Chapter 1
Gravitas

Joan came to me three years ago in a state of complete distress. She had an important position as a thought leader in her field and had been asked some time ago to present at a major conference.

This was an important occasion for her. It represented the culmination of years of work and demonstrated how she was now being appreciated by her community. She felt pressure to showcase her thinking and leverage her success, while at the same time being humble—all the while delivering a presentation that would leave the audience captivated and motivated.

Unfortunately, when she walked out on stage to deliver her presentation, she saw the audience and froze. She was struck with a tremendous case of performance anxiety.

After mumbling a few words, sweating, losing all the moisture in her mouth and fumbling, she left the stage. No one knew what to say. No one wanted to speak to her. She went home and her journey with performance anxiety began … until we met.

Today, after our work together on communication and gravitas, Joan speaks to thousands internationally. She is a key thought leader in her field, and she is seen and heard as such. She is able to lead with gravitas — and if it works for Joan, it can work for you.

Understanding how to lead with gravitas begins with understanding what gravitas is, and how it works together with the terms *oratory* (the art or practice of speaking in public) and *rhetoric* (the art or practice of persuasive speech or writing).

Our modern understanding of these ideas has changed significantly from the way they were originally understood by the ancient Romans and Greeks, and I believe that we have much to learn from them. By investigating this ancient understanding we can learn not only how to better understand gravitas, but also how to implement it in our lives and our work.

Oratory, Gravitas and Rhetoric

Entering the world of corporate communications, I quickly realised that I needed to rediscover the skills of communication from a fresh perspective. Ultimately, I found this perspective through the learnings of the philosophers and orators of ancient Rome and Greece. But diving into the communication styles of the ancient world was like diving into a can of worms — confusing, wriggly and hard to pin down!

From my opera background, I knew that our modern way of communicating — particularly in relation to being able to communicate with gravitas — was simply not working well. But I believed that what we were missing had already been discovered and that it had existed in ancient Greece and Rome. Somehow, it had become lost — and I believe that we need to bring this back into our modern-day communications. My task is to unearth these skills and redefine

the possibilities. And to do that we need to first clarify what we mean by oratory, rhetoric and gravitas.

Understanding Oratory

'Oratory' means the art or practice of speaking in public. While the permutations and combinations of methods of public speaking are endless, we have come to associate oratory today with effective and skilful public speaking, but the story of what we understand oratory to be begins with the ancient Greeks.

The first Greek-speaking tribes entered Greece during the late Bronze Age, around 1800 BCE.[1] The practice known as oratory began with these tribes and went on to flourish during the late 400s and the 300s BCE.[2]

One of the earliest Greek orators was Lysias (445–380 BCE, approximately). As well as being an orator himself, he was highly sought after as a speechmaker. He was well known for delivering speeches that were simple and direct, and the speeches he created for others — particularly those who were defending themselves in courts (or in the court of public opinion) — were brilliantly tailored to the person delivering the speech, helping to make them appear more likeable and their message more persuasive. With the reference to speech 'delivery', I found what I believe has been missing from our current understanding of gravitas and communicating with gravitas. The evolution of my understanding of gravitas began to take shape.

As opposed to the simple style of Lysias, the great orator Demosthenes (384–322 BCE) was known for his grand, stately style. Another famous Greek orator, Aeschines (389–314 BCE), favoured speeches that contained vivid descriptions rather than relying on persuasive logic.

In ancient Greece, orators' speeches were often compared to theatrical performances. Excellent orators wouldn't just say the words; they would use gestures, body movements and, of course, the stage itself to deliver their words to the audience and enhance the speech's message. This hints at the incredible breadth of opportunity to express one's individual style when speaking or communicating, an element that was embraced by these early orators.

As global power moved from ancient Greece to ancient Rome, most Roman citizens would eventually need to call upon these public speaking skills — either during public meetings or when taking part in court cases. So the educational focus was designed to produce skilled orators who could deliver speeches before the people, in the courts and even before the Roman Senate.

Students of oratory would learn how to select the subject matter for their speeches and how to compose the speech itself, particularly how to influence their audience. They were taught to utilise both logic and emotion to draw the listeners to their own side. Students of rhetoric and oratory learned how to select appropriate subjects for their speeches and how to influence their listeners by appealing to their sense of logic and to their emotions.[3] They also learned other subjects — like literature, mythology, philosophy, geography and even music — to support their future orations.[4]

Students were also taught different styles of speechmaking — which could be simple and direct or grandiose and overblown — and the best time to use those different styles. They were taught memory devices they could use when delivering long speeches to help them remember their main points. They also studied various techniques to create effective speeches, including gestures and dramatic uses of the voice.[5]

This educational focus created generations of skilled orators who could argue before the law courts, before the Senate and before the people as a whole. Trust and respect were key, confidence was essential to oratory success, and it all came from years of devoted study and ongoing practice.

The rise and fall of oratory

Anciently, oratory had broader connotations than effective and skilful public speaking. The point of oratory was to deal with ignorance, bring about like-mindedness and motivate action.[6] Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher, scientist and intellectual, defined three types of oratory:

1. **Judicial oratory.** Courtroom speeches that primarily focused on describing and opining on past events.

2. **Deliberative oratory.** A public debate or discussion about the best course of action to take on any given subject. In this case, orators would attempt to convince listeners to come round to their way of thinking or to align with their opinion.

3. **Epideictic oratory.** Also known as 'display speeches', orators delivered these speeches primarily to show off their skills. They were typically centred around praising or blaming someone—perhaps easy topics to create a strong display of oratory, as they allowed for the opportunity to raise passions and encourage identification (whether towards the positive or away from the negative). Funeral orations were also considered a type of epideictic oratory.[7]

So why did oratory lose favour in around 300 CE? I believe there are several reasons.

1. EMPERORS GAINED ABSOLUTE POWER

Over time, oratory began to lose its power in the ancient world. In Rome it was still important, but primarily as a form of entertainment in social occasions, rather than as a method of public discourse. One reason for this was that during the Roman Empire, emperors gained absolute power, so oratory was no longer required (or accepted) as a political tool.

Still, ancient Roman orators remained models of excellence, and students continued to study the great speeches and speechmakers as models of the power of language.

2. DOCUMENTATION WAS SCANT OR LOST

Much of the work around the physical elements of oration has been lost. While we think of Aristotle as a great reference, this is only partly true. His influence was more in the area of the canon of 'arrangement', leaving the discussion of delivery to other experts, whose works did not survive from the time. And Aristotle never claimed to be a source of all elements of rhetoric, with some claiming he was even dismissive of delivery,[8] considering it vulgar and important only because of 'the corruption of the hearer'. (I cover the five canons of rhetoric, including arrangement and delivery, later in this chapter.)

The truth, however, is that Aristotle considered delivery 'of the greatest importance,'[9] but without the works of others to fill the gaps, this has left us in the dark, in terms of understanding how to use oratory today.

We do have some works from the ancients remaining. The most fulsome and helpful for us in modern times is Marcus Fabius Quintilianus's *Institutio Oratoria*.[10] Colloquially known as 'Quintilian' (35–96 CE), he was a Roman educator and well-known persuasive speaker, and this book continues to be our most useful source on the nonverbal elements of oratory.

Quintilian noted that gestures could convey meaning without words. He believed they constituted an entire language that an orator must master and could use to supplement his control of words.[11] He delved into that world more deeply than any other ancient work that remains with us today.

A few other works remain as well, and their attitude is best exemplified by an anecdote that Cicero, Quintilian and nearly every other commentator on oratory repeated concerning Demosthenes, the greatest Greek orator. When asked to list the three most important elements of oratory, Demosthenes replied that delivery was the single most important element of great oratory (effectively, his response was 'delivery, delivery, delivery'!).[12]

While much of the ancients' work in this area has been lost, the subject of nonverbal oratory has also not then been addressed by any modern rhetorical treatise. There is much discussion around Roman rhetoric in general, but the detail is never explored—for example, even in the 700 pages of the bestselling leadership and communications treatise *The Articulate Executive*, only 20 pages are devoted to delivery methodologies, such as gestures, voice and body movements.[13] This hardly reflects the emphasis or importance spoken about by Demosthenes.

3. CHRISTIANITY MOVED IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION

One of the tenets of being a follower of Christ was the requirement to speak honestly and plainly. In his book *On Christian Doctrine*, Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) says, 'Eloquent speakers give pleasure, wise ones salvation.'[14]

During research for my PhD, I visited church leaders to discuss their oratory skills. Almost without exception those leaders told me that there was no conscious programme, but instead they were 'channelled by God'. I know God is good, but it might be asking a

lot of God to be so attentive every time a pastor stands to speak. It is my contention that many of the skills religious leaders demonstrate are actually skills of oratory embodied thousands of years hence and, over the years, passed down from generation to generation through watching and experiencing the skills of the past generations. In other words, they may not 'study' oratory, but they learn how to persuade and emotively engage through the same skills that the ancients would have used, which are taught to them in the seminary or from more senior leaders. But maybe that's just me being the sceptic!

Anciently, the Christians denounced oratory as a field of study—instead implying that they relied solely on God to speak through them—and as they soon held sway over the education of the masses, this meant that oratory fell out of favour.[15] The rise of Christianity didn't spell the end of rhetoric and oratory completely; however, it did move the study and focus of both areas from the political (or secular) world and into the religious world with the closing of the Platonic (secular) schools in around 529 BCE.[16]

Those interested in the role of rhetoric were no longer focused on winning court cases or persuading an audience to their own political ends. Instead, they were concerned with winning over the souls of the listeners to Christianity through preaching, sermons and letter writing.[17]

Around 1000 BCE, teaching and learning moved into cathedral schools (designed almost exclusively for the children of wealthy families who were often being prepared for a life in the church).[18] Because of the Crusades, ancient texts started to be rediscovered, which led to the revival of the liberal arts, including what was known as the 'Trivium' (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the 'Quadrivium' (arithmetic, mathematics, astronomy and geometry).[19]

The 13th century saw the rise of Catholic-funded universities. These institutions began to gather and compile the ancient texts

and study them in an effort to improve their preaching and religious communications. And while this was a departure from the way rhetoric was used by the ancients, it did serve the important purpose of preserving those texts for our use today.

4. THE MODES OF DELIVERY CHANGED

Mark Wollacott, a writer and expert in humanities and language with a fascination for the wisdom of the ancients, defines the focus on rhetoric as opposed to oratory. He says, 'Both oratory and rhetoric are deeply connected. This is because, in older times, oratory was the only means of delivering rhetoric.'[20]

Ancient orators didn't have the widespread dissemination of information that we have today. They had to use the systems of the time — which were public orations delivered to the people directly.

But over time this began to change. The first Roman postal service was established in 14 CE. Moveable type was invented by the Chinese around 1041, which allowed for the widespread printing of books for mass distribution. And around 1605, a German publisher, Johann Carolus, printed and distributed the world's first newspaper.[21]

People today can publish their thoughts in newspapers or books, and they can spread their ideas via radio spots, on television and through digital means, such as articles, podcasts or even on social media. Because of this ability to reach out to our audience in a myriad of ways, the belief that we need the skills of public orators has waned and almost disappeared. And we've been left the worse off for it.

Understanding Rhetoric

As we have seen, today the lines between what is rhetoric and what is not have become blurred. Aristotle, our primary source for the

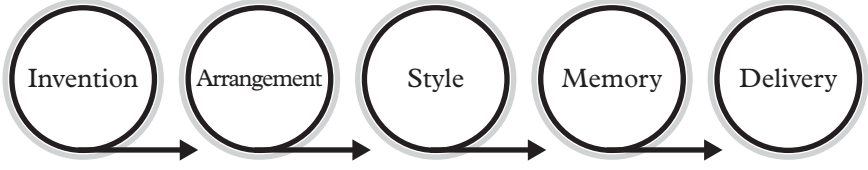
canons of rhetoric, focused on his areas of expertise, leaving us wanting in the area of delivery (which though important, as we'll see, wasn't where Aristotle himself focused his energy). But when we look at the broader picture and see how the ancients really understood (and delivered!) rhetoric and oratory, we can learn so much that can lead us towards better communication (and communicating with gravitas!). So what can we find?

Aristotle defined 'rhetoric' as speech or writing that is intended to persuade people to agree with their way of thinking. As oratory was, in Aristotle's time, the only means of performing rhetoric, it shared the same persuasive purpose.[22] And traditionally, an orator would master all the canons of rhetoric in order to become an effective public speaker.

Aristotle developed the basics of a system of rhetoric — the five canons of rhetoric. These five elements — invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery[23] — 'thereafter served as the touchstone' of the discipline of rhetoric[24] and have influenced how we've communicated, and studied communication, from ancient through to modern times.

The five canons of rhetoric

The five canons of rhetoric as identified by Aristotle are invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. Often these are called the five 'canons' or 'pillars' of rhetoric.



While Aristotle names these the five canons of rhetoric, I believe they can be considered to be the five skills of attaining gravitas.

SKILL 1: INVENTION

Invention is the process of coming up with the material that you're going to use in your speech. It includes naming and developing your message, as well as the factors that make it true or plausible so that you can make a convincing case to the audience. Many people think of this as the brainstorming stage of rhetoric because that is certainly part of the skill of invention.

An example of this in practice is the process of mind mapping. To prepare a speech, you might sit down with paper and start diagramming thoughts, words, concepts, ideas and any other items around a central subject or message. There's no strong organisation here. Using a non-linear layout, the person will end up building in bubbles, frameworks and themes that start to turn into a colourful ideas map that aligns with how your brain and thoughts naturally work.

In the work I do with leaders, the area of 'invention' is generally believed to be a given. So often people sit before me and explain that they know their topic and have no issue with finding material to draw from, which renders the skill of invention as unnecessary. In other words, they think that they know everything there is to know.

On the other hand, I take it as a given all leaders and experts experience the continual need to update their knowledge.

> *For without the consciousness of such preliminary study, our powers of speaking extempore will give us nothing but an empty flow of words, springing from the lips and not from the brain.*[25]
>
> **— Quintilian**

Whether you feel you have enough subject matter expertise or not, it's important to continue to gain more and more. Suggested modes of improvement are to:

- read good books
- read a lot of books
- read dictionaries
- read aloud to yourself
- use your expertise daily so it remains up to date and relevant.

SKILL 2: ARRANGEMENT

The arrangement is essentially the structure of the oration. This skill involves organising your arguments to give sense and order to your message. A clear and logical arrangement allows you to deliver a coherent oration that your listeners can easily follow and understand.

Arranging your oration generally involves creating an outline that sets out the order in which you'll deliver your major points. You'll typically start with introducing your subject, then move onto the points that support your thesis. Ensuring that these points make logical sense and that they also transition smoothly is one of the most important aspects of your arrangement.

Elements I see as critical in arrangements today are:

- **The notion of three.**[26] Known in ancient times as *'omne trium perfectum'*—or 'everything that is three is perfect', this tenet can inform the arrangement of your messages. For example, the national motto of France is liberty, equality,

and fraternity. So, if you were a French politician, you might develop a speech around these three central ideas.

- **The three proofs for the inventor.** These 'proofs' are ethos, pathos and logos (authority, emotion and logic). When delivering any presentation or speech, you'll use ethos (authority) to establish your credibility, pathos (emotions) to engage with your audience and logos (logic) to authenticate your message.

- **The three questions.** Considering these three essential questions helps give everyone the comfort to move on knowing who (both you and them) is in the room and what you're all trying to achieve. Psychologically, these points need to be handled for the audience to feel rapport.

    a. **Who am I?** This gets to the heart of what kind of expert you are, and where your strengths lie. For example, if you're a team leader in the aerospace field, you might have expertise in your field, but also have experience in team dynamics. Both of these are strengths you can focus on in your presentation.

    For example: 'For those who do not know me, my expertise is in the area of aerospace with experience in team dynamics.'

    b. **Who are they?** This helps you to understand your audience so that you can deliver a message that speaks to their needs. For example, if you're delivering to your team you might engage differently than if you're delivering a speech to a large group of industry professionals.

For example: 'It is an honour to be here with such an esteemed group of experts in your field, who have travelled from all areas of the country to be here for your annual conference.'

c. **What am I trying to tell them?** This helps you to clarify the main point of the message that you're looking to communicate. If your goal is to help your immediate team collaborate better, understanding this will help to guide your entire presentation.

For example: 'Our purpose here today is to come together and experience the power of team collaboration.'

SKILL 3: STYLE

Style is including and adapting suitable words and sentences within your speech to suit your audience. Style also encompasses tone. You'll want to choose how professional or accessible you want to be. You'll want to consider whether you want to be direct and simple or more grandiose, and whether you want to use humour or stories (and I recommend both!).

Much of your style will depend on both your platform (are you on a stage in front of 500 people or in a team meeting of 10?) and your audience. Depending on those factors, you'll want to change up your style to best suit.

When I do breakfast television, the simplest of words are broken down by the interviewers. They know their audience and any long and seldom-used words are pulled up immediately and translated and questioned further. It drives me to drink, but at the same time I question whether I am trying to show off by wearing the cloak of

the intellectual, which impresses no one in that environment. In fact, in the end they want to laugh and learn something new. It's not about me.

In every case you need to ensure that your style doesn't overshadow or convolute your message. Steer clear of complicated ideas and jargon, or anything else that will confuse (and lose) your audience. Use metaphors and storytelling as part of your process as this aids in delivering a clear and memorable message. When someone can easily understand you, it builds credibility and therefore trust.

SKILL 4: MEMORY

Memory is the firm retention in the mind of the message, words and arrangement, and the steps that you take to recall the main points of your message. This is not about making your speech memorable to others, but about the skill of remembering the elements of your presentation overall.

We aren't generally taught the skills of memory today, and many of my clients don't know where to begin when remembering their content. Lack of sleep, stress and overwork will put pressure on your cognitive skills, so having great techniques to help you retain information is essential.

It's important to recognise that memory is not a shoebox you fill, then once it is full, no more can be put inside. Instead, memory is like a muscle. You can grow it and strengthen it over time with practice and use.

I have found that when you are memorising a speech it is best to memorise the outline of the talk rather than the talk verbatim. This allows you to hit all the main points of your message, while still permitting the freedom of natural flow and responsiveness.

SKILL 5: DELIVERY

The final canon or skill of rhetoric is delivery. In the simplest terms, delivery is the process of presenting your ideas to an audience. But, in practice, delivery involves so much more.

Delivery was known in ancient Greece and Rome as the graceful regulation of voice, countenance and gestures. In fact, Quintilian tells us, 'Delivery is by most writers called action, but it appears to derive the one name from the voice and the other from the gesture.'[27] He goes on to qualify that 'delivery in general … depends upon two things, voice and gesture, of which the one affects the eyes and the other the ears'.[28] The ancients knew that in perfecting our delivery we had to think both about our voice — how we sound and speak — and our bodies. This includes our movements and gestures, and where we hold our hands — and even how we stand. Unfortunately, though this was integral to what the ancients knew about delivery and oration, it was lost over time.

As the Cambridge-educated economist and scholar Sylvia Ann Hewlett tells us, 'Among modern scholars, oratorical delivery has been somewhat neglected as a topic of enquiry, but to the ancients it was of vital interest.'[29]

The twist

Here is where the twist begins — where oration becomes divorced from the element of delivery, and we lose the vital element that drives gravitas. Although Aristotle defined the five canons of rhetoric, he was clear that his work focused on words and language, which was separate to delivery. Without that focus — and without the work of other ancient scholars to bolster our understanding of delivery — over time, the pillars of rhetoric have become confused.

I put it to you that the 'skills of oratory' we know today combine only the pillars of arrangement and style. They sideline invention

and memory and ignore delivery (or treat delivery in the most banal way). Sylvia Ann Hewlett's observation that delivery is 'somewhat neglected' is, in fact, an understatement. Delivery has been virtually abandoned.

Evidence of this can be found in modern university programmes and the supporting literature.

In the US, the University of Utah describes its rhetoric programme as one that teaches students how 'culture and society shape what we define as "literacy".' Students who choose to study rhetoric at the U of U can 'choose courses from topics such as under-represented rhetorics, rhetorics of gender, writing popular non-fiction, professional discourse, grammar and stylistics, digital storytelling and writing as a social practice'.[30]

In Europe, the Catholic University in Leuven notes that its course in rhetoric is linked to other introductory courses, 'such as "Critical Text Analysis" in the Master of Journalism, and "Speech Analysis" in the Master in Interpreting.'[31]

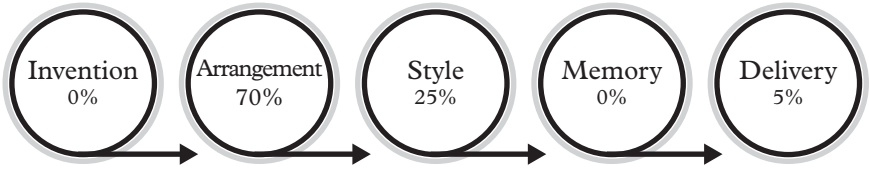
A more thorough examination of the coursework does nothing to dispel this understanding. There is no hint here of the skills of delivery or memorisation. These skills are left wanting.

Wollacott says: 'Part of what separates oratory and rhetoric is that oratory requires the speaker to have a natural skill set, including charm and charisma as well as a good voice.'[32] However, I beg to differ. I believe our current mindset on delivery is not looking through the lens of possible change when we accept Wollacott's statement about 'a natural skill set' and 'a good voice'.

As an expert in this field, I can tell you we can all have 'good' voices. We do not require a 'natural skill set'. To get to a house of international opera as a girl from what is satirically known as 'Brisvegas' was not a

result of my innate talent. The ancient Romans who worked daily on their skills were not divided out because of 'natural talent'. It is my understanding and experience, reinforced by the literature, that voice is a learned skill that must be practised and polished over time.

I suggest that of the five canons of rhetoric, which I see today as the five skills of oratory, postulated by Aristotle, the percentages attributed to each today is as follows.



However, to really embrace our ability to lead with gravitas, we have to shift these percentages closer to what the ancients originally believed. That is, we need to add much greater weight to the skill of delivery.

Re-focus on delivery

> *A poor speech accompanied by great delivery is better than a great speech accompanied by poor delivery.*[33]
>
> **— Quintilian**

One of the primary elements of our new model of communication is the focus on delivery. Think of Jacinda Ardern, a leader I believe turned the tables with her expressions of emotion and seemingly honest outpourings about events that stunned the world. Analysing Jacinda, you see that her voice of empathy is exceptional, her use of touch is world-leading and her attention to structure and message outstanding, while not appearing obvious in any way. (Please note I am not commenting on her politics, but the way she expresses herself in a leadership role.)

Similarly, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine, has astounded the world with his poise in communication under enormous stress. It is no surprise to me that Zelenskyy is a trained actor and comedian: these skills come in handy! And yes, it is still totally authentic.

The question is, how do we make our delivery interesting and also professional? The answer is not as difficult as you might think. Over many years, I have seen those who work with me on the skills of gravitas see the light of hope and go from believing that gravitas is something you either have or don't have, to something that can be learned and developed with understanding and hard work. And once they learn that they can never go back to that comatose state.

However, to make swift progress on this journey—to speed up the transition from unbelieving and unskilled speakers to believing and skilled speakers who deliver with gravitas—it is necessary to refocus on delivery, elevating it from its neglected, abandoned state to one of the most important skills of oratory overall.

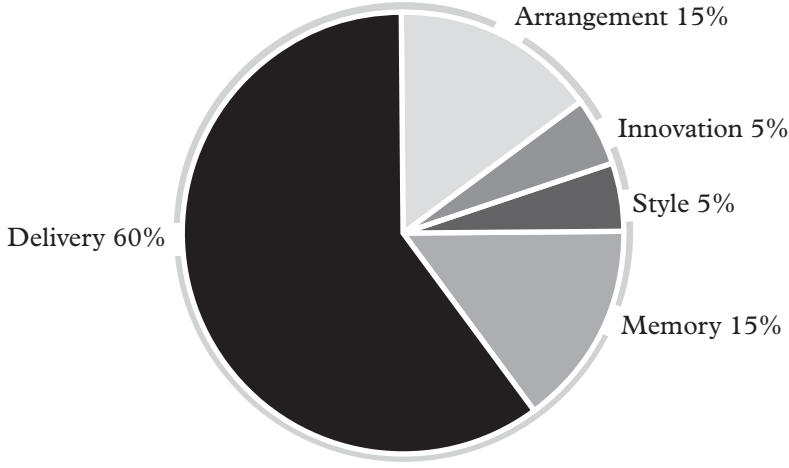
Let's return for a moment to all five canons or skills of rhetoric. Of course invention remains important. But, as leaders, emerging leaders and those who are experts in a field often tell me, their knowledge of their topic is excellent. We might need to keep perhaps a 5 per cent focus on invention in order to keep our knowledge fresh.

Arrangement also continues to be important as we need to learn the frameworks for the various scenarios we face today, such as a television interview, a conference representation, presenting your idea in the boardroom or handling a difficult situation. So, perhaps we need to allow a 15 per cent focus on arrangement.

For the other two components, style and memory, we might need to allocate 5 per cent of effort to style and considering the appropriate

language, and 15 per cent on memory. This means we can take our carefully planned words from the written form to the audience without relying on notes.

Finally, we can invest the remaining proportion of our time and energy on delivery, which really does demand about 60 per cent of our focus.



This model is influenced by the writing of Demosthenes, who, when asked about the three most important elements 'in the whole art of oratory', said that delivery is the first, second and third most important element.[34] In other words, he believed it was the single most important part of oratory.

Cicero believed delivery has the 'sole and supreme power in oratory'.[35] Further, Quintilian said: 'For my own part, I should be inclined to say that language of but moderate merit, recommended by a forcible delivery, will make more impression than the very best if it is unattended with that advantage.'[36]

It's in the delivery that we are really able to embrace the elements that allow us to be individuals that can communicate with gravitas.

Understanding Gravitas

Working through the five canons of rhetoric, one achieves gravitas—the manner of trust and respect. It encompasses all the five pillars of rhetoric—but mainly 'delivery'.

Gravitas is variously defined as 'dignity, seriousness or solemnity of manner',[37] 'high seriousness'[38] and 'seriousness and importance of manner, causing feelings of respect and trust in others'.[39] As you can see, the main thrust here is one of seriousness.

Anciently, *gravitas* was also understood to embody several complementary attributes of moral rigor and absolute commitment to the task at hand. But there is something missing in today's definition that the ancients understood.

The Romans lived by a set of virtues. These were the qualities of life to which every citizen aspired. They were at the heart of the *Via Romana*—the Roman Way—and are thought to be those qualities that gave the Roman Republic the moral strength to conquer and civilise the world.

Of those virtues, there were three foundational virtues. These were *pietas* (piety), *dignitas* (dignity) and *gravitas*. These three formed the basis for the expression of all other essential virtues, the most important of these being that beyond all else, the person must be 'good'.[40]

> *'I hold that no one can be a true orator unless he is also a good man and even if he could be, I would not have it so.'*[41]
>
> **— Quintilian**

Unfortunately, there is no contemporaneous work specifically focused on describing or examining these virtues. Modern scholars assume that these ideals were so ingrained in the culture and society of the time that formal exploration was hardly necessary.[42]

As part of this trio of foundational virtues that called for a public persona — and in this case, the ancient Romans meant a male persona — that would be serious, dignified and proper within the perimeters defined by society, gravitas was considered absolutely essential to the task of retaining a proper place in the community. Without qualities such as a depth of personality and weighty judgement (which were understood to be fundamental to the virtue of gravitas), a male would often slip to a slightly less desirable position in society, which in turn would adversely impact the standing of his children within the community.

(This constant reference to the male of the species, of course, begs the question as to whether the whole topic is relevant for women. Spoiler alert: the answer is yes!)

A balanced approach

While we associate gravitas today with weight and seriousness, this was never the only intention of the ancient Romans. In fact, during the Roman period they spoke of it as being a balance between weight and levity. This consisted of humour, humility and wit. Perhaps the swing occurred in 1687, when Isaac Newton described gravity as a one-way weighty force. Perhaps not, but somehow we did lose the part of gravitas that embraced levity.

Today, our understanding of 'communication' is limited by our modern definition of communication and our understanding of the foundation term of gravitas. And this confusion has minimised the art of communication.

We have also lost our focus on teaching communication (and therefore, lost our ability to easily harness the elements of gravitas). Here in Australia, we have two schools alone (Curtin and ANU) that study the art of speaking. Focusing on frameworks in the school of journalism, ANU says their education introduces students to the structuring of arguments, and the framing and communication of issues on behalf of government, industry, non-government organisations and individuals.[43]

And we've also incorrectly associated gravitas with some of the most heinous individuals in our history, such as Adolf Hitler, cult leaders and charlatan politicians. We have lost the important notion of 'good' as being part of gravitas. But the skills of gravitas are those that we, as 'good people', must recognise and learn, so that we ourselves can influence others for the better and stop allowing those who may have poor intentions to be the only ones to enjoy this skill.

Is gravitas learnable?

Diagrammatically, I see gravitas as an aura-like factor that exudes from a speaker. We might think of this today as the 'x-factor'. But, unlike the connotations of singing competitions and reality TV, for us the x-factor is not an undefinable skill that comes from innate talent. Instead, gravitas is an absolutely learnable skill that we can all incorporate—men and women, leaders and emerging leaders—be that in business, at rotary events or school meetings.

While Mark Wollacott's musings may imply that gravitas is not learnable, Rebecca Newton, renowned organisational psychologist,

on the other hand, believes just the opposite.[44] Like me, she believes that gravitas is learnable and claims that to do so you simply need to:

1. Be clear with yourself about what you want.

2. Be open to feedback.

3. Create time for broader conversations.

While agreeing with Rebecca Newton on gravitas's attainability, I have a strong belief that gravitas involves curating a set of tangible delivery skills that have little to do with 'being open' or 'creating time'. I will be exploring these skills of change in this book.

Summary

In summary, gravitas is the feeling that you evoke that creates respect and trust—for anyone, anywhere and at any time. From my experiences developing the manner of gravitas during my career as a singer, I have come to respect that for anyone communicating with the spoken word, one could not be better guided than to follow the five canons of rhetoric as laid out by Aristotle, and explored further by Quintilian, Cicero and others.

However, we cannot be led astray by the modern-day development of our understanding of rhetoric through university courses as a tool for studying writing. Instead, we need to focus on rhetoric that goes back to the original definition of delivery between individuals one-on-one or to crowds of people. It is delivery that requires the human body and voice to appear and be heard. It is rhetoric where Aristotle's canon of 'delivery' takes centre stage, reinstates gestures, vocal tone and posture, and begins again to build the skills of memory.

This is how we convey confidence, engender trust and demonstrate that vital, day-to-day and, importantly, *leadership* trait of gravitas. It's also what gives us the confidence we need to overcome any performance anxiety.

A New York think tank reported that 67 per cent of senior executives surveyed saw gravitas as the core characteristic of executive presence (which was described as 'the ability to present yourself in a way that signals to the world that you are leadership material').[45] We need gravitas in our political leaders, and we need gravitas in every person who wants to be seen and heard to shape the world for whatever purpose holds value to them.

In other words, to become an effective and inspirational individual in today's world, you must be able to grasp and maintain the element of gravitas. If you're wondering where you can go to learn, you've come to the right place.