

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

By Paul Brocklehurst PhD. (Revised edition May 2023)

The Stammering Self-Empowerment Programme www.stammeringresearch.org/

Introduction

If you are a person who stammers, 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 and where we need to be able to get a message across quickly and fluently. 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 stammering. 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 alone will not enable you to overcome the fear of blocking. So, although Orchestral Speech is effective in the short-term, if used in isolation it is not a long-term solution to stammering 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 only 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 blocking and reducing stammering itself. So, I’m sounding a note of caution here. Orchestral Speech (and other 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 rely on them exclusively and use them too often.

How does Orchestral Speech work?

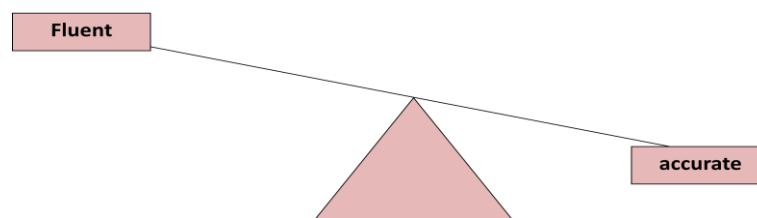
To answer this question, it is useful to consider Orchestral Speech together with some other closely related fluency-shaping methods such as “Syllable-timed speech” (speaking in time to a metronome); Choral speech (speaking together with a group of others); Shadowing (a language-learning technique that involves 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 forward flow of speech than to the phonetic accuracy of each sound. This change of priorities is all-important because, as a general rule, people tend only to stammer when they are concerned that what they are about to say may not come out in the way they want it to come out, and it may not sound good enough or clear enough for the listener to understand. 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 stammer are slightly error-prone, when we try to speak, the sounds that come out of our mouths do not always correspond exactly to the sounds we intend to say – even when we are not actually stammering. Because of this, we have a tendency to focus too strongly on the sounds we are making while we speak and on avoiding potential speech errors, especially in situations where we consider it important to speak clearly and accurately. The problem with this is that, the more we focus on pronouncing each word correctly, the less fluent our speech becomes. Because our language and speech production systems are error-prone, if we try too hard to avoid or eliminate our speech errors, our speech inevitably becomes dysfluent. So, effectively we have to make a choice... we can either give priority to maintaining the forward flow (i.e., the fluency) of what we want to say -in which case our speech will contain somewhat more speech-errors than that of normally fluent speakers, or otherwise we can give priority to speaking accurately – i.e., to pronouncing each word correctly, in which case our speech will be relatively dysfluent (compared to that of normally-fluent speakers). Of course, it would be nice if we could speak both fluently and accurately just like non-stammerers can, but because of the underlying weaknesses in our language and speech production systems, this is generally not an option. The unavoidable reality is that if we give priority to fluency, we will tend to 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 each word comes out exactly in the way we want, we will be more disfluent. Most of the time, most people who stutter focus more strongly on pronouncing each word correctly than on maintaining the forward flow of their speech. In other words, they tend to prioritise accuracy above fluency. In contrast, when using Orchestral Speech, effectively we are choosing to prioritise fluency above accuracy.



The fluency-accuracy trade-off: If we try to speak fluently our speech will come out less accurately. If we try to say each sound accurately, our speech will come out less fluently.

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”

Challenging two underlying beliefs

The fact that people who stammer habitually focus more strongly on getting their words out accurately 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, because, more often than not, when people who stammer do start focussing just on maintaining the forward flow, their listeners generally understand them much better than they expected. However, this belief is nevertheless extremely tenacious. It is usually also accompanied by another false belief... “If I try as hard as I can to speak as clearly and accurately as possible, people will understand me better”. In fact, the harder we try to speak clearly and 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 prior beliefs (and our intuitive feelings) and just focus on maintaining the forward flow of speech and see what happens.

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 phrases that contain several syllables. 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 seven or eight 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 rhythm and forward flow are all-important. So, when using this technique, you must maintain your planned rhythm and forward flow 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.

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 establish a rhythm to adhere to before you try to say the word you want to say. There are many ways to do this: For example, If I want to say my name “Paul” I can tap with my fingers rhythmically four times and say the word on the fourth tap,

Tap...tap...tap... “Paul”

or I can count down three...two...one inside my head and then say the word out loud at the “zero” moment,

three...two...one... “Paul”

The technique I personally find easiest of all is to take a short in-breath prior to saying the word I want to say – and then *say the word on the out-breath*. (this is essentially the method taught in McGuire Program)

Inbreath... “Paul”

A variation on this method which allows you to create a stronger rhythm is to take a couple of short breaths before saying the word “Paul on the second outbreath.

inbreath...outbreath...inbreath... “Paul”

An alternative method is to embed the single-syllable word into a larger utterance. So, for example I could say “my name is Paul”. Doing so enables me 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. This method can be particularly useful if the first attempt to say the word fails. However, it is important to only 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.

For these methods to work, the important thing is to focus entirely on the rhythm and speech-rate and not to put effort into pronouncing the word correctly. If the word doesn’t come out or if the listener doesn’t understand it, you can always try again, but make sure to go right back to the beginning to establish the rhythm first.

What if orchestral speech doesn’t stop you blocking?

If you find that your attempts at Orchestral Speech are consistently failing because you are still blocking too much, you probably are not adhering sufficiently closely to the planned rhythm and speed of the phrases you are trying to say. You may also still be focussing too much on trying to say individual sounds or words correctly, and worrying too much about whether or not the listener will understand what you say. If this is the case, first of all remind yourself not to worry about whether or not the individual sounds are coming out correctly and not to pay attention to what your words

sound like – and not to worry (while speaking) about whether or not your listeners will understand you (You can deal with that possibility afterwards). Then, focus entirely on maintaining the appropriate rhythm and speech-rate. Be as strict with yourself as possible.

You can reduce the likelihood of blocking even further by adopting the simplest form of orchestral speech: syllable-timed speech, whereby you say the phrases at a consistent rate of one syllable per beat. Syllable-timed speech sounds more artificial, but because the rhythm is completely simple it is much easier to employ – provided you can overcome your reluctance to speak in such an artificial way. If the thought of using syllable-timed speech in real-life speaking situations is too unattractive, then the best solution may be to first of all develop your skills while reading aloud – first using syllable-timed speech and then Orchestral Speech. First of all read to yourself, and then to other people. It is helpful to record yourself while reading, so you can check how strictly you are adhering to the rhythm and speed. It may also help, initially, to use a metronome.

What if the listener doesn't understand you?

Of course, when we employ Orchestral Speech, it is possible that sometimes people won't understand us. This is especially likely to happen when we make a lot of speech errors, and one or more important words don't come out in the way we intend. This is especially likely to pose a problem with words (especially names) that are not commonly used (or that are not in our native language) and in situations where there are simply not enough contextual cues to help listeners correctly guess what the word we intended to say was.

If when you get to the end of a phrase, if it is clear that the listener has not understood it, go back to the beginning of that phrase and say it again, *in its entirety* (avoid going back and repeating individual sounds or words). When you say it the 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 speech-rate you originally planned – even if it doesn't seem like the best. Avoid the temptation to put any more effort in to 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. If necessary, get a bit closer to the listener or, if possible, find a way of reducing the background noise.

On your second attempt, the chances of your listeners 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 after a couple of attempts, Orchestral Speech does not result in the listener understanding what you are trying to say, then it is best to stop and resort instead to a different approach. In such situations it is important to be pragmatic and to feel free to use any means that are available –

provided they do not traumatize you.² It is useful to remind yourself of what normally-fluent speakers do when they find themselves in similar situations, for example, when on holiday in a country where people do not speak the same language. Often the best options are to rephrase what you are trying to say, using different words; to use gestures and point where appropriate; or 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 call back later, get someone else to make the call for you, or resort to texting instead. Of course, it is disheartening when this happens, but importantly, because you have tried (more than once) to get the message across using Orchestral Speech and it hasn't worked, you have not avoided the situation, so you will not have reinforced the tendency to avoid.

At the end of the day, it's important to recognize that communication failure is also a common outcome even for people who do not stammer. Often, despite our best efforts, listeners can't understand us – and that's OK. Being overly idealistic in such situations does not help.

The Limitations of Orchestral Speech

As emphasized at the start of this article, it's important to remember that Orchestral Speech is only a symptomatic remedy. Although most of the time, it will work when you employ it; in the long-term it probably will not significantly reduce your tendency to block or the fear of blocking. So, when you stop using it, you will most likely find that the blocks and other stammering symptoms will return.

Also, Orchestral Speech works better in some situations than in others. It works very well for speech 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.

However, in conversational settings, although Orchestral Speech is useful when first starting off, if you then continue to use it for subsequent phrases, you are likely to find that it takes too much cognitive effort to continue to employ effectively.³ Because of this, you may struggle to keep up with the conversation, especially if the content matter is complex.

Orchestral speech works best of all if you have also learned how to employ the Jump. Then, if for some reason or other, while using Orchestral Speech, you lose the sense of rhythm and find yourself blocking, you can use the Jump to get restarted. Moreover, if you are already proficient at using the Jump, then it becomes easier to employ Orchestral Speech in real-life conversational situations without needing to pre-formulate all your phrases in advance. Thus, with the Jump as a back-up, it is indeed possible to use orchestral speech “on the fly”– formulating and speaking simultaneously.

² To avoid the risk of being traumatized it is important not to resort to ways of speaking that involve the use of extreme force or that result in secondary symptoms that are likely to elicit negative responses and/or rejection from your listeners.

³ This is also one of the drawbacks of some related techniques that also require pre-formulation, such as the fluency shaping technique used by Starfish and Mcguire Programmes.

You can use this combination of the two techniques in conversational situations where you want to minimize any likelihood of blocking.

However, do bear in mind that ultimately, it is not a good idea to use Orchestral Speech any more than you really need to, and it's not a good idea to adopt it as your only technique. It is better to restrict its use to the beginnings of conversations and for situations where you really need to be fluent. If over-used, Orchestral Speech may increase your tendency to avoid and to fear blocks, and it will not reduce your fear of listeners' negative responses to your blocking. To reduce and ultimately eliminate such fears, you need to allow yourself to block and then use a reliable block modification technique such as [The Jump](#) to get yourself restarted.



Orchestral Speech: A technique for when you really need to be fluent, by [P. H. Brocklehurst](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be obtained on request. For details, see www.stammeringresearch.org/copyright.htm.