

Winging it's best in front of a crowd

I've had to do a bit of public speaking lately. Not sure why. Possibly it's because the province's many organisations are always on the lookout for someone new to entertain them, and I'm sort of new, having returned only four years ago. Getting my name on things that I write may have piqued curiosity.

It's something quite enjoyable, which is surprising. Writers are supposed to be introverted and tongue-tied, aren't they, uncomfortable standing before an audience trying to explain what they do and how it's done, this essentially inexplicable thing, this writing business.

Perhaps I'm not really a writer. Not in the true sense. I can talk for hours; flick a switch and I'm away, and there's no shutting me up. People are often too polite to point out that we've been going for an hour now, Jim, and we've all got things to do.

I speak without notes, which is slightly dangerous. And getting more so, because as you get older you dread the day when the mind goes blank, the store of anecdotes fails, silence ensues, embarrassment descends.

That's why I retired from teaching journalism. Students are the world's toughest audience, and I vowed I would depart quietly if there came a time in the middle of a teaching session when I forgot what I wanted to say. It happened. I left.

Public speaking is easier. The people who invite you are more forgiving, polite. Most seem intrigued by someone who has spent so long doing something society generally finds distasteful. Journalism has always ranked with politics and the selling of cars, even though all three are fundamental and in their own ways important. And all three have great war stories. We see life from many angles, the best and the worst, and like undertakers and nurses we develop self-deprecation to an art form.

Being able to take the proverbial out of yourself is, I believe, the essential oil of successful public speaking. Students teach you that. The second an audience senses a misplaced belief in your own importance, you're gone. That's what made me a disaster as a would-be local politician – the requirement to be deadly serious and resist making fun of the absurdity of it all.

Another essential requirement is not reading. Winging it works best, because you're looking at the listeners, rather than down at notes.

However, that apparent engagement is illusory. In fact, I'm not really looking at all, because the speaking process seems to shut down perceptions, to confine concentration to some mysterious story bank that can be drawn on only through an inner eye. The gaze might be sweeping the room, but all I'm seeing are the next words of the narrative. Weird.

There are other motivations for not reading a speech. Broadcasters often say "what's read is dead", and if you analyse people speaking on TV and radio you can see they're right.

For me, another reason stemmed from something that happened on the first day I faced a class. Just prior to that, I was newly "retired" from the news business and at a loose end when Auckland Technical Institute invited me to hold the fort at their journalism school while its head took sick leave. No problem. How hard could that be?

Doubts had crept in by the time we got to kick-off, but quickly vanished when I found the entire programme was written out in long-hand and could be delivered, word-for-word, for the whole six months of the course. Yes.

And so, there we were on day one, the welcoming session under way. I stood in front of 24 eager entrants to my trade and read from the script. However, I hadn't had time to check what I was about to deliver, and unease started to rise as what began on a friendly note quickly ascended into the 10 commandments. The language became authoritarian, hectoring.

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And then we got to rule number nine. Rule nine stated in as decorous a way as my unseen mentor could muster that students must not cohabit; in not so many words, there was to be no intra-curricular shagging.

I stopped reading. Our eyes all met for the first time. Some smiled. Others flared. I dropped the notes like a tax demand, and without missing a further beat winged it...for the next 25 years. There was a funny sequel to that inauspicious beginning, a story in *Truth's* gossip column. Another time, maybe.