

Precision Ritual

Adapted from a short talk by Craig Lehrke, PM District Deputy Instructor for the Grand Lodge of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

We must draw focus on the importance of creating a new Worshipful Master each year in order for the Lodge to be sustainable, and successful. This requires us to strengthen our officer line through the programs of mentorship and education.

Last month I spoke of guarding the West Gate, not only from those who enter, but especially those who exit. Often, they simply sneak out without a word, never to be seen again. I believe by raising the requirements of masonic education our candidates must be competent in, we not only guard the West Gate, but we also increase our success at accomplishing the goal of creating a new master each year.

With all of this in mind the idea of precision ritual becomes increasingly important to the success of our Lodge.

Being a great ritualist is not just a matter of the verbal expression of words; it only requires a handful of simple skills and a commitment to doing the very best presentation one can do, specifically: Procedural Accuracy, Correct Grammar, and Professional Delivery. Although each of these is closely related, and to varying degrees overlap, individually and collectively they provide the essential qualities necessary to help you become more self-confident in the lodge room. More importantly, each of the principles is easy to learn, so every one of us can become more engaged in opening and closing our lodge, being part of a degree team, or becoming a master ritualist. Remember: a master ritualist is not an elite, rare, or special person; he's a Mason, just like you, who loves the craft and has invested his time to practice and learn the ritual.

Procedural Accuracy:

This is especially directed toward the seated officers of the lodge, in particular the Deacons, Wardens, and Worshipful Master, or anyone seeking to serve in these positions, because it is a fundamental necessity to follow all aspects of our ritual, especially in terms of opening and closing the lodge. This is not to be confused with degree floorwork; instead, Procedural Accuracy is most concerned with the accurate use and placement of actions: knocks on the door, gavel raps, standing, sitting, and one's overall movement within the lodge room. Sadly, two of the most egregious and, unfortunately, common mistakes are often improper signs and for the Wardens failure to be on step while performing the opening and closing. Attention to the little details makes a huge difference in the lodge room and separates the mediocre from the magnificent lodges.

Accommodations are provided for any brother who may have physical limitations in his range of movement, but we must strive to be as accurate as possible. For most, it's simply a matter of taking the time to teach and learn how to do things accurately. The motions of the sign should be made using right angles vs. a haphazard swipe across the body.

Procedural Accuracy is simply achieved by making the commitment to fine tune your lodge ritual through practice and accurate repetition.

Correct Grammar:

Grammar refers to the whole system and structure of a language in general, usually taken as consisting of syntax, articulation, and inflection. Syntax refers specifically to the composition and arrangement of words within the sentence structure. The Masonic Ritual explicitly provides this for the speaker. Follow the ritual; word-by-word accuracy is the goal. To settle for mediocrity or to paraphrase is not acceptable.

Articulation, or proper pronunciation, is an essential element of effective communication. Speak the words clearly, accurately. Pronunciation is easily accomplished through a little research or the aid of a brother to assist you in learning how to say a word correctly.

Inflection brings words to life. It involves a change in the form of a word to add emphasis, express a grammatical function or attribute such as tense, mood, question, or statement. From the listener's point of view, inflection is the difference between a dry, monotone presentation and one that holds attention, sparks interest, and conveys a greater meaning through the modulation of intonation or pitch in the voice. Intonation takes practice. You need to hear yourself speak out loud and analyze how you sound; better yet, practice with a brother and critique and assist each other.

Professional Delivery:

This is where it all comes together: knowledge, skill, and practice. It's all about you being prepared to make a professional delivery. One of the most important aspects of delivery is the rate of presentation. Our ritual is not a race or an auctioneer's chant...slow down. Remember the words of our ritual have meaning, they are meant to be heard so as to reinforce the duties and principles they communicate. Abide by the commas and periods placed within the sentence structure. Also, bear in mind that those who are considered great orators will effectively take this a step further and break down long passages in shorter phrases which allow the audience time to absorb and understand the content being presented. One of the best communication skills you can have is patience. Good lecturers take the time they need to collect and express their thoughts, without rushing themselves – or letting others rush them. Don't be afraid to give your audience time to internalize critical information: a well-placed pause __ says a lot.

Confidence is huge when it comes to our lodge ritual and even more so in delivering a degree presentation. If you are confident in your delivery your audience will be more likely to pay attention and appreciate the material that you are putting out there. Confidence makes you credible. In order to truly show confidence, you have to trust in your knowledge and ability to be yourself during your presentation. Confidence comes with research and practice. Take time to study and understand the meaning of what we do, why we do things in certain ways, and why our ritual and charges contain the life lessons they do.

Practice is simply the commitment to memorize and rehearse that which you want to present. How can you accurately, confidently, and professionally deliver a charge, or your chair's portion of opening the lodge, if you have never taken the time to practice?

Your commitment to the craft is the foundation to your passion. Effectively opening a lodge, presenting the lambskin, or conducting a charge, requires you to truly love what you are doing and believe in the value of being a Mason. When others see and feel your passion, they will be more open to hear what you say, and you'll be empowered to energize that same passion for the craft in others.

For those who are sitting on the sidelines wondering, how does any of this pertain to me as a Mason? Or the Mason who cannot attend meetings regularly, or even more so, casually dismisses lodge meetings and fails to attend? How does this talk affect all of us here tonight, as well as them?

We as Masons should remind each other that ritual is what sets us apart from the rest of the world. Our ritual has meaning, and the duties, principles, and morals it conveys are the primary means by which we teach and instill these tenets into our lives so that we may exemplify them within our families, workplaces, and community.

The precision with which we present our ritual is also the means by which we preserve our Masonic heritage. Through ritual, we are connected to every Mason of years long past; through ritual, we will strengthen our fraternity today; through ritual, we preserve that legacy for all Masons yet to come.