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Should You Use Rhetorical Questions?

By Ron Sathoff

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Rhetorical questions are probably as old as public speaking itself. Like anything else, this technique has its uses, but can be very tiresome if used overmuch or in the wrong circumstances.

Remember that a rhetorical question is simply a question asked that doesn't require an answer from another person. So think about it, when would such a question be asked? In my opinion, there are two different times when this kind of question is asked. First, you ask it when you want the audience to THINK about the answer, but you don't need to hear those thoughts. The second time is when you are in a situation where getting an answer is impossible -- when speaking to a large, distant audience, for instance.

The problem with rhetorical questions is that they can sometimes be confusing. I've heard speeches where someone has rhetorically asked "Think about it; when was the last time you were TRULY happy?" only to have an audience member say out loud, "Yesterday!" Needless to say, the speaker was a little disoriented by this unexpected answer.

Because rhetorical questions can be hard to handle and because they have a tendency to sound stiff and formal, I recommend that you ask TRUE questions (ones that require an answer) whenever you can. This is especially true if you are in a normal speaking situation, where you can communicate back-and-forth freely with your audience.

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There are two reasons why I recommend doing this. First, it sounds much more conversational — rhetorical questions don't come up a lot in normal conversation. Second, by asking your audience actual questions and gathering the answers, you are creating a sense of participation in your speech. Your audiences will pay better attention and remember your speech more if they take an active part in it.

So, the next time you feel like saying something like "We've all had a bad meal, haven't we?" and going on without pausing, try saying "How many of you have had a truly BAD meal in the past week? Raise your hand if you have! [see how many hands go up] Wow, that's a LOT of bad food, and that's what I'm here to talk

about . . ." You'll find that, by actually communicating with your audience in this way, your message will be better received.

Ron Sathoff, manager of <http://InternetWriters.com>, offers a full range of services to business and professional speakers, including speech writing and editing, personal coaching, and presentation development. You can reach him at ron@drnunley.com or 801-328-9006.

Rhetorical Questions

By Michael LaRocca

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RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

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Here's a question I ask as an avid reader. It's rhetorical, which means you don't have to answer it. Which is convenient when you think about it, since I won't hear you. I'm not talking to you, I'm writing. The floor is all mine.

Why is it that when someone's in a fight, and someone hits them hard enough, bright lights always explode behind their eyes?

I've been clocked a time or two. Sows, boars, horses, falling objects, falling Michael, a baseball bat, a nightstick, footballs, basketballs, baseballs, kickballs, kung fu cousin, a bad neighbor, the jaws of a leaping dog. And, never has light exploded behind my eyes.

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What usually happens to me at that point of impact is sensory overload. I don't feel it when a hunk of metal pops me in the mouth hard enough to split my lip and break my dentures and send them across the room. (The dentures, not the lips.) Sensory overload. Then a couple seconds later I see the damage and think, "Dang, what happened?" But in books, it's always those darn bright lights exploding behind people's eyes.

My advice to authors, then, is this. Before you write a lot of fight scenes, ask someone to punch you a few times. No, I'm kidding. No lawsuits, please.

My real advice is, avoid the cliches. Don't say "a snowball's chance in hell," say "a broccoli's chance in Bush One's White House." It's original, see? And if you're going to write about something you know nothing about, please do a bit of research.

This isn't a rhetorical question, but rather a true story. You know how in the comic books, whenever someone gets popped, they see stars? I really did. Once. Readers of *RISING FROM THE ASHES* know who "kung fu cousin" is. Clint. The naughty

boy. My hero. He's in this story. Naturally.

One time, when I was eleven years old, four of us decided to play a game at Gramma's house. Clint, Dwayne, Barry, Michael. Whenever we got together, someone wound up losing blood, and it was always at Gramma's house.

In this game, which was safe by our standards, each of us had a different large plastic ball. We went into the bedroom, turned off all the lights, and threw them at each other. Something hit me in the eye, hard, and I saw stars. Then we turned the lights on, and I saw that I'd been hit by a kickball with stars on it.

Since there was no blood, we turned off the lights and played some more. The next day, I had a black eye. "How'd that happen?" Mom asked. "I dunno. I think I fell out of bed." She didn't believe me, but she pretended she did.

To continue on with rhetorical questions, here's another one. Who cares? Note how I ended that with a question mark. Always do that. I see this one so much that I might add it to

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"Common Writing Mistakes" one day. I don't care how many times I see it. It's still wrong. I first had this argument in 1980 with two fellow busboys. I'll never back down. I'm edumacated.

Next week's rhetorical question... When the ghosts appear in the haunted house, how come nobody ever leaves? Okay, I know, Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy have done that bit already, but my editor still busted me on that one in THE CHRONICLES OF A MADMAN. So, I changed it. The dude left the house. If it were me, I would. Wouldn't you?

Michael LaRocca's website at <http://freereads.topcities.com> was chosen by WRITER'S DIGEST as one of The 101 Best Websites For Writers in 2001 and 2002. He published two novels in 2002 and has two more scheduled for publication in 2004. He also works as an editor for an e-publisher. He teaches English at a university in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China, and publishes the free weekly newsletter Mad About Books.



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