

Learning & Memorizing Ritual

by Wor. Mark Waks

One of the problems that most often plagues Masonry is poor ritual. By this, I don't just mean getting the words wrong -- I mean ritual that is drab and uninspiring, which fails to actually *teach* a candidate. Ritual is often mediocre, and it doesn't have to be; anyone can do ritual well, provided he knows a little about acting.

It isn't hard, actually; it's mostly a matter of knowing how to do it, plus a lot of practice. This article is intended to impart some guidelines on how to do Good Ritual. It doesn't demand a lot of time, or any particular talent, just a little drive to do well. Read it and play with it. With some practice, you should be able to use these techniques to good effect in your Lodge. The course is specifically aimed at dealing with the longer speeches, but much of it is also relevant to shorter pieces; I commend it to junior officers.

This is adapted from a lecture that I worked up for my own lodge; having done that, I figured I should try to spread these tips around for the common weal of the Craft. (Caveat: I do assume that you have some kind of cypher book, with encoded ritual. If your jurisdiction doesn't use this, you'll have to adapt these lessons.)

1: Figure out the Words

The first step of learning any ritual is to know what you're saying! This should be obvious, but is often overlooked, because brethren are afraid to admit that they don't already know the right words. Don't be afraid to admit your own limits -- I've never met *anyone* who gets every single word right every time.

Start out by listening to someone say the speech, preferably several times. (You should be doing this the entire previous year, listening to your predecessor.) Listen carefully, and make sure you understand what's being said; ask questions if you don't. (After lodge, of course.)

Next, go through your cypher or code book carefully, and see how much you can read. Mark words that you can't figure out, or that you're unsure of -- this is the point to catch any mistakes you may be making. Then call or get together with a

Ritualist or a reliable Past Master, and talk through it, reading out of the book slowly. Have him correct any mistakes, and fill in the words you don't know. Take notes (preferably somewhere other than in the book), because you will forget the corrections as soon as you're on your own.

2: Understand the Speech

This step gets overlooked even more often than the previous one. Read through the ritual a couple of times, and make sure you really grasp it. Don't just know the words -- know what it's talking about. Find out who the characters being talked about are. Again, ask questions.

Now, start trying to understand the speech structurally. Any ritual is made up of components, separate pieces that are linked together. For example, a section may be talking about symbols, with three paragraphs per symbol: concrete meaning, abstract meaning, and purpose. Figure out what these pieces are -- you'll use them later.

The next step is especially useful for long speeches -- visualize the speech. Any speech can be thought of in terms of movements, places, rooms, stuff like that. Words are hard to remember in order; places are easy. The canonical example is the Middle Chamber Lecture, which walks through King Solomon's Temple. That's no accident -- that path is easily visualized, and makes a good example of how to learn ritual, which is probably why it is the first major speech an officer learns. This is why we use symbols in the first place: because they are easy to learn and internalize. Use them.

3a: Small-Scale Memorization

This is never anyone's favorite part; anyone can do it, but no-one finds it simple. It's considerably easier if you do it right, though.

Start out by reading the speech over and over. Don't move on to the next step until you can read it from the cypher quickly, without breaks or hesitation. Read it *out loud*, when you get the chance. This step is particularly important, and skipped more often than any other. Don't skip it -- this is how you get your brain and mouth trained to the words. It may sound silly, but it really matters -- the mental pathways used to talk are distinct from those used to read.

Now, start trying to learn sentences. Just sentences. Read the first word or two of the sentence, then try to fill in the remainder from memory. Don't fret if you can't do it immediately; it will probably take at least 5 or 10 times through before you're getting most of the sentences. You'll find some that are hard -- hammer those ones over and over (but don't totally neglect the rest while you do so). Again, get to the point where you're doing reasonably well on this, before going on to the next step.

3b: Large-Scale Memorization

Once you've got most of the sentences, try to move on to paragraphs. Again, some will be easy and some hard. Try to understand exactly why this sentence follows that one -- in most cases, the ritual does make sense. An individual paragraph is almost always trying to express a single coherent thought, in pieces; figure out what that thought is, and why all the pieces are necessary. Keep at this until you're able to get most paragraphs by glancing at the first word or two, or by thinking, "Okay, this is the description of truth," or something like that.

Finally, start putting it all together. This is where the structural analysis in Step 2 gets important. You visualized the speech, and figured out how it hooks together; use that visualization to connect the paragraphs. Make sure you have some clue why each paragraph follows the one before. In almost every case, the next paragraph is either a) continuing this thought, or b) moving on to a related thought. In both cases, you can make memorization much easier by understanding why it flows like that. Convince yourself that this paragraph obviously has to follow that one, and you'll never forget the order.

4: Smoothing It Out

You're now at the point where you've got pretty much all the sentences down, and most of the paragraphs, and you're able to get through the whole thing only looking at the book a few times. Now, start *saying* it.

When you're driving in the car; when you're alone at home; pretty much any time you have some privacy, try saying it all out loud, at full voice. Trust me, it sounds very different when you actually say

it aloud. You'll find that you stumble more, and in different places. Some words turn out to be more difficult to pronounce than you expected. Try it a few times.

Start out by trying to do this frequently -- once, even twice every day. It'll be hard at first (and it's a real pain to pull out the cypher book while you're driving), but it'll gradually get easier. When you're starting to feel comfortable, slow down, but don't stop. Practice it every couple of days, then every week. Don't slow down below once a week. If you feel up to it, see if you can speed up your recitation. (But do not ever speed-talk the ritual in open Lodge -- that's for memorization and rehearsal only.)

5a: Mindset

Last part. You're now at the point where you pretty much have the ritual memorized. Now, the trick is learning how to perform it well. Very nearly everyone has some amount of stage fright; us acting types often have it even worse than most. The trick to overcoming it is control of the nerves.

Now that you're comfortable reciting the ritual, observe how you do it. By now, you're not thinking about it so much; your mouth is doing almost all the work, with the conscious mind simply making a few connections between paragraphs. That is the right state to be in. Think about how that feels, and learn it.

Before you go in to "perform", do some basic acting exercises. Take a few deep breaths; concentrate on not thinking. I think the ideal is a little light meditation, but it takes a fair bit of practice to be able to drop into that state on demand; for now, just worry about being calm. Being calm is far more important than anything else. If you're calm, you're unlikely to screw up too badly; if you're tense, you're far more likely to. Some people like to exercise the body a bit, to relax the mind; you should do what works for you.

5b: Acting

Now the final nuance, which separates merely competent ritual from the really good stuff. Now that you're able to let your mouth do all the talking, start listening to yourself. Think about the ritual again, but don't think about the words, think about

what it means. What are the important bits? Emphasize those. How could you use your body or hands to illustrate a point? Try talking *to* the person in front of you, not just *at* them -- look them in the eye and make them get the point. You are teaching important lessons here; try to capture a little of the emotional intensity of that importance.

Think of your "performance" as a melding of two parts. Your mouth is providing the words, your mind and heart the emotion. Again, nothing beats practice. This is what rehearsal should really be for -- taking a dummy candidate in hand, and learning how to really get the point across. Don't fret if you find that you need to change "modes" now and then -- here and there you will need to think about the words briefly, when you change paragraphs or hit a hard sentence. That won't throw you, though, so long as you keep track of what you're saying; you've already figured out why each part leads into the next, and that will guide you when you stumble.

Conclusion

Don't expect to get all this down instantly; it takes most people a few years to really get good at it. Just try to advance yourself bit by bit. Learn the transitions and pieces first -- if you have that, you can get through the ritual. Next time, work on memorizing more thoroughly. The time after that, work on getting it really smooth. After a while, you can build up to the point where you have the luxury to act. And at that point, you will find that you start doing the kind of ritual that Masonry is meant to have -- both moving and interesting, enough so that the candidate (who is, remember, the whole point) actually *learns* what you're saying, and what it actually means. And if you really do it well, you'll find that you come to understand the meaning of the ritual a good deal better yourself.

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Our ritual work is the life's-blood of Freemasonry. It is what sets us apart from every other fraternal and charitable society in existence. In this essay Wor. Bro. Waks reveals what every actor learns and what every lodge officer should know. There is almost nothing I could add to this excellent explanation of how to learn our ritual.

If you give this an honest try, and are careful not to skip to the next step before mastering the previous ones, you will be a skilled ritualist. You will enjoy doing the ritual work, and most importantly, your candidates will be moved and will learn something of the heart of Freemasonry from your presentations.

Please feel free to copy this article to share with your lodge officers.

Fraternally yours,

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