

Orchestral Speech: A technique for when you really need to be fluent

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The Stammering Self-Empowerment Programme www.stammeringresearch.org

Introduction

If you are a person who stutters, you will know that there are times when you really need to be fluent. Despite all that we are taught about the importance of non-avoidance – of not avoiding blocks when they arise – there are nevertheless times when it really is important not to block. For example, speaking situations crop up from time to time in which we need to be able to get a message across quickly and efficiently. If we fail to do so, we may miss an important window of opportunity, or we may fail to avert a serious accident. Also, an increasing number of companies use speech-recognition software to process their telephone calls. If you block, the software will not recognize your words. At such times, block modification techniques do not help. Orchestral Speech is for times like these.

Essentially, Orchestral Speech is a fluency-enhancing technique that prevents you from getting stuck and prevents you from producing any overt symptoms of stuttering. It fits into the broader category of “fluency shaping” techniques and, as such, has much in common with some of the more traditional fluency-shaping techniques such as “syllable-timed speech” and “prolonged speech”, and indeed, it also has much in common with singing.

Orchestral Speech emphatically will not help us overcome the iceberg of secondary symptoms that stutterers accumulate. And, because it does not help us overcome the fear of stuttering or blocking, it does not reduce the tendency to block in the future. So, although Orchestral Speech is effective in the short-term, it is not a long-term solution to stuttering and should not be thought of as such. I think it is important to emphasize this fact because, in my experience, clients are often tempted to start to employ it as their primary technique and, as a result, they never learn to employ the block-modification techniques (such as “the jump”) which really would have the long-term effect of reducing their fear of stuttering and reducing stuttering itself. So, I’m sounding a note of caution here. Orchestral Speech (and other related fluency-shaping techniques) are highly valuable – and indeed necessary in some situations. But, they can become a serious hindrance to your long-term progress if you use them too often.

How to employ Orchestral Speech

In order to employ Orchestral Speech, it is best to formulate what you want to say before you say it. The reason for this is because, when using orchestral speech, your focus of attention needs to be primarily on the rhythm and flow of the words you are saying, and it is easier to pay attention strongly to the rhythm and flow of a phrase if you do not have to simultaneously attend to formulating its contents. Orchestral Speech is essentially like reciting poetry.

Orchestral speech works best when uttering short phrases. It is harder to use with single syllable utterances (I'll say more about this later) and it is harder if an utterance contains a lot of words. If you have a lot to say, it is best to break the utterance up into manageable chunks and alternate between formulating and speaking. Ideally, each chunk should contain a maximum of five or six words. The key thing is that each chunk of utterance is short enough for you to be able to remember all of the words it contains. Otherwise you may find yourself forgetting and needing to reformulate some of the words as you go along, and that may cause you to lose track of your intended rhythm.

So...

1. Decide what you are going to say.
2. Decide exactly what rhythm and speed you are going to say it with, and then
3. Say it with the planned rhythm and speed.

Don't worry if some sounds or words don't come out as intended. Just keep to your planned rhythm and make sure you maintain the forward flow as planned. The best analogy for this is to speak as though you are playing an instrument in an orchestra or singing in a band. In such situations, when a player or singer makes a mistake, they simply have to keep going (Hence the name "Orchestral Speech"). With Orchestral Speech the timing and rhythm is all-important. So, when using this technique, you must maintain your planned timing and rhythm at all costs, even if it means missing out some sounds or words entirely in order to keep up. If you make a mistake, do not slow down or stop. Do not speed up either. Just keep going as if nothing has happened.

What if the listener doesn't understand?

If, when you get to the end of the chunk of words you were saying, it is clear that the listener has not understood those words, you can go back to the beginning of that chunk and say again. However, when you say it second time round, try not to change anything of your original plan. Stick to it exactly if you can – word for word and stick exactly to the rhythm and timing you originally planned – even if it doesn't seem like the best. Also, and very importantly, do not put any more effort into saying it than you did the first time. In fact, if anything, you could put a little less effort into it. If you feel like the listener couldn't hear you, resist the temptation to speak more loudly. Simply get a bit closer to the listener or, if possible, find a way of reducing the background noise.

If the listener hasn't understood you first time, the second time round, the chances of them understanding you are greatly increased, even without trying harder and without changing anything. There are several reasons for this. First of all they will be paying more attention. Secondly, they probably already heard and understood most of the words you said, so second time round they only really need to focus on the one or two words they failed to understand. Thirdly, even without making more effort, second time round the words that come out of your mouth are likely to correspond more closely to what you intended to say than they did the first time round – because you've already had some practice at saying it.

If you find that your second attempts are consistently failing because you are still blocking, you can reduce the likelihood of blocking even further by adopting syllable-timed speech for the second attempt; in other words, by saying the chunk at a consistent rate of one syllable per beat.

*How can I use **Orchestral Speech** for single syllable utterances?*

Many of our utterances just consist of a single syllable or word. Obviously, this is a bit problematic for any method that focuses on rhythm or flow, so these single syllable utterances need a special approach. The secret is to decide exactly the moment when you are going to speak, and then speak (or try to speak) the word at exactly that moment. I've found the best approach (and one that effectively establishes a rhythm for me to adhere to) is to count down inside my head first. So, for example, if I'm on the phone speaking to speech recognition software and the word I need to say is "Paul", I will count, "3,2,1" inside my head (in inner speech) and then on the fourth beat, I will say "Paul". Again, for it to work, the important thing is to focus entirely on the timing and not to try too hard or put too much effort into it. If it doesn't work, don't be tempted to just try to say "Paul" again, go right back to the beginning of the counting and try again... 3,2,1,Paul.

An alternative, although I would recommend only adopting this approach occasionally, is to imbed the single-syllable word into a larger utterance. So, for example I could say "my name is Paul". Doing so enables one to establish a rhythm out loud, and can be particularly helpful where there is a need to attract the listener's attention and thus increase the likelihood that he will understand. I have found it helped sometimes when my initial attempt at just saying "Paul" failed. However, use this approach sparingly and be careful not to get into the habit of adding extra words. Of course, you can't do this when speaking your name into speech-recognition software.

How does **Orchestral Speech work?**

To answer this question it is useful to consider **Orchestral Speech** together with some other closely-related fluency-shaping methods such as "Syllable-timed speech" (speaking in time to a metronome); Choral speech (speaking together with a group of others); Shadowing (repeating immediately what somebody else has just said); and Singing.

***Orchestral Speech** changes your focus of attention*

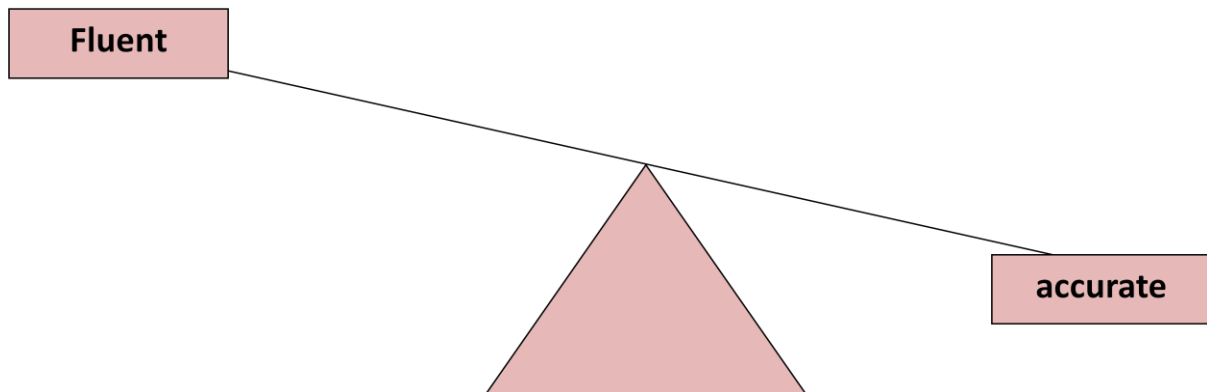
Essentially, what the above mentioned fluency-shaping methods all have in common is that they make you give higher priority to the flow of speech than to its phonetic accuracy. This change of priorities is all-important because, as a general rule, people tend only to stutter when they are concerned that what they are about to say may not sound good enough or accurate enough. This concern triggers a physiological response that, for one reason or another, makes it harder to initiate articulation of the particular sounds they are concerned about¹.

The fluency – accuracy trade-off

An easy way to understand how **Orchestral Speech** works is in terms of the "Fluency – Accuracy Trade-off". Essentially, because the speech production mechanisms of people who stutter are slightly error-prone, we have a tendency to focus strongly on avoiding potential speech errors, especially in situations where we consider it important to speak accurately. However, the stronger our focus on speech accuracy is, the less fluent we are. So, effectively, we have a choice... we can either give priority to maintaining the forward flow (i.e. the fluency) of what we want to say, or we

¹ There are a number of possible explanations for why concern over speech accuracy may lead to the production of stuttered disfluencies. Two of the most recent theories are Vasić & Wijnen's "[Vicious Circle Hypothesis](#)" and Brocklehurst, Lickley & Corley's "[Variable Release Threshold Hypothesis](#)". A [free video](#) explaining the Variable Release Threshold Hypothesis is also available for download.

can give priority to its accuracy but we can't prioritize both simultaneously. If we give priority to fluency we may make more speech errors and the sounds that come out might not coincide with exactly what we intended, whereas if we give priority to making sure all the sounds are accurate we will be more disfluent. When using *Orchestral Speech*, effectively we are opting for fluency above accuracy.



Challenging two underlying beliefs

The fact that people who stutter habitually focus more strongly on the accuracy of what they are trying to say rather than just on maintaining the flow probably reflects an ingrained underlying belief that “If I only focus on maintaining the forward flow, my speech will not come out accurately enough for people to understand me”. In fact, this belief is often wrong. However, it is extremely tenacious. This belief is usually also accompanied by another false belief... “If I try as hard as I can to speak as accurately as possible, people will understand me better”. In fact, the harder we try to speak accurately, the more disfluent we are likely to become and the more difficult it will be for people to understand us. So, in order to employ *Orchestral Speech*, we need to take the risk, ignore our underlying beliefs (and our intuitive feelings) and just focus on maintaining the forward flow of speech and see what happens.

What if *Orchestral Speech* does not work even after two attempts?

Of course, when we employ *Orchestral Speech*, people sometimes won't understand us, even after a couple of attempts at an utterance. This is especially likely to happen in situations where our words do not come out as accurately as intended and where there are simply not enough contextual cues to help listeners correctly guess what we intended to say. If after a couple of attempts *Orchestral Speech* does not enable the listener to understand, then it is best to resort to a different approach. In such situations it is important to be pragmatic, and often the best option is simply to write down the word or words that have been misunderstood and show them to the listener. Or, if it has happened during a telephone call, you may need to get a friend to say it for you. This may feel like failure, and in a way it is, but it is nevertheless better than resorting to using force to try to push the words out. Importantly, because you have tried (a couple of times) and failed, you have not avoided the situation. In such situations it is useful to consider that even normally-fluent speakers sometimes find themselves in similar situations, for example, when abroad on holiday in a country where people do not speak the same language. If a normally-fluent speaker asks someone for something and that person doesn't understand, after a couple of tries, the most sensible option is to write it

down, or to show the person the text on a mobile phone. And, of course, occasionally, whatever you do, the listener simply won't understand. It's important to recognize that communication failure is a common outcome even for people who do not stutter. Often listeners can't or simply don't want to understand. Being overly idealistic in such situations does not help.

The Limitations of Orchestral Speech

As emphasized at the start of this article, Orchestral Speech is only a symptomatic remedy. Although, most of the time, it will work when you employ it; it does not have a long-term effect of reducing your stutter or reducing the iceberg behind the stutter. So, as soon as you stop using it, you will find yourself stuttering again. Also, Orchestral Speech works better in some situations than in others. It works very well for anything that is pre-formulated. So, for example, it is extremely easy to employ when reading aloud, or when reciting something you have already learned. It can also work well when giving talks and it is very good for getting you started off when you first begin a conversation. Indeed, it is especially useful for starting off telephone conversations. Because, by helping you get the first few words out, it enables the receiver on the other end to know that you are a genuine caller and not a heavy breathing prankster or whatever.

In face-to-face conversational settings Orchestral Speech is most useful when first starting off. It will get you through the first chunk of your utterance. If you then continue to use it for subsequent chunks, your speech will contain abnormal pauses and will sound unnatural. This is because Orchestral Speech only really works well if you pre-formulate each chunk that you intend to say before you begin. And, of course, if you have to pre-formulate everything you want to say, you will find it a significant burden and will soon get fed up of doing it². Conversely, if you try to use orchestral speech "on the fly" – formulating and speaking simultaneously – it probably won't be very reliable and you will find yourself getting increasingly stressed. I do not advocate doing this.

Another reason – and ultimately a more important one – for not using Orchestral Speech as your main technique, and for restricting its use to the beginnings of conversations and for situations where you really need to be fluent, is because at the end of the day, Orchestral Speech, in common with any fluency-shaping technique, is essentially increasing your avoidance of stuttering. One-side effect of this, especially if you find you can use it very successfully, is that it can cause the iceberg to grow. So, despite enabling you to speak fluently when you need to, it does nothing to reduce your fear of blocking and your fear of people's negative responses to your blocking. To reduce and ultimately eliminate such fears, you need a reliable block modification technique such as [The Jump](#).



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² This is one of the drawbacks with some related techniques that also involve pre-formulation, such as the costal breathing technique used by Starfish and Mcguire Programmes.