

# Becoming a Powerful Public Speaker: Using Imagery to Captivate Your Listeners

by Steven D. Cohen

One of the first steps to becoming a powerful public speaker is to examine your default public speaking settings.

Each of us has default settings—that is, automatic, pre-programmed ways of designing and delivering a speech. Millions of years of evolution have taught us to unconsciously embrace the most comfortable, familiar ways of doing specific things. For example, put down this magazine for a moment and clasp your hands together as if you are praying. How does your grip feel? Comfortable, right? Now unclasp your hands, and clasp your hands together the *other* way, so that the opposite thumb is now on top. How does your grip feel now? A little awkward?

We each have a default way of clasping our hands—a pre-programmed grip that feels right—just like we have default ways of getting dressed in the morning or preparing certain meals. Public speaking requires you to clasp your hands differently than you are used to. You must identify and acknowledge your default public speaking settings and change those settings that will detract from your ability to make a powerful impact on your listeners.

One of the most common default settings is to focus on the words of a speech instead of on the emotion beneath the words. Determining what words to use is an essential part of crafting a compelling message; however, words alone are not memorable.

What your audience will remember are the images that your words create. Powerful images convey people and places, colors and textures, sounds and smells, and a whole range of emotions. As writer and lecturer Dale Carnegie (1990) said, “Your purpose is to make your audience see what you saw, hear what you heard, feel what you felt. The only way you can possibly achieve this effect is to use an abundance of concrete details” (p. 111).

Powerful public speakers don’t just talk about a cause they care about; they *show* the audience they care by using emotive language. Public speaking involves creating powerful images and transferring them, replicating them, and bringing them alive

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in the minds of your listeners. Images are mental representations of something else; they are copies, likenesses, imitations. Powerful images change hearts and change minds. They persuade your listeners and motivate them to take action. They set your message in motion and make it stick in the minds of your listeners.

By delivering powerful images, you narrow the distance between you and your

listeners; you enable your listeners to think your thoughts and feel your feelings. You put your listeners in your shoes and enable them to take the same steps that you have taken. Once your listeners are in your shoes, they are more likely to believe what you believe and do what you want them to do. Powerful images are used to transfer ownership of a message and make others feel like an idea belongs to them, too.

Barack Obama (2004) masterfully demonstrated how to use powerful images during his now famous Democratic National Convention speech:

I’m not talking about blind optimism here—the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don’t think about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about something more substantial. It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker’s son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too (p. 3).

Barack Obama’s use of imagery enables his listeners to hear the slaves singing freedom songs and feel the fear of a young

officer on patrol. He paints pictures of places such as the Mekong Delta and distant shores, and paints pictures of people like slaves and immigrants. Obama even includes a striking, somewhat self-deprecating portrait of himself by using adjectives like “skinny” and “funny” to elicit awkwardness with which nearly everyone can identify. He also uses images to form a tangible representation of hope that others can visualize and feel. Through the use of powerful images, Obama conveys the power of hope and inspires his audience to join the movement for change.

Like Obama, powerful public speakers have an incredible ability to make people want to listen to them. But how exactly do these speakers craft and deliver memorable messages? They experiment and practice. Public speaking is not a natural gift; it is learned. Think about an artist’s ability to paint an impressive portrait. Great painters weren’t born with the ability to create masterpieces. They learned about and experimented with different combinations of line, color, composition, balance, and contrast. Behind every great painting, there is

a talented artist—a magician who has spent thousands of hours refining his craft.

Changing your default public speaking settings is a little like undergoing an orthodontic procedure (without the metal and office visits). As a result of your genes and your own physical composition, your teeth may have settled in a certain undesirable way, and you may want to eliminate a gap, straighten crooked teeth, or correct an overbite. But the orthodontist cannot just squeeze your teeth together. Proper correction involves constant application of pressure against resistance, accomplished by strapping rubber bands to teeth. Over time, these bands are tightened, and little by little, the teeth are pushed into perfect alignment. This process can take years and sometimes be a bit uncomfortable, but most people would agree that a perfect smile is worth the effort.

The same is true for default public speaking settings. These settings take time to change and require constant monitoring, but the result—the ability to craft compelling messages—is well worth the effort.

## References

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## About the Author

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