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THE VALUE OF READING ALOUD

Are you a writer, promoting your book or magazine work? Are you a poet or storyteller, building your audience? Do you do presentations for your business, internally or externally? Have you been asked to make a speech, at a wedding maybe? Will you be accepting an award?

Are you nervous?

This book will teach you techniques that build both your confidence and your abilities, so that the words you have written make as powerful an impact as possible.

That's not all it will do. If you are a writer, you may already know the value of reading your work aloud as a final step in the editing process. When you read silently, the words just roll along. You wrote them so you know what to expect, and guess what? Your expectations are met. Reading aloud adds a dimension of objectivity. You can hear whether the rhythm of the words is pleasing, where you've repeated a word or a phrase or a grammatical construction.

But when you read aloud with full emotional and intellectual engagement as if you were reading for an audience, you get a far more powerful understanding of your writing. Now you are not just listening to the words; you are feeling them. When you load your writing with its full freight of meaning, conveying it with passion to an empty room, you know viscerally when something feels inauthentic or wrong. You feel the disconnect when you're not actually saying exactly what you want to say.

Practice the techniques explained in the "Rehearse"

section of this book. You will develop your own personal litmus test for what feels right to you, and you will be that much more confident of your writing before you send it out into the world.

Reading work by other writers

Reading written work aloud is like playing music. No matter whether you wrote the song or somebody else did, it's still music. Just as musicians hone their craft by playing the work of other songwriters, not just listening to the recordings, so you can hone your craft by reading the work of other writers aloud and feeling the rhythms in your voice and body.

I (J.N.) have found that reading the work of others, both silently and aloud, memorized or from the page, teaches me more about writing than almost anything. As a performer for Poetry Alive!, I presented poems by Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Service to K-12 students. As my familiarity with these classic poems grew, my own work began to grow and change. Sometimes one of my lines would echo a phrase I'd memorized, or I'd trace the drama in one of my poems back to the tension I'd felt while reading Poe's "The Raven."

Literary fame and healthy sales figures are built by writers who actively promote their work. Yet most writers are thrown into the spotlight with no preparation. No

wonder they find it intimidating and unpleasant! No audience wants to watch you doing something you hate, and booksellers will tell you that people walk out of dull readings—which means that writers who don't read well are actively turning potential fans off their work. You do not want that writer to be you.

Fortunately, it's not hard to get good at reading for an audience. And with a bit of time and practice you can get so good that passers-by will stop, listen and even buy your book. That actually happened when I (A.H.) was doing a reading of my novel *Say My Name* at Bookworks in Albuquerque. A woman came into the store to buy something else, was drawn in by my reading and bought not one but two copies of my book (in hardback, even!): one for herself and the other for her sister. (To watch a live-stream of one of my public reading events, visit the Facebook page “Allegra Huston Author.”)

And will you believe me when I tell you that before James Navé coached me, I was terrified by public speaking? As an editor at a publishing house presenting my books at sales conferences, my heart would pound, my hands would shake and my nerves drained all authentic enthusiasm out of my voice. I was lucky to work with James Navé before my first book was published, and by the time that book tour was finished I was enjoying an experience I once dreaded. So, I am the poster child for these techniques—and you can be too.

(From here on, “I” refers to James Navé unless otherwise indicated.)

WHAT MAKES A GOOD READING?

Too many writers read in public the way they'd read in private, just saying the words aloud. To engage an audience, you must convey what's strong about your writing: the intensity of the emotion, the beauty of the words and images, the drama of the narrative. We don't mean that you must be theatrical. We mean that you must develop an emotionally connected reading style that reflects your authentic self.

Feelings are transactional. If you feel, your audience will too. The best way to make this happen is to be yourself—and share that self with your audience.

The poet Ocean Vuong, whose book *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* won the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2016, is an excellent example of a writer who is comfortable being himself on stage. (To hear him, go to the *New Yorker* website and search “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong.”) There’s nothing histrionic about Ocean. He’s soft-spoken, unassuming. When he reads, you feel like he’s telling you, and only you, one of his most precious secrets.

When I first met Ocean a few years ago, he was only 21 and just starting out. I was at Bar 13 in Manhattan, at a Monday night reading called Louder Arts. As you might imagine, many poets in that room competed for the imaginary loud prize with vocal volume, gesticulations and general overacting. When Ocean was introduced, he walked slowly to the stage with a small chapbook in his hand. There was something about him that cued the room full of slam poets and spoken word artists to silence.

When he stepped in front of the microphone, he simply said, “Thank you for allowing me to read. I appreciate it.”

Ocean opened his chapbook, looked out at us, smiled and began. It was instantly obvious that he was reading from a place deep inside himself. He only read for five minutes. He got a standing ovation.

Unlike Ocean, when I started out with Poetry Alive! I had little awareness of what it meant to be myself on stage. On the contrary, I thought pretending would do the trick. I communicated fear with wide eyes. I frowned for sadness, switched on a smile for happiness. I waved my arms to indicate excitement. But I knew there was something missing. All the emotion in the room was coming from me.

It took a little time for me to realize that I had to stop pretending and fully engage my imagination and my emotions. Then one day, when I reached a place of genuine sadness as I recited a poem—by bringing to mind the death of someone I loved—the students not only believed me, they experienced sadness too. I saw it on their faces. That was when I began to understand what Ocean already knew when he stepped up to the microphone that night at Louder Arts.

In this book, we will show you how to use memory and imaginative circumstances to give emotional depth to your reading. That interior connection will give rise to gestures, facial expressions and variations in your voice, but because they arise naturally they will be authentic—true to you, true to your material.

Apply these techniques, and you will feel the differ-

ence immediately. Powerful reading converts listeners (and passers-by) into fans.

GETTING STARTED

Recently the poet Jessica Jacobs called me for help. Her book *Pelvis with Distance* was getting excellent reviews and she was receiving invitations to read her work at bookstores, conferences and universities. She was committed to doing everything she could to get her poems out in public. “I’ve worked incredibly hard on writing and revising my poems,” she told me. “They’re regularly published. But every time I’m invited to read, I’m so nervous I do the poems a disservice by not giving myself full-on to sharing my work with an audience. How can I get past my anxiety to allow me to read in such a way that listeners connect with my poems and with me?”

Jessica’s nervousness was natural. Most writers are nervous about their first public readings, and for some writers that nervousness never goes away. When we don’t know if we can do something, when we haven’t received instruction or training, of course we’re nervous. As with everything, we get better with practice.

I told Jessica that after she had a few readings under her belt, she’d begin to channel her nervous energy into performance energy. “There are three simple steps,” I told her.

Choose your content.

Rehearse.

Show up prepared.

Yes—you will have to rehearse. Even writers who aren't nervous need to rehearse. Just because you wrote the words and can read with confidence doesn't mean you are already able to convey the full emotional impact of your work to an audience. The most common rookie mistakes, which we will discuss on pp. 24–25, are usually the result of a writer not believing they need to rehearse or not knowing how to do it.

If you want to be comfortable in front of an audience *and* read your work with powerful emotional connection, you must commit to a rehearsal process. It demands time that you will have to work into your schedule. We promise you it's worth it. As in painting a room or running a race, preparation is the key to success.

Consider every reading a gift to your audience, yourself and your work. Every rehearsal is a step in creating that gift.

Your audience

When you're nervous about reading in public, you tend to picture the audience as the enemy, distant and judgmental, just waiting for you to mess up. If you think about this for a moment, you'll realize that it's an illusion born of fear. In fact, your audience wants to love you and your work. Some of these people probably already do.

The audience is on your side. They love writing just as you do; that's why they're there. These wonderful people have taken time out of their lives, probably traveled some distance and spent some money, just to hear you read. They've come to witness your imagination at

work. They've come to be moved, entertained, motivated, validated, informed, provoked, stimulated and inspired. In short, they're receptive.

They are your allies.

When you stand up in front of your audience, you're making a bargain with them. In return for the effort they've made to be there, you will give them an experience of human connection—though the emotions you share may range from ecstasy to hilarity to rage. This sense of shared emotion—which reminds us that we are not alone, that life is infinitely sad and infinitely sublime, and that there is always something new to fascinate or appall or delight us—is why we read.

Storytellers and speech-givers: skip to p. 23.

PREPARATION 1: CHOOSE YOUR CONTENT

So, what are you going to read? Keep three things in mind as you make your selection:

- Emotional connection
- Timing
- Audience

Emotional connection

Many people in your audience will be experiencing your work for the first time. But they will be hearing your words, not reading them on a page or screen, so they