



TALKING HEADS

What more could there possibly be to say about 'vox pops and talking heads'?

Well, our last Info Sheet gave lots of hints and tips for the folk behind the camera... This time, it's the turn of the speaker! Much of what's here applies more to formal talking heads than to genuinely spontaneous vox pops, so let's start with why we think they're different...

Planning to be spontaneous? Our view is that vox pops differ from talking head pieces in as much as that viewers' expectations of the latter are usually higher! Audiences will forgive something 'off' when it's been shot in the street, with members of the public, that they won't forgive from a pundit giving an opinion in a room! So generally speaking, vox pops can be a little rougher round the edges; talking heads should be filmed more formally, with interviewees that have a good idea of what they're going to say.

One step, two steps, tickly under there: There are three stages to developing contributions in a talking head situation:

- Preparing
- Polishing
- Filming

And our experience is that the more you do to get the preparation and polishing right, the easier the filming is!

Preparing:

What are you doing, Dave? Throughout the next few paragraphs, it'll help to remember that, no matter how casual they appear, interviews are about communicating a message: your opinion! And the first thing you need to do is clarify what that opinion is...

Say it, Sam: Many people, when asked to do a talking head piece, will blurt out an unedited opinion, often expressing it for the very first time... That's not ideal! Our advice is to ask yourself the questions you're going to be asked, long before you have to commit your answers to the camera, and get a firm idea of what your opinions sound like...

Sound like? Yes! Give the subject a little thought, then say – out loud – what comes to mind. Do this a few times, then take a break and come back to it. Next, have another go but, this time, write down your main points or, better still, have someone else do it for you.

Speak right and write speak: From the perspective of the brain, the act of writing is both a creative and logical one. In the first instance, your brain creates what it wants to say but, in the second instance, the action of physically writing or typing those thoughts is a logical process. The reason that this is important is that different hemispheres of the brain are active in each function, with the result that the way you speak has a different tone from the way you write!

A touch of the Enid Blyton's... So what does this mean in real terms? Well, many times when something that's been written is read aloud, you'll find it has a very formal, unnatural tone: there'll rarely be contractions, for example, so words like cannot, will not, did not, have not, etc, are usually included in the writing.



Polishing:

Mirabile dictu: Happily, very few people actually talk that way! Rather, people say “can’t, won’t, didn’t, haven’t”, etc. So the first ‘polishing’ we suggest you do is an edit of the ‘script’, replacing the full form of the word with the contraction – it will relax the sound of it no end.

Ee by gum, where’d y’draw line? You can go too far the other way, though. Just as unchecked writing can sound stiff and formal, a person’s natural speaking style can contain many informalities and colloquialisms and create an overly relaxed tone which, at times, can be inappropriate... And even indecipherable!

“This is the BBC Home Service”: So, are we saying that everybody should speak in that clipped, 1940’s, BBC broadcast voice? No! What we’re saying is that your job on camera is to communicate: it’s very difficult to do so if you can’t be seen, be heard or - when you can be seen and heard - you can’t be understood!

It’s not really about accents so much as it’s about interest and clarity. You’ve probably had the experience of listening to somebody speak and being unable to focus on what they said, right? And yet you’ve probably also had an experience wherein you’ve been listening to somebody with a strong accent and you’ve not been thrown by it at all. The difference would most likely be in the way certain words were emphasised, and the variation in their speech...

Stops and commas: Punctuation being what it is – and you can read far too much about it in our ‘Better Punctuation’ Info Sheet here: www.dmiproductions.co.uk/info – you’ll benefit from remembering that a full stop signifies a good breath in; a comma signals a smaller one. Make time to punctuate your piece properly; you’ll find your pausing happens all the more naturally.

Eschew pomposity, bombast and grandiloquence: There’s an old joke that says how, back in the 1970s, teenagers had an everyday vocabulary of 2,000 words... By the 1990s, that vocabulary had shrunk to 1,500 words and that, these days, many teenagers have a vocabulary of just 1,000 words... With any luck, goes the punchline, that means in 20 years’ time, teenagers won’t be able to speak at all!

Notwithstanding the cynicism of that thought, there’s no question that many people have a limited vocabulary today and, in much the same way as we speak more formally when we write, so too we tend to use longer and more difficult words... At least one review of your material should be dedicated to replacing such words!

Avoid long sentences that run on and on as they can be difficult both to read and listen to and often prove difficult to understand by many people whose intention it is to determine meaning from the verbiage you utter: Take the point? Write short, snappy sentences! It’s very easy to write a long sentence but not so easy to say it out loud! Short sentences let you to breathe more often and allow listeners to more easily digest information.

Monotony – it’s not a type of wood: A monotonous tone is the kiss of death to any speaking endeavour! In trying to avoid sounding bland, though, many people make the mistake of starting to sound like they’re singing a song; their voices go up and down for no reason at all as they speak...



Stress for success: To dodge that pitfall, take a look at your notes and work out which words need stressing; it's better to emphasise those than to sing everything! Most of us quite naturally emphasise words in one of five ways. We tend to:

- Change their pitch: lower or higher
- Hit them with a different volume
- L - e - n - g - t - h - e - n them
- Hit them with a different volume
- Emphasise them with body language

On the last point, this very often means speaking more LOUDLY, but clever speakers use quiet emphasis, too.

Doing:

Smile, smile, smile! Unless the subject on which you're speaking demands otherwise, it's best to remember that a smile and a positive tone go a long way to winning over an audience!

Your pace or mine? Most of us speak at a rate of around 110 - 150 words per minute, but we're comfortably able to listen to clear speech at a rate of nearer 400 words per minute... That means people who speak slowly tend to be no better understood, but are quite definitely harder to listen to, than most people who speak quickly!

By contrast, our brains tend to go up a gear to listen to people who speak quickly... Of course, some people speak so quickly that just hearing them is exhausting, so – clearly – your best bet is the middle ground – but some of the most fascinating voices in the world tend to have a rich variety to their pace and tone...

Such as? Brian Blessed comes to mind, notwithstanding that his volume control seems permanently stuck on 11... If you listen carefully to him speaking, though, you might notice that he sometimes speaks very slowly and with emphasis, and at others gets very excited and speaks rapidly... Christopher Walken, William Shatner – they also seem to have vocal qualities that demonstrate great variety.

Perfect practise makes perfect: Once you've got a decent 'script' that you feel comfortable with, you may have the opportunity to learn it or - if you're doing it with less preparation - approximate it as you go! Repeat it out loud just a few times, preferably to a person whom you trust to give good feedback... Failing that, practise on camera or into a recorder of some sort; this should let you judge yourself more fairly and allow you to grow accustomed to the rather odd experience of talking to a machine!

Equident words: Some of the things that are most often said in amateurish vox pops and talking head pieces are not really words at all... If we had a penny for every 'er' and 'um' that's on the cutting room floor, we could buy another room to store them all in...



The secret to removing ers, ums and other non-words from your speech is to embrace the pause! As soon as you understand that you don't need to speak non-stop on any subject; that it's okay to pause, nod in silence and breathe in before answering, for example, the non-words will melt away!

Water! Water, everywhere... An experienced film crew will normally provide a bottle of water, or some fruit, so that you stay hydrated throughout. You might be astonished at how much water you lose through speaking! Don't get caught out!

Round and round the rugged rock the ragged rascal ran: Many people recommend doing tongue twisters to warm up the voice... Our advice is DON'T. Unless you're doing a great number of them, or speaking at inordinate length, it isn't necessary and, we've noticed, it's often discouraging! A tongue twister, moments before you're on camera, often results in a sense that you're not going to be very good at speaking simply because you can't relate the tale about Peter Piper's grocery gathering!

Say "Aaaah!": Better to say 'Aaaah!' a few times and run things through out loud; you can also, if you like, overemphasise the vowel sounds out loud to warm up the voice... Go easy, though. You certainly don't want to do anything at an unnatural volume, scream, or otherwise strain your throat.

Once more, with feeling: Remember, it's your opinion! If it's worth the audience's attention, you'd look a little bit interested in it yourself, wouldn't you? Avoid the zombie like gaze into the camera that seems to bedevil many talking head contributors.

Ten-SHUN! Standing up or sitting up straight will help you breathe more easily and give your voice a fuller sound. Let your hands do what they normally do; if you gesture a lot when you speak, do so now... if not, don't force it! The only exception we think there is to this rule of thumb is if the 'Director' has an important reason to deviate from the norm – you need to feel relaxed, though; that's the main thing.