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## Practicing the Ancient Art of Memoria in the Modern Classroom

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Oratorical Address Presentation:

Practicing the Ancient Art of Memoria in the Modern Classroom

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Oratorical Address Presentation:

Practicing the Ancient Art of Memoria in the Modern Classroom

*objective:* To challenge students' memorization and speaking skills by having them present an excerpt from a previously delivered speech.

*courses:* basic, public speaking

Memoria, one of the original five canons of rhetoric,<sup>1</sup> has been described as a lost art (Hoogestraat, 1960, p. 141). While "word-for-word" memorization and presentation of classic speeches was an important component of rhetorical training that "persisted through the middle ages," it receives no more than a brief mention (usually in the sections outlining different types of delivery) in most contemporary public speaking texts (Carruthers, 2002, p. 25). The ancients believed that memory, and therefore the development of memory skills, was an important component of an education in rhetoric because it provided the student with the mental discipline necessary to craft, recall, and present oral arguments. For many modern students, the opportunities to practice memorization skills normally do not extend beyond cramming information for exams, and this sort of memorization rarely, if ever, results in a public presentation.

The purpose of the oratorical address presentation is to provide students an opportunity to practice their memorization and delivery skills. The activity is a nice complement to extemporaneous speeches, as the practice in memorization serves students well in preparing for and presenting subsequent speeches. With one shorter memorized presentation, students get a very clear sense of exactly how much time they need to

devote to practicing for later extemporaneous assignments. Also, by committing another speaker's words to memory, students get a better understanding of the impact of language choices on the interaction between speaker, audience, and situation. In addition, this memorized presentation helps students start to learn effective techniques for structuring, wording, and presenting oral arguments. Finally, the process of memorizing and presenting a short excerpt helps students understand how different public speakers can express the same ideas in different ways.

### The Activity

Students are asked to take a 2-3 minute excerpt from a previously delivered speech, memorize it, and present it to the class. The focus of this assignment is on refining delivery skills and establishing rapport with the audience. The selections should be fully memorized, so students must be made aware of the need for adequate time to work on memorization. A general rule of thumb is that it takes approximately one hour of focused work to memorize one minute of a speech. Students should not have a copy of the script or any sort of notes to aid their memory during the presentation.

There are a variety of techniques that the students can use to help with the memorization of their speeches, and these should be discussed in class. Virtually all of the effective techniques for memorization involve repetition. One specific technique students can use to aid with memorization is to make an audio recording of themselves reading the speech aloud and then listen to the recording over and over. In the absence of a recording device, simply reading the passage aloud can also be an effective technique. Another technique that has worked well for students is to divide their selection into smaller segments and work on memorizing each segment individually. Students can

divide the speech into segments by simply treating each individual paragraph as a segment, by identifying clear shifts in theme or topic, or by identifying shifts in the tone or emotional content of the passage. For visual learners, it is particularly helpful to place each individual segment on a note card. Finally, some students have simply used a “line-by-line” approach to memorization. In this approach, the student commits one sentence to memory and then adds the second sentence, then the third, and so on, starting from the very beginning of the passage with each repetition.

The techniques for memorization are important, but there is no substitute for time and practice when it comes to memorization. Students should be reminded to keep a copy of their speech excerpt with them at all times, and to read through the excerpt whenever they have a spare moment. The instructor should encourage students to read their speech excerpts when walking to classes, waiting for classes to start, or whenever they have a few extra minutes during the day. Instructors might decide to devote the first five or last five minutes of each class session leading up to the final presentations to having everyone in the class read their excerpts aloud in unison. The repetition not only makes students feel much more comfortable with the text, but it also makes them feel much more confident when it comes to final presentation in front of the group.

Since the students are not responsible for generating the content of their particular speech, the evaluation should focus specifically on the student's overall ability to communicate the text's message. Students should be evaluated on the extent to which they are able to make the words their own, as well as their ability to project enthusiasm, energy, and sincerity. Specific areas of vocal and physical delivery to be evaluated include volume, rate, emphasis, vocal variety, the ability to maintain direct eye contact,

the ability to use gestures naturally, the ability to maintain good posture, and the ability to utilize effective body movement.

The instructor should distribute the passages no fewer than two full weeks before the presentations are scheduled. One preliminary step for the instructor is the collection of a set of appropriate speech excerpts. While classical orations are an excellent resource, for introductory level students more contemporary speeches (those presented within the last couple of years) are recommended. Students seem to relate better to the themes and perspectives presented in more contemporary orations, and typically the language choices of modern speakers are less of an obstacle for students. *Vital Speeches of the Day* is an excellent resource for locating contemporary speeches on relevant topics. The instructor should locate a different speech or a different speech excerpt for each member of the class. To meet the 2-3 minute time requirement, the passages should be approximately 250-350 words in length. While the passage most likely will not be a complete speech, ideally it should have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Students might ask to select their own passages, but for this assignment it is not recommended. Students should be allowed to focus exclusively on delivery in this particular assignment, and asking them to select their own passages takes away valuable time from that objective. Perhaps more importantly, though, when instructors select the passages, they have the ability to pick excerpts that demonstrate important skills to be discussed later in the course. For instance, the instructor can select a passage that illustrates how to craft an introduction for a persuasive speech, a passage with particularly nice transitions and other connectives, or a passage that incorporates a wide variety of evidence. All of these passages can provide valuable examples not only for the

individual student but also for the other members of the class. When selecting passages from contemporary speeches, the instructor should avoid choosing excerpts from well-known figures. One goal of this assignment is for students to take these words and make them their own, and a passage from a well-known figure (like the President) might make the students feel like they have an obligation to imitate the delivery choices of the original speaker.

### Debriefing

The overall goal of a post-presentation discussion should be to get students to understand how memorization might help them in subsequent speaking assignments and to help them identify the most effective structural elements, language choices, and arguments in the passages they presented. In other words, the goal is to get students to think carefully about the question, "What did I see in my speech excerpt and the speech excerpts presented by my classmates that I can use to help me in crafting my own speeches?" The following questions have proved useful for generating discussion about the assignment after completion of the round of presentations:

1. Approximately how long did it take you to completely memorize your excerpt? Did you find the process of memorization difficult? If so, what was most challenging about it for you?
2. Do you have experience with memorization from work in some of your other classes/activities, or is memorization a skill that you don't use very often? If you do some memorized work in other classes/activities, which ones?

3. Did you find it difficult to work with someone else's words, or did you like the fact that you were not the author of the speech? Why? What was your favorite sentence or phrase from your particular speech excerpt?
4. Did the process of memorization give you a clearer sense of the original speaker's language, context, and audience? Can you identify a specific structural or language choice that the original speaker made in an effort to better adapt to the audience?
5. How will the skills you practiced in this particular assignment help you with your upcoming speeches? What role does memorization play when using an extemporaneous delivery style?

#### Appraisal

Students appreciated the focus on delivery in this particular assignment. In post-assignment discussions, many of them commented on the fact that having a pre-prepared text allowed them to devote extra time and energy to refining delivery skills. One limitation of the assignment is that several students suggested that the memorization process was more difficult because they received a passage that did not interest them. A common suggestion was to "allow the students to select their own passages," but for the reasons discussed previously this is not recommended. One simple way to include more student input in the selection process is to, after collecting all of the speech excerpts, generate a list of all selections (including topic area) and allow students to sign up for a particular excerpt. A few students also admitted that they "waited until the last minute" to start the memorization process, which created some problems for them in terms of polishing their delivery. One thing the assignment does well is to provide students with a

clear sense of the time and dedication required to select and refine their delivery choices. Fritz and Weaver (1986) stress the importance of memory and delivery choices for public speakers when they state, "Memoria and pronuntiatio help the audience and speaker remember content and help speakers present ideas with clarity" (p. 179).

Several variations on this assignment could be crafted, and most of them involve making changes in the type of "text" used. Published excerpts from student speeches, which can be found in the text and appendices of most introductory public speaking books, can be used as an alternative type of speech text (see, for example, Lucas, 2004; DeVito, 2000). Folktales and other short stories can also be substituted for the contemporary orations, and these texts provide nice examples of narrative structure that the students can incorporate into later speeches. Finally, in a more advanced public speaking or rhetoric class, where there is the opportunity to complement the activity with some historical research, excerpts from classical orations could be used for this assignment.

References and Suggested Readings

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<sup>1</sup> The five canons of rhetoric, as they are described in the anonymous Roman text *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, are inventio (invention), dispositio (arrangement), elocutio (style), memoria (memory), and pronuntiatio (delivery).