

# 17. All communication is exposition

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use symbols, but in the middle of enough prose to keep the mind from drowning in a morass of suffixes.

## 17. ALL COMMUNICATION IS EXPOSITION

I said before, and I'd like for emphasis to say again, that the differences among books, articles, lectures, and letters (and whatever other means of communication you can think of) are smaller than the similarities.

When you are writing a research paper, the role of the "slips of paper" out of which a book outline can be constructed might be played by the theorems and the proofs that you have discovered; but the game of solitaire that you have to play with them is the same.

A lecture is a little different. In the beginning a lecture is an expository paper; you plan it and write it the same way. The difference is that you must keep the difficulties of oral presentation in mind. The reader of a book can let his attention wander, and later, when he decides to, he can pick up the thread, with nothing lost except his own time; a member of a lecture audience cannot do that. The reader can try to prove your theorems for himself, and use your exposition as a check on his work; the hearer cannot do that. The reader's attention span is short enough; the hearer's is much shorter. If computations are unavoidable, a reader can be subjected to them; a hearer must never be. Half the art of good writing is the art of omission; in speaking, the art of omission is nine-tenths of the trick. These differences are not large. To be sure, even a good expository paper, read out loud, would make an awful lecture—but not worse than some I have heard.

The appearance of the printed page is replaced, for a lecture, by the appearance of the blackboard, and the author's imagined audience is replaced for the lecturer by live people; these are big differences. As for the blackboard: it provides the opportunity to make something grow and come alive in a way that is not possible with the printed page. (Lecturers who prepare a blackboard, cramming it full before they start speaking, are unwise and unkind to audiences.) As for live people: they provide an immediate feedback that every author dreams about but can never have.

The basic problems of all expository communication are the same; they are the ones I have been describing in this essay. Content, aim and organization, plus the vitally important details of grammar, diction, and notation—they, not showmanship, are the essential ingredients of good lectures, as well as good books.