

Learning & Memorising Ritual

One of the problems that most often plagues our enjoyment of Masonry is poor ritual. This, don't just mean getting the words wrong -- this means ritual that is drab and uninspiring, which fails to actually *teach* a candidate. Ritual is often mediocre, and it doesn't have to be; anyone can do ritual well, provided he knows a little about acting.

It isn't hard, actually; it's mostly a matter of knowing how to do it, **plus a lot of practice**. This leaflet is intended to impart some guidelines on how to do Good Ritual. It doesn't demand a lot of time, or any particular talent, just a little drive and the will to do well. Read it and play with it. With some practice, you should be able to use these techniques to good effect in your Lodge. The leaflet is mainly aimed at dealing with the longer pieces of ritual but much of it is also relevant to the shorter pieces so will be of use to any Brother who has a part to play in a Ceremony.

This information has been put together from advice received from experienced Ritualists, pointers found in books and bits and pieces found on the internet. It is hoped that it might be useful to share this information around so that it might be of help to those Brethren who struggle with committing the Ritual to memory.

1: Figure out the Words

The first step of learning any ritual is to know what you're saying! This should be obvious, but is often overlooked, because brethren are afraid to admit that they don't already know the right words. Don't be afraid to admit your own limits – no-one gets every single word right every single time.

If you can, start out by listening to someone delivering the relevant piece of Ritual, preferably several times. You would be surprised if you knew how many Brethren listen to the Ritual but do not hear what is being said! (You should be doing this the entire previous year, listening to your predecessor.) Listen carefully, and make sure you understand what's being said; ask questions if you don't. (After lodge, of course.)

Next, go through your Ritual book carefully, and see how much you can read. Mark words that you do not understand, or that you're unsure of -- this is the point to catch any mistakes you may be making. Then call or get together with an experienced Ritualist or a reliable Past Master, and talk through it, reading out of the book slowly. Have him correct any mistakes, and fill in the words you don't know. Take notes (preferably somewhere other than in the book), because you will forget the corrections as soon as you're on your own.

2: Understand the Speech

This step gets overlooked even more often than the previous one. Read through the ritual a couple of times, and make sure you really grasp it. Don't just know the words -- know what it's talking about. Find out who the characters being talked about are. Again, ask questions. Many Brethren are able to deliver a piece of ritual almost word perfectly, without a prompt and receive murmurs of approval at its conclusion. Whether that approval is for not receiving a prompt or for delivering the Ritual in a meaningful manner is sometimes debateable.

Now, start trying to understand the speech structurally. Any ritual is made up of components, separate pieces that are linked together. For example, a section may be talking about symbols, with three paragraphs per symbol: concrete meaning, abstract meaning, and purpose. Figure out what these pieces are -- you'll use them later. The explanations of the Working Tools are great for understanding this.

The next step is especially useful for long speeches -visualize the speech. Any speech can be thought of in terms of movements, places, rooms, stuff like that. Words are hard to remember in order; places are easy.

The Third Degree Tracing Board is a good example of this. There is the set sequence as the presenter explains each element of the Board which in turn reminds him of what is coming next.

3a: Start Out Small

This is never anyone's favourite part; anyone can do it, but no-one finds it simple. It's considerably easier if you do it right, though.

Start out by reading the speech over and over. Don't move on to the next step until you can read it from the Ritual Book quickly, without breaks or hesitation.

Read it *out loud*, when you get the chance. This step is particularly important, and skipped more often than any other. Don't skip it -- this is how you get your brain and mouth trained to the words. It may sound silly, but it really matters -- the mental pathways used to talk are distinct from those used to read.

Now, start trying to learn sentences. Just sentences. Read the first word or two of the sentence, then try to fill in the remainder from memory. Don't fret if you can't do it immediately; it will probably take at least 5 or 10 times through before you're getting most of the sentences. You'll find some that are hard -- hammer those ones over and over (but don't totally neglect the rest while you do so). Again, get to the point where you're doing reasonably well on this, before going on to the next step.

3b: Get to the Bigger Picture

Once you've got most of the sentences, try to move on to paragraphs. Again, some will be easy and some hard. Try to understand exactly why this sentence follows that one -- in most cases, the ritual does make sense. An individual paragraph is almost always trying to express a single coherent thought, in pieces; figure out what that thought is, and why all the pieces are necessary. Keep at this until you're able to get most paragraphs by glancing at the first word or two, or by thinking, "Okay, this is the description of the Square" or something like that.

Finally, start putting it all together. This is where the structural analysis in Step 2 gets important. You visualized the speech, and figured out how it hooks together; use that visualization to connect the paragraphs. Make sure you have some clue why each paragraph follows the one before. In almost every case, the next paragraph is either a) continuing this thought, or b) moving on to a related thought. In both cases, you can make memorisation much easier by understanding why it flows like that. Convince yourself that this paragraph obviously has to follow that one, and you'll never forget the order.

4: Smoothing It Out

You're now at the point where you've got pretty much all the sentences sorted out, and most of the paragraphs, and you're able to get through the whole thing only looking at the book a few times. Now, start *saying* it.

When you're driving in the car; when you're alone at home; pretty much any time you have some privacy, try saying it all out loud, at full voice. Trust me, it sounds very different when you actually say it aloud. You'll find that you stumble more, and in different places. Some words turn out to be more difficult to pronounce than you expected. Try it a few times.

Start out by trying to do this frequently -- once, even twice every day. It'll be hard at first, but it'll gradually get easier. When you're starting to feel comfortable, slow down, but don't stop. Practice it every couple of days, then every week. Don't slow down below once a week. If you feel up to it, see if you can speed up your recitation. (But do not ever speed-talk the ritual in open Lodge -- that's for memorisation and rehearsal only.)

5a: Get Your Head Right

Last part. You're now at the point where you pretty much have the ritual memorised. Now, the trick is learning how to perform it well. Very nearly everyone has some amount of stage fright; acting types often have it even worse than most. The trick to overcoming it is to control the nerves.

Now that you're comfortable reciting the ritual, observe how you do it. By now, you're not thinking about it so much; your mouth is doing almost all the work, with the conscious mind simply making a few connections between paragraphs. That is the right state to be in. Think about how that feels, and learn it.

Before you go in to "perform", do some basic acting exercises. Take a few deep breaths; concentrate on not thinking. For now, just think about being calm. Being calm is far more important than anything else. If you're calm, you're unlikely to screw up too badly; if you're tense, you're far more likely to. Do what works for you.

5b: Acting

Now the final flourish, which separates merely competent ritual from the really good stuff. Now that you're able to let your mouth do all the talking, start listening to yourself. Think about the ritual again, but don't think about the words, think about what it means. What are the important bits?

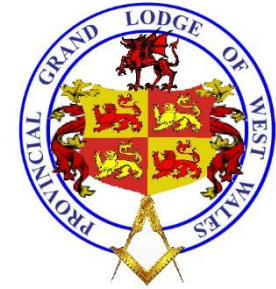
Emphasize those. How could you use your body or hands to illustrate a point? Try talking *to* the person in front of you, not just *at* them -- look them in the eye and make them get the point. You are teaching important lessons here; try to capture a little of the emotional intensity of that importance.

Think of your "performance" as a coming together of two parts. Your mouth is providing the words, your mind and heart the emotion. Again, nothing beats practice. This is what rehearsal should really be for -- taking a dummy candidate in hand, and learning how to really get the point across. Don't fret if you find that you need to change your delivery now and then -- here and there you will need to think about the words briefly, when you change paragraphs or hit a hard sentence. That won't throw you, though, so long as you keep track of what you're saying; you've already figured out why each part leads into the next, and that will guide you when you stumble.

Conclusion

Don't expect to get all this in place instantly; it takes most people a few years to really get good at it. Just try to advance yourself bit by

bit. Learn the transitions and pieces first -- if you have that, you can get through the ritual. Next time, work on memorising more thoroughly. The time after that, work on getting it really smooth. After a while, you can build up to the point where you have the luxury to act. And at that point, you will find that you start doing the kind of ritual that Masonry is meant to have -- both moving and interesting, enough so that the candidate (**who is, remember, the whole point of the ceremony**) actually *learns* from what you're saying, and what it actually means. And if you really do it well, you'll find that you come to understand the meaning of the ritual a good deal better yourself.



LEARNING AND MEMORISING MASONIC RITUAL

Ritual is the life blood of Freemasonry, and it sets us apart from all other fraternal or charitable organisations.

What follows is a series of suggested steps which will enable any Brother to become at least a competent Ritualist and at best an accomplished one.

There are, of course, other ways to master the learning required, this is just one alternative. Every Brother will find and use the method best suited to himself.

It is hoped that the following will be of use, not only to more junior Brethren, but also to those of longer standing.

This is not intended as a quick fix or magic formula, there is no real short cut to becoming a good Ritualist. It takes time, effort and, above all, dedication. Go for it!

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