conversational patterns to avoid sounding monotonous.

### **The sight & sound of words**

The book outlines the difference between the written and spoken word. Atkinson explains why the most carefully crafted written word may not sound right when presented vocally.

#### **The cloak of formality**

- If you speak in a hyper-correct way you run the risk of sounding unduly stilted or wooden.
- Using words that are hardly ever heard in everyday conversation will make it more difficult for the audience.
- Jargon & acronyms need to be kept to a minimum.
- Slang and swearing could easily offend some.
- The longer and more complicated the structure of a sentence, the more difficult it is for the listener to make sense of it.
- Repeating the first few words at the start of each sentence in a sequence works like bullet points on a page. It reminds the listener that there is a process being delivered.
- Repetition greatly increases impact and memory retention.
- Some words repeated can become a distraction such as ‘actually’ or ‘basically’.
- Using the passive can convey neutrality, objectivity, or distance from direct responsibility- not always helpfully.
- When it comes to sentence formation simple is best.

#### **Information overload**

- Written word provides a lot of information far in excess than the spoken word can carry.
- If you go through endless amounts of information, you run the risk of coming across as insecure and lacking in confidence.
- Simplifying the content not only makes it easier for the audience, but gives the impression that you are authoritative and in full command of your subject matter.

### The persuasive power of words.

Rhetoric - speech or writing that communicates its point persuasively.

The research shows that the same rhetorical technique is used by effective speakers today is the same as those used in ancient Greece - They work!

#### 1. Contrasts

- Contradictions - 'Not this but that'
- Comparisons - 'More this than that'
- Opposites - 'Black or White'
- Phrase reversals - 'ask not what your country can do you for, ask what you can do for your country'

#### 2. Puzzles and questions

- Puzzle-solution format - naming the puzzle and the solution
- Rhetorical questions - shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

#### 3. Lists of Three

- Three identical words - 'education, education, education'
- Three different words - 'Tom Dick or Harry'
- Three phrases - 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people'
- Three clauses - 'Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do, are in harmony'
- Three sentences -stating your case in three sentences.

#### 4. Combinations

- Any combination of the above is more powerful than any single one used on its own.

### The use of imagery and anecdotes.

#### 1. Types of imagery.

- **Similies** - sometimes called open or overt comparisons, similies make it clear that the thing being talked about is 'like' something else.
- **Metaphors** - This involves using a comparative image without words like 'as' and 'like' to make it explicit that this is what you are doing
- **Analogies** - extending a similie or metaphor and provide a vivid way of simplifying and clarifying a subject.

2. **Anecdotes**- using stories to illustrate a key message. More than one minute is usually too long.

3. **The sound of words** -use of illiteration can help make a message more noticeable and memorable. - ' We cannot fail or falter.'

### Putting the principles into practice.

### **The creative process**

- First attempts hardly ever become the last one, try different applications out.
- Where there are two related points it is worth considering whether they could be translated into a contrast
- Rhetorical techniques are especially useful at pivotal points. E.g. beginnings, endings, summaries, bridges etc.
- You can put a key statement into the first or second part of a contrast or the third item on a list.

### **The position taker.**

Used regularly by politicians, it consists of a two stage intervention:

1. talk about something that the listeners will expect you to take a strong position on (descriptive), then
2. state your position in relation to this.

### **Physical facts and urban myths**

#### **Claims to be sceptical about:**

- X What we actually say has a minor role in communication.
- X There is scientific evidence to suggest that some clothes have more impact.
- X People with folded arms are always on the defensive.
- X Moving about distracts the audience.
- X Using gestures distracts the audience.

#### **Claims worth taking seriously.**

- ✓ Speaking to a group is a stressful experience
- ✓ Physical tension increases nervousness and directly affects the parts of the body that produce the voice.
- ✓ Breathing well is the foundation of good delivery
- ✓ If your mouth is not fully open, you are likely to sound dull and monotonous
- ✓ Most people speak too fast
- ✓ Alcohol is never the answer
- ✓ When it comes to reducing tension, the aim should be minimalisation rather than total elimination