

DON'T RISK IT, REHEARSE IT!

**HOW TO REHEARSE
TO PERFORM WITH CONFIDENCE**

BY MICHAEL PARKER

REHEARSE, REHEARSE, REHEARSE.

Rehearsal is the bedrock of confident performance. This is true for a business presentation, a speech at a wedding or conference, a competitive pitch, or a job interview. In all these, the audience, however seriously inclined, are anticipating a 'show', whether they realise it or not. You may be across a desk, seated around the board room table or within the four walls of a video screen but wherever you are, you are on stage, and your audience is taking in *everything*.



How you perform, the way you come across, will have more impact than your words alone. 65% of communication is non-verbal. Rehearsal will reduce the nerves, the sense of risk, and pave the way to a confident performance.



“Over and over and over and over. Repetition and repetition and repetition. The French for rehearsal is répétition. Do it until it’s second nature.”

MICHAEL CAINE

REHEARSAL HERO

When Cicero turned to the crowds in ancient Rome, people said, 'great speech.' When Demosthenes spoke to the crowds in ancient Greece and people turned to each other, they said: 'Let's march!' Asked what was the most important component in oratory, Demosthenes replied '**Delivery**'.

Asked what was the second, he responded, '**Delivery**' and, third, '**Delivery**'.



He was not a born orator. He practised, trained like an athlete, and worked on his voice. Cicero wrote about Demosthenes:

“His habit to slip pebbles into his mouth and then declaim a number of verses at the top of his voice and without drawing breath, and this not only as he stood still, but while walking about or going up a steep slope.”

Demosthenes rehearsed.



REHEARSAL TO WIN

In preparing for the must-win presentation, or career-changing interview, we tend to focus on persuasion that assumes a rational response from our audience. Reason leads to conclusions. We tend to forget that emotion is what leads to action.



We forget about feelings – hoping that our well-argued presentation will do enough. Unless we are supremely gifted as speakers, this will not be the case.

Only rehearsal will enable you to capture and project the emotions needed to win over your audience, to take to the stage like a warrior ready for the fray, as set out in The Art of War.

**“Be rushing as a wind.
Be stately as a forest.
Be ravaging as a fire.
Be still as a mountain.
Be inscrutable as night.
Be swift as thunder or lightning.”**

SUN-TZU



REHEARSAL EVIDENCE

Few of us argue against rehearsal, but few of us truly invest in it, apart from the token last minute run-through. But we admire and acknowledge that many of the world's greatest speakers rehearsed.

Steve Jobs rehearsed his famous presentations like an actor in a theatrical production.

Martin Luther King rewrote, rehearsed, and recorded his speeches multiple times.

Mick Jagger, commenting on 50 years of unbridled, seemingly spontaneous performance, said, "I'd rehearsed!"

TED Talkers, who've raised the bar for all of us, rehearse with a vengeance. The 'introvert' Susan Cain rehearsed for a year before delivering her famous talk.

We can't quantify the value of their rehearsal. We just know it worked. They did not start out as gifted performers, they rehearsed.



"All the world's a stage and most of us are desperately unrehearsed."

SEAN O'CASEY

REHEARSAL RELUCTANCE.

We have all made excuses like this to avoid rehearsal:

'I ran out of time.'

Make time. Make rehearsal a deadline, not an option.

'The script needs revising.'

An okay script well-rehearsed will outperform the 'perfect' script unrehearsed.

'I like to reserve my energy.'

You're avoiding the discomfort of rehearsal.



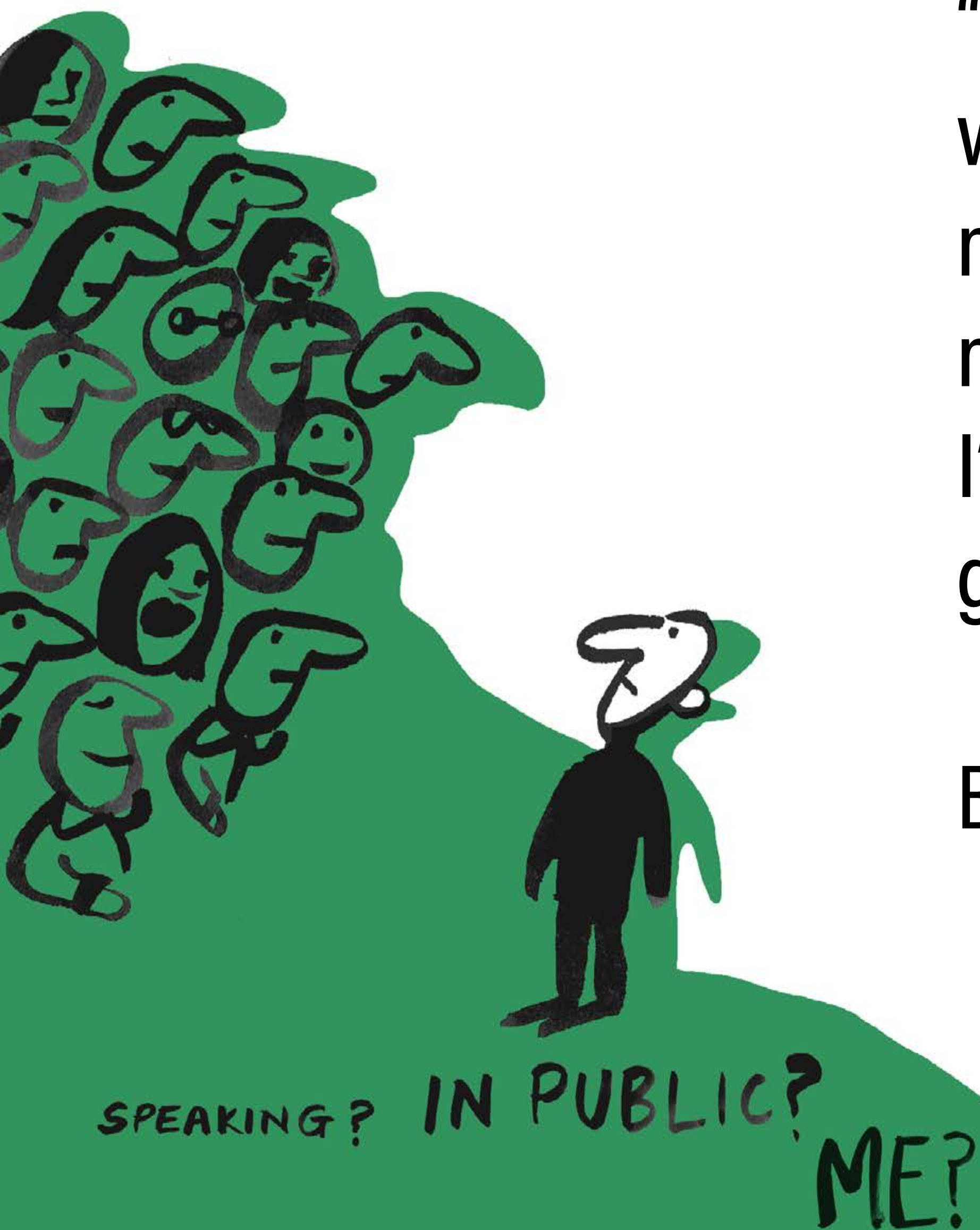
'Spontaneity will suffer.'

The more rehearsed, the more confident you'll be. This enables spontaneity.

The reality is that all these excuses are coming from nerves arising from the almost universal fear of public speaking, the most common phobia ahead of death, spiders, or heights! A degree of nervousness is normal. With rehearsal, you can learn to embrace the risk and channel it to enhance performance.

"I get nervous when I don't get nervous. If I'm nervous I know I'm going to have good show."

BEYONCÉ



REHEARSAL AS AN INVESTMENT

Reluctance causes rehearsal to be left, unloved and ignored, to the last possible moment. Technology doesn't help. It allows us to tinker with words, redesign slides, reorder the presentation and to change content while eating up every second of rehearsal time. Time seen as a cost. In fact, it's your best return on investment.

The timings of rehearsals should be deadlines that are sacrosanct, working back from the day of the speech or presentation. In the Eighties, the most successful pitching agency stopped all

work on creative development ten days before pitch date. It rehearsed what it had, without trying to improve. Its win rate was spectacular even against agencies with much better creative track records.



TIME
DOTH FLIT;

oh shit!

Dorothy Parker



There are many ways to rehearse. All have value and can play a part in improving performances. Don't be seduced by technology. Start rehearsing early. The more you rehearse the better the performance.



“I love rehearsal. I don't see how any rehearsal can do anything but help.”

NICHOLAS CAGE

REHEARSAL ON YOUR OWN

Rehearsing in your head is an effective use of 'downtime.' Rather like an athlete visualising a race, imagine your performance. How you will walk into the room, smile, greet your audience, take in the surroundings, pause, start talking. Run through the whole presentation, the key moments, the way you will finish.

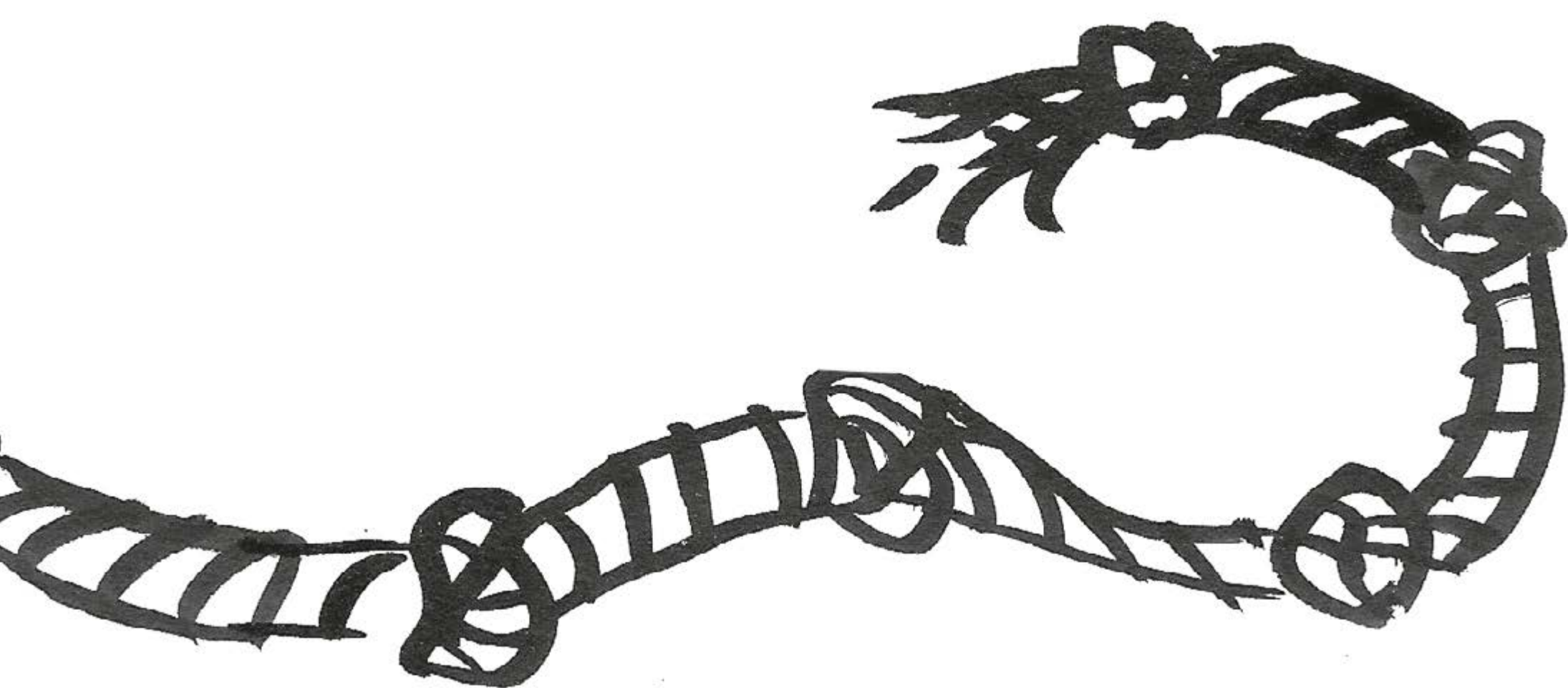
This is also an opportunity to **imagine your audience**. Put yourself in their shoes, what's in it for them? Align yourself with their interest, is it to be entertained, educated, or moved to agree with you? Empathy is all important. As confidence grows, you can worry less about yourself and care more for your audience.



Rehearse out loud 'like it's the real thing.' Steve Jobs went into full presentation mode. 'He raised his volume and changed the tone of his voice and the energy he gave. He used expansive gestures like he was speaking to thousands.' (Carmine Gallo.)

Work on your voice, think about pace and pitch. Avoid the common mistake of speaking at the same level throughout.

As you read aloud, **look for edits** that can help enhance performance. Shorter sentences, unnecessary vocabulary, memorable phrases and adjectives, opportunities for repetition perhaps. Concentrate on your storytelling, focus on the emotional highlight. Start memorising, then build towards the use of signpost notes to replace the full script.



Rehearsing to a mirror is an easy way of checking your expressions and body language. Adolf Hitler practiced his commanding movements in front of a mirror. Churchill, not a natural speaker, wrote his scripts complete with detailed stage directions. He rehearsed, gestures and all, in front of a mirror until he got them right.

Today, of course, he would have used video rehearsal, available to all of us on our iPhone to record, transcribe and edit. (Without this modern aid, he was still able to time his dramatic words and historic V sign to galvanise his audience.)

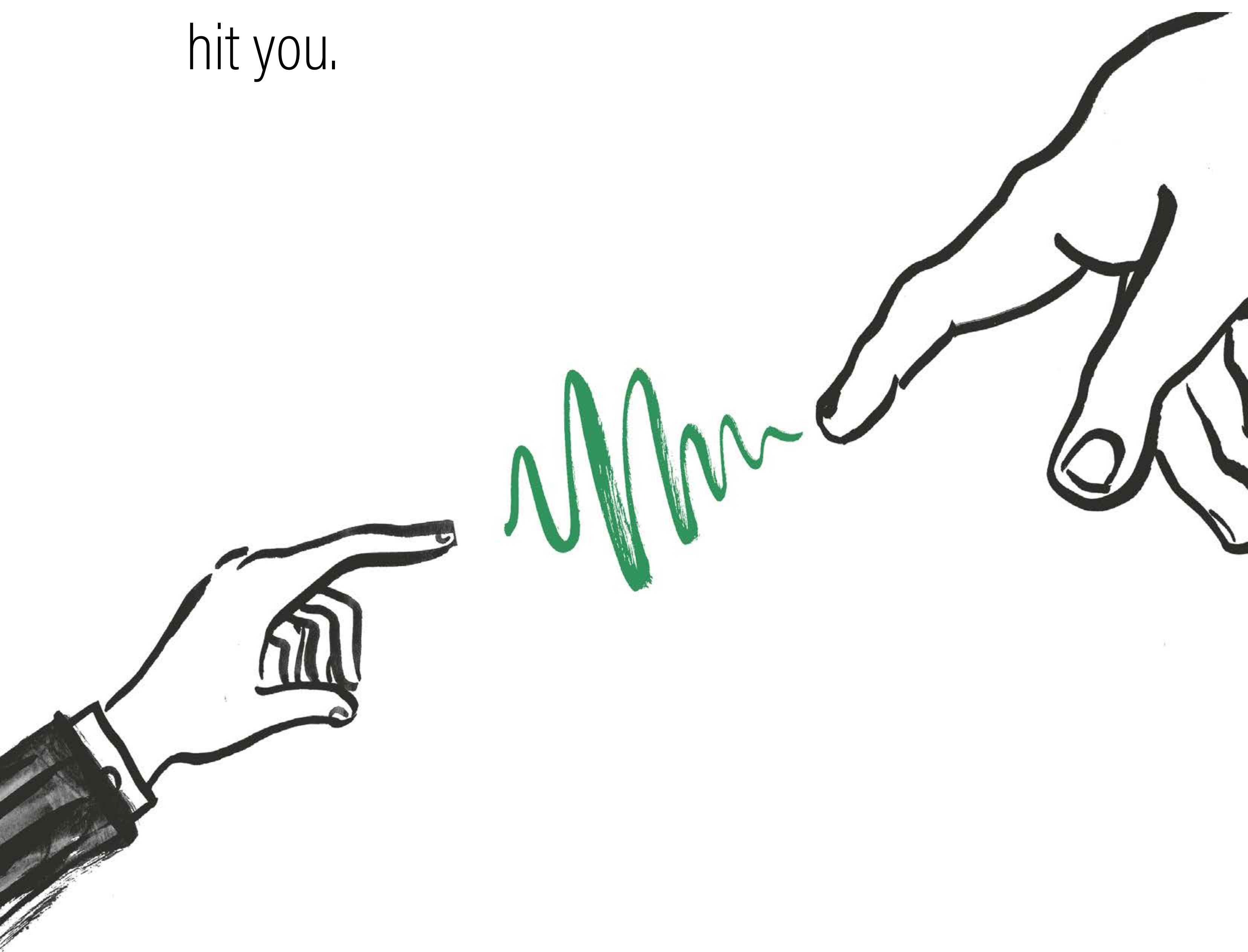


Rehearsing in situ is valuable. If it's not possible, rehearse in a setting that will be similar. Identify the best place to position yourself to 'command' the stage and your audience, generally standing – unless it is invasive or threatening.



Practice your movement onto the stage and off. TED Talks excel at stage presence, keeping visuals as an occasional dramatic aid, leaving the speaker as hero.

In the theatre, the term 'serious play' is sometimes used in rehearsal. You've got to take it seriously but having fun as you rehearse is just as important. Be serious about being playful! Playing with your text and actions as you rehearse will help you loosen up and discover new things in a safe environment before the nerves hit you.



“The whole thing about rehearsal is discovery.”

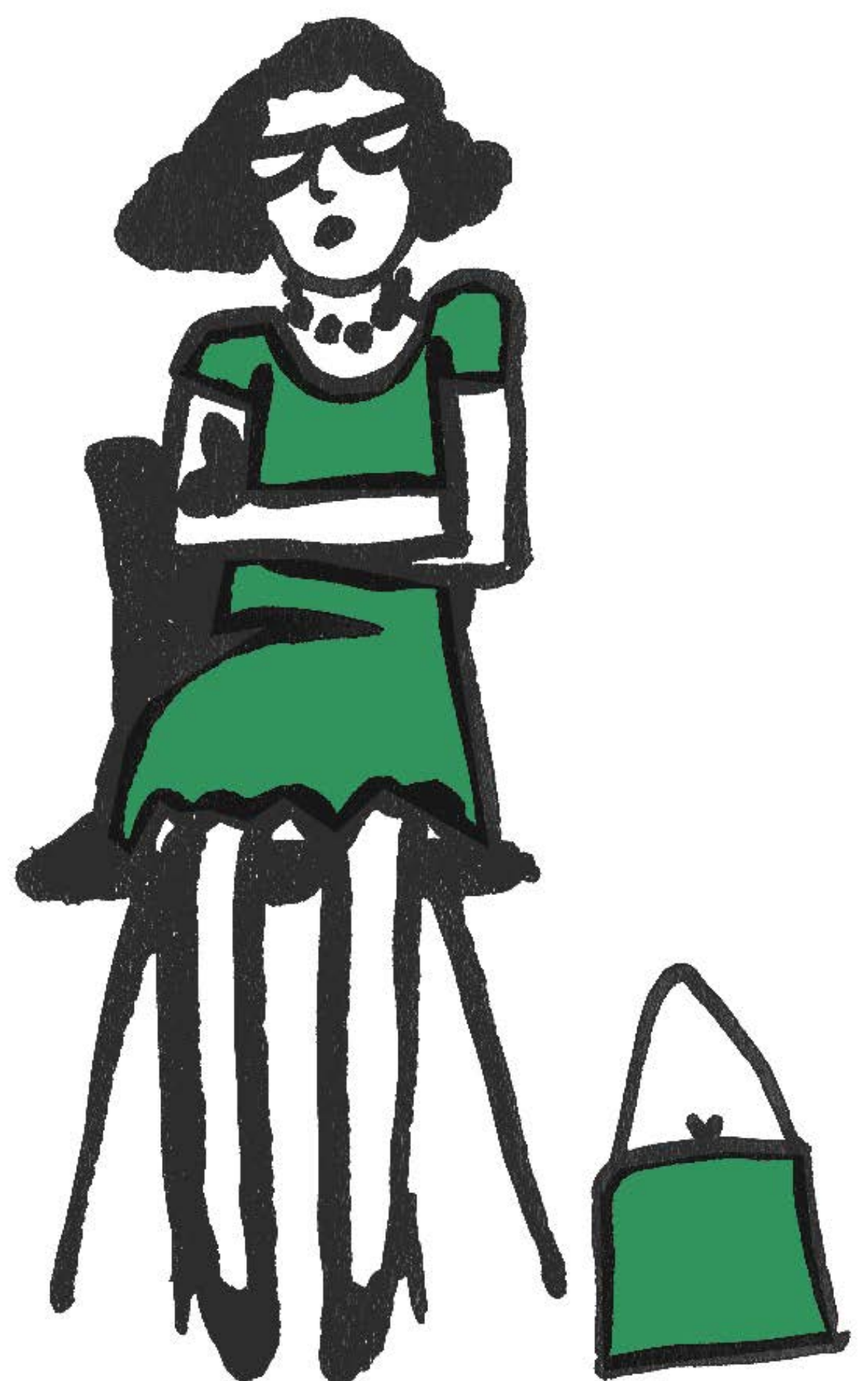
ROBERT DE NIRO


REHEARSAL TO SOMEONE

It's only when you rehearse to someone that you can get a sense of how you're coming across to an audience. Your 'rehearser' should not be there to challenge your content, which should have been decided on in advance. Their role is to critique your performance, your delivery.



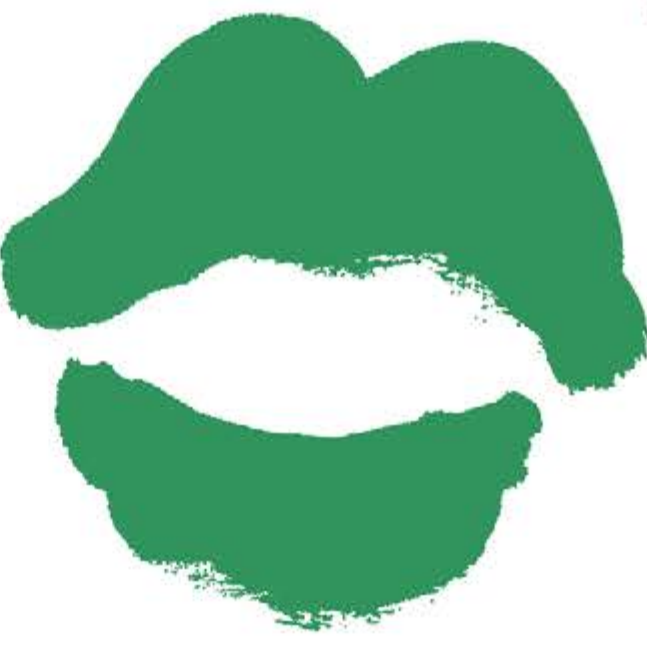
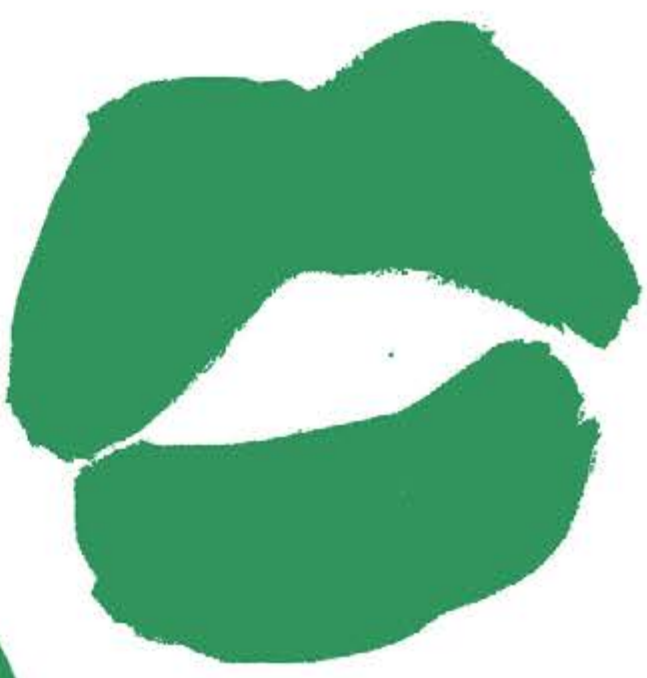
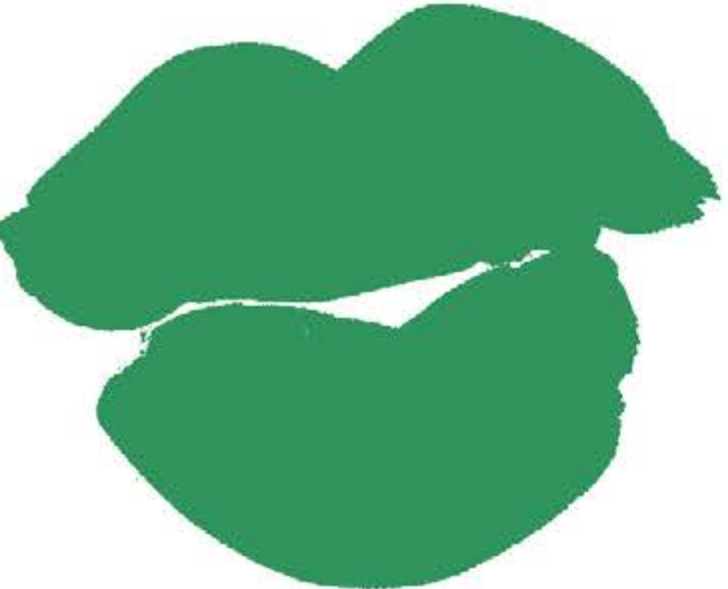
Ask for initial feedback or overall response.

How did you come across?






At ease? Likeable? Confident?
Persuasive? Passionate?

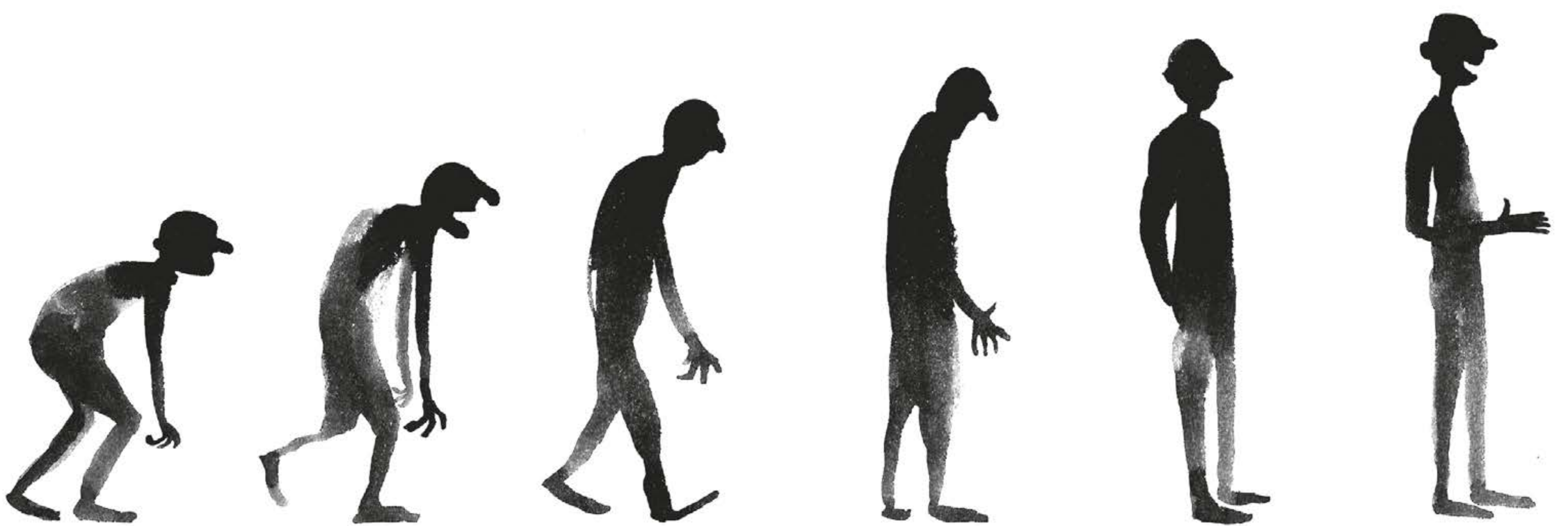


Any constructive comments? Be careful not to allow too much negative comment. A productive, positive, constructive rehearsal environment will always bring out the best results. Focus the feedback by asking for comment on specific 'delivery' aspects.

Was your voice pitched at the right level and the right pace? Was it clear, enthusiastic conversation not relentless proclamation? Did you talk with, not at, the audience?



How good was the first impression? Did the first impression raise the audience's expectations? Any easy welcoming remarks? Did I smile? Was I rushing? Was I unrushed, allowing audience to 'meet' me and feel comfortable with me?



Were you looking at, engaging with, your audience? Or were you reading and looking down while speaking, effectively dismissing them? If you are unable to memorise, practice using 'signpost' notes, glancing down but only speak when looking up.



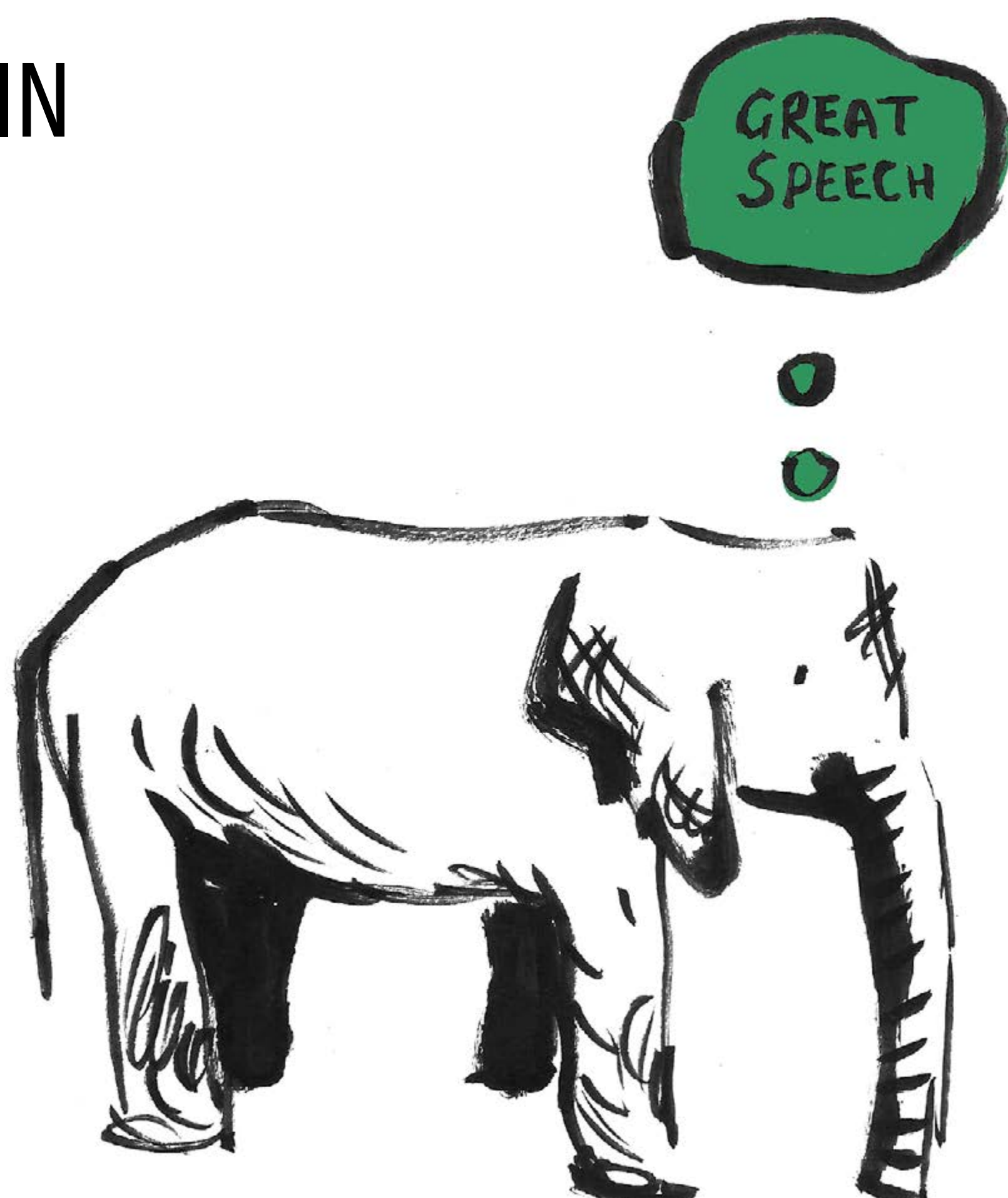
Did you pause enough..... Pause for emphasis..... Pause to let audience catch up..... Pause to change pace..... to introduce new thought..... to appear confident? Rehearsal is the best way to practice the.....

Pause.

Pitches happen in the pauses.

“The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause.”

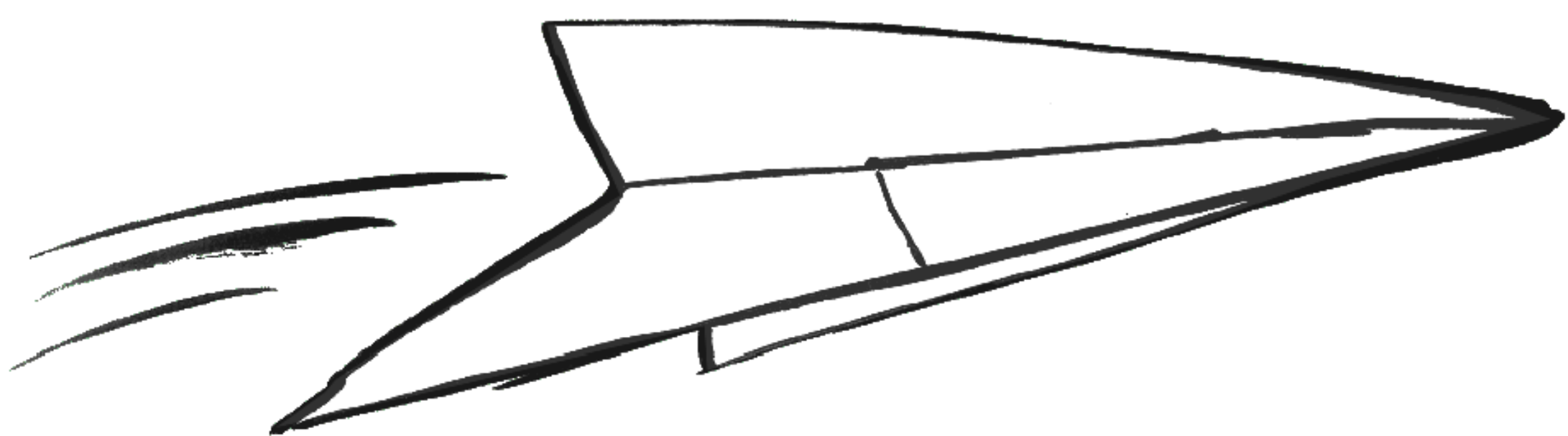
MARK TWAIN

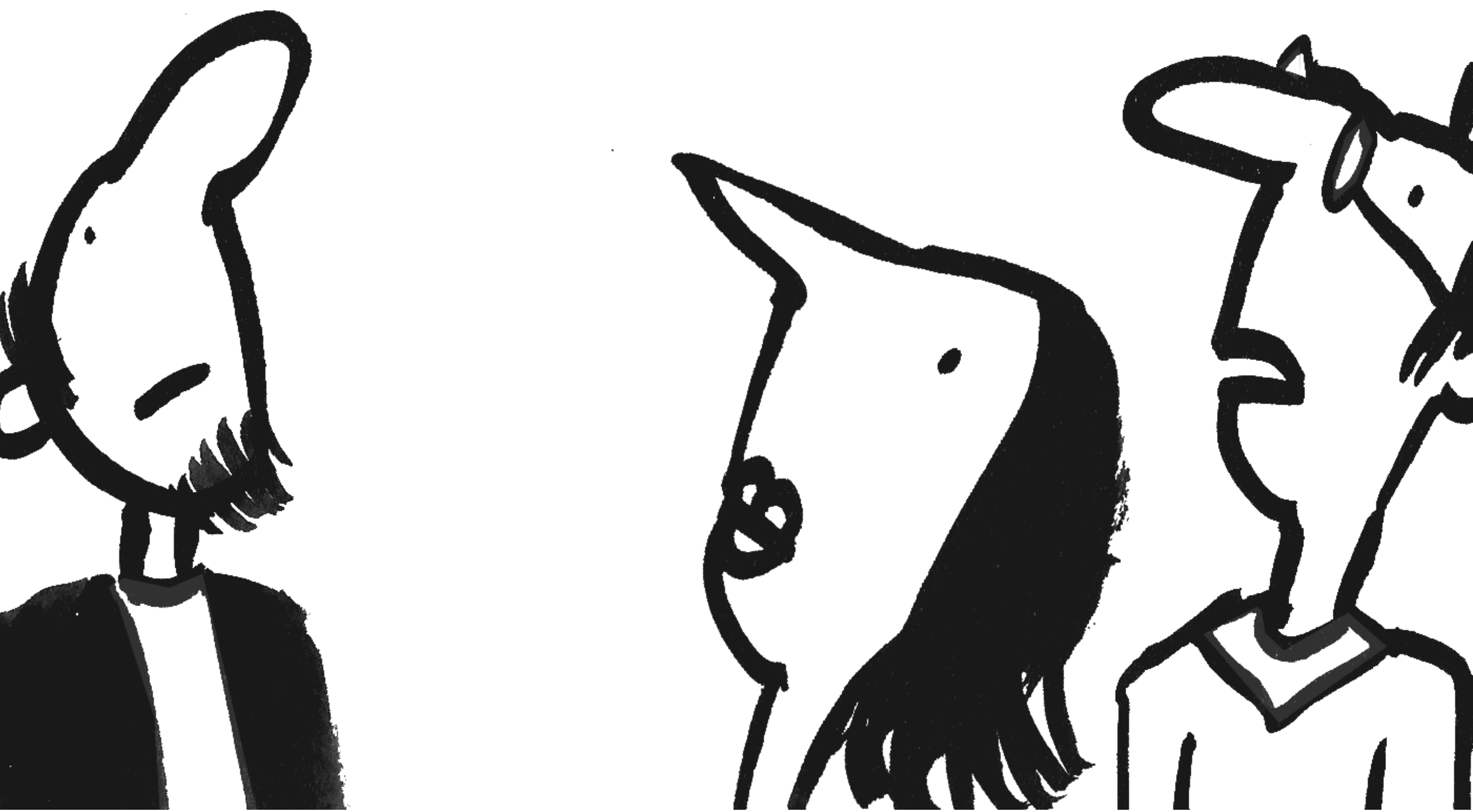


REHEARSAL WITH VISUAL AIDS

It's only through rehearsal that you can check that your carefully crafted created charts, slick slides, moving graphics, digitalised data or video materials are doing the job intended. That is to aid the presenters, not replace them.

The presenter's words should lead the visuals, not follow them. A common mistake is to create the slides/charts before drafting the message. This contributes to poor and confusing delivery.

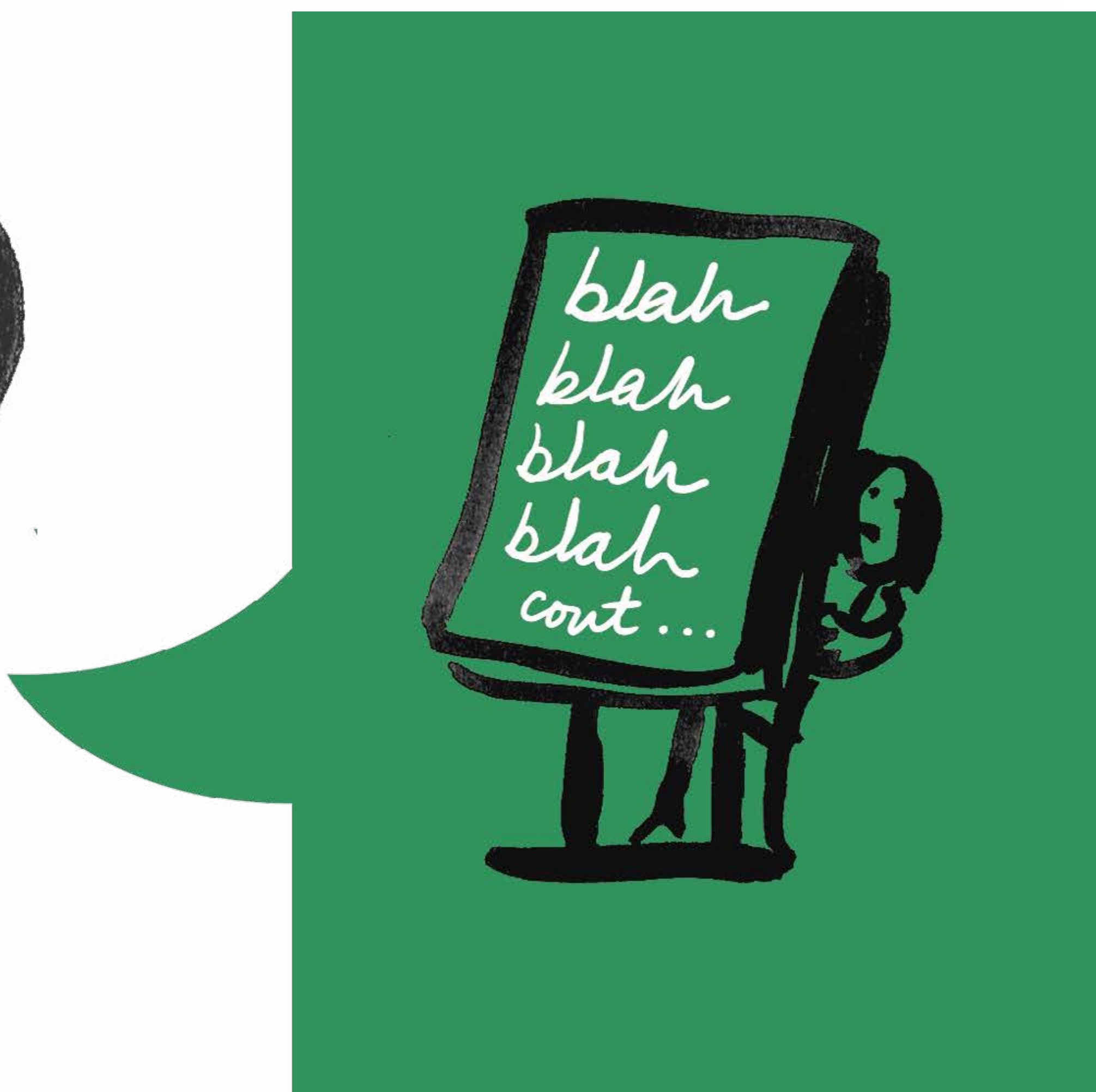




Complicated visuals, that look great in a document when readers have time to understand them, need careful rehearsal to ensure that they are communicating something.

You don't want so much going on that the audience doesn't know where to look. They need direction. Your actions and body language should be saying: now look at me and listen to me, now look at the visual, now look at this image in the centre of the visual, okay back to me, now let's get on with the story.

Rehearsal of the transition between visuals is also important. Ideally having finished slide or chart A, pause over a 'blank' before moving to slide/ chart B. Separate the messages and 'Sell the chart before you show the chart.' The charts maybe dramatic but they will not move the audience. The presenter must be the hero.



"Talk from the heart, not the chart!"

ELIZA PARKER

REHEARSAL AS A TEAM

Members of the team can be rehearsed separately, recognising there will be varying levels of experience and confidence.

Typically, the first team rehearsal is the run-through, too often the only one. It is the time to check on practical details, timings, handovers, technology, 'choreography', and individual contributions.



Dress Rehearsals are all about performance. Preferably with an experienced rehearser who can assess the overall performance.

Was it likeable? Confident? Persuasive? Passionate?



Did the team come across as liking each other? The way the team introduce themselves, and interact, at the start is key to the vital first impression.

Was every team member engaged, listening intently to the current presenter?

Was strong leadership evident? The pitch leader will be under extra scrutiny, so the

other pitchers need to show their support and enthusiasm by focusing their attention on the leader and being present and available if they are called upon.

Did the team exude energy? It's infectious and is felt by the audience.

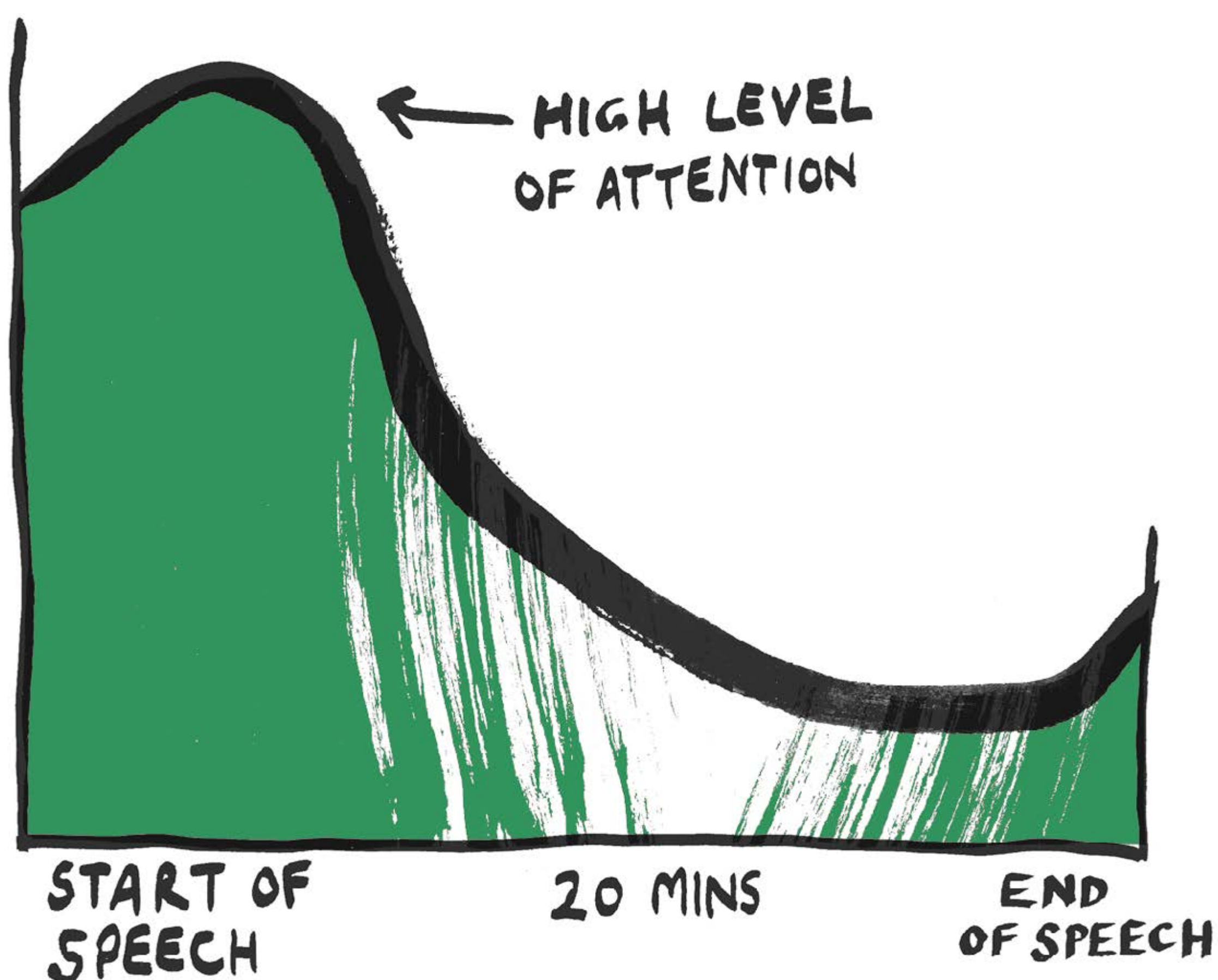
“Energy. It’s 75% of the job. If you haven’t got it, be nice.”

PAUL ARDEN



REHEARSAL ON ZOOM

Virtual performance calls for the same rehearsal principles and practice while recognising the essential difference. Your connection with your audience, despite the stream of technical advances, is 'remote.' Normal eye contact, that we take for granted in two-way conversation, is not as possible. This can lead to one way proclamation, talking at, not with.



For both the presenter and audience, virtual meeting is hard work, attention drops quickly.

Rehearsal on Zoom to your virtual 'rehearser' audience is essential to counter the inherent problems. From the first awkward moment of 'joining the meeting' to the equally awkward conclusion, rehearsal is needed to improve the 'way you come across.'

Where meetings involve several participating presenters, the Zoom rehearsal can check the various on-screen appearances. It can avoid the typical array of distracting faces, differently lit, in different backgrounds. First impressions matter. Preparation to eliminate technical issues should be mandatory.

The restricted possibilities of Zoom, however, can encourage you to think of interesting ways of getting through to and entertaining your audience. Get creative with the way you open your speech or presentation.



Everyone loves a story. They are memorable and, told well, will capture the attention of any audience, live or remote. They work on stage; they work in the dark; they work on Zoom! To tell them well, rehearse. To bring people together, and make the experience more connected, rehearse a quick interactive exercise. For example:

'It would be great to get to know you all so let's jump straight into a bit of a game. Can I have everyone who likes sweet food more than savoury food, give me a thumbs up! (They do, you take note.) Can I have everyone who prefers cold weather to hot weather give me a thumbs up (They do, acknowledge answers). How about, everyone who just can't wait to be on holiday? Everyone! Well, that's something we can all agree on!'

Whatever you do, remember that Zoom presentations are often tiring so you need to try and light up your audience and offer something unexpected as soon as you can. And as always, prepare.

"I try to prepare for everything beyond the extent of preparation."

TAYLOR SWIFT

REHEARSAL FOR INTERVIEW, Q 'n A

You may have prepared for every possible question, but rehearsal in front of an audience is still invaluable. Brief your rehearser on anticipated question areas but let them word it their own way. Let them surprise you. Then, rehearse your answers.

Did you listen, really listen to the question as it was asked, not as anticipated?
Listening makes for powerful communication.

Were you ready to answer the unexpected question?

Did you reply succinctly, resisting the urge to go on, and on?

Were you at ease and conversational, not talking at them?

Did you pause to reflect, rather than rush to reply?

And remember, the interviewer is 'listening' to your expression and body language as well. The more rehearsed you are, the more confident you will appear to your inquisitors.



Most importantly, the more you have rehearsed your questions and answers, the more comfortable you will feel to listen to the questions, consider them, and respond clearly in the real thing.

“When people see your personality come out, they feel so good, like they actually know you.”

USAIN BOLT



REHEARSAL 'YOU AT YOUR BEST'

In the hour or so before you step onto your stage, re-reading your notes, re-checking visual aids is unlikely to up your performance but will probably add to nervousness. Ideally you won't need to because you will be prepared and ready.

Use the time as a final warm-up, like an athlete before a race. Visit the space you will be presenting in if you can. Spend some time grounding yourself or doing something physical to reduce tension.

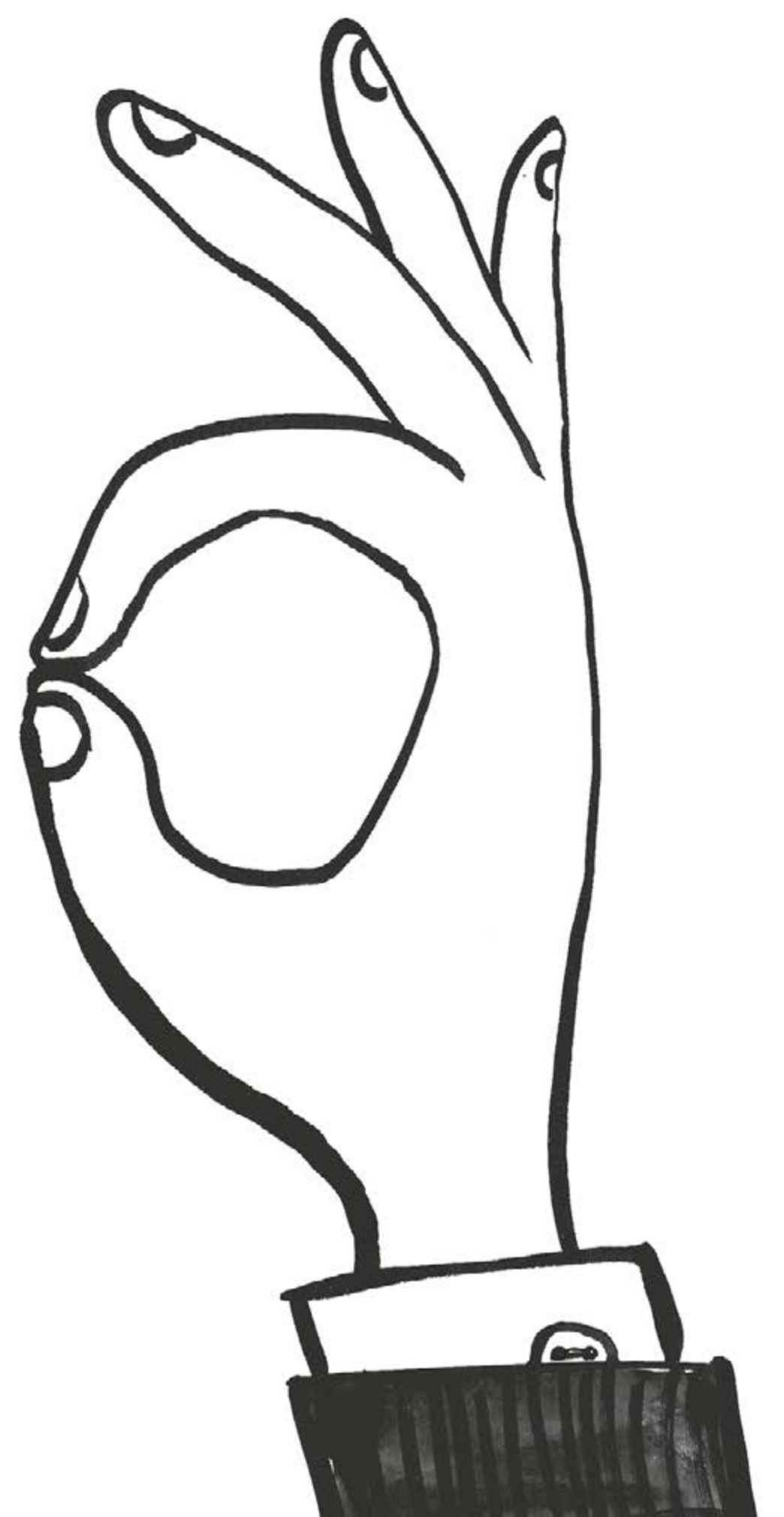


Get in your zone through your breathing. Sit or stand comfortably, breathing deep down in your belly, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe in for 5 seconds, hold for 5, breathe out for 5 seconds or so. (For more, Caroline Goyder, *Find Your Voice*) Listening to music, especially inspirational music, also helps.

Find the routine that works for you. Clear your mind, go for a brisk walk, 'walking tall to stand tall'. Try the 'power posing' (see Amy Cuddy, *'fake it till you become it'* TED Talk) punching the air violently, shouting 'I am the greatest!'

"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

OSCAR WILDE



REHEARSAL ENCORE

“I would not hesitate to assert that a mediocre speech supported by all the power of delivery will be more impressive than the best speech unaccompanied by such power.”

QUINTILIAN, *INSTITUTES OF ORATORY*



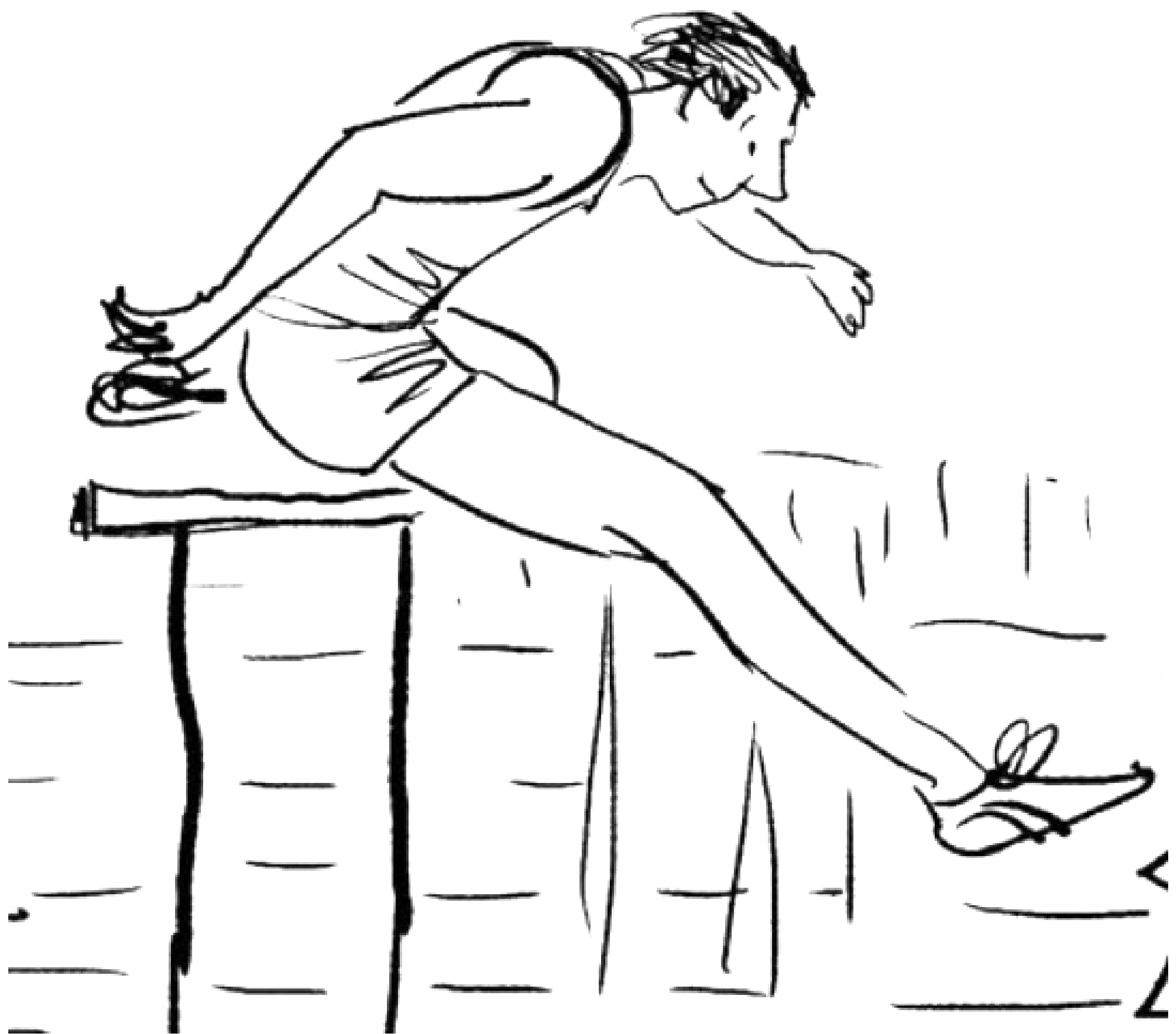
A bit about Michael Parker

I know from experience the very real value of rehearsal. In my advertising career, I took part in over 1000 pitches, some well rehearsed, others less so, some not at all. The rehearsed had a better win rate!

However before I was an adman, I was an athlete. Daily sessions of repetition training for technique, speed, strength, endurance, were a given. Without them, acceptable performance was not possible.

I came to understand that exceptional performance was grounded in the security of rehearsal, freeing me to delight in the the challenge of competition. I became a better performer, when the chips were down, and competed at two Olympics.

I was later intrigued to discover that in Ancient Greece, athletic instruction was used to create rhetorical training based on rhythm, repetition and response. Demosthenes would have been a great high hurdler.



Some acknowledgements:

Sam Leith, *You Talkin' to Me?* Caroline Goyder, *Gravitas*

Debra Hawhee, *Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*

Amy Cuddy, *Presence* and Imogen Sage, actor. And Quintilian

This guide is a companion to my book *It's Not What You Say, It's the Way You Say It!*

Illustration Jessica Salt.
Design Jennifer Kyte.



