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## **Making messages memorable: the influence of rhetorical techniques on information retention**

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## 5. Conclusion and discussion

Aristotle's time travels to observe modern rhetorical practice have almost come to an end. What would the founding father of rhetoric have learned about rhetorical techniques and their influence on audience information retention? What new insights would he take home on how messages are made memorable?

This concluding chapter brings together the various strands of the thesis. To recapitulate this thesis' main question:

*How can rhetorical techniques in speeches enhance information retention by the audience?*

This thesis followed a three-step approach to answer the main question: (1) it provided an overview of characteristic advice on influencing audience retention in public-speaking textbooks, (2) it presented an analysis of how scholars, politicians and TED speakers use a selection of the advised retention techniques linked to organisation and elaboration in their speeches and presentations in practice, and, following from these first two steps, (3) it reported the results of experiments into retention effects of three rhetorical concluding techniques in the specific context of an informative presentation: announcement of the conclusion, circle technique (referring to the introduction) and summary (recapitulation).

In this concluding chapter, the order of these three steps is reversed, in order to first present the most concrete and detailed answer to the main question. Section 5.1 discusses the retention effects of the techniques that are studied to the most detail: it shows to what extent retention has been influenced by the announcement of the conclusion, circle technique and summary in the experiments reported in chapter 4. Next, the section relates these results to the description of these three techniques in public-speaking textbooks (chapter 2) and their usage in public-speaking practice (chapter 3). From the detailed answer presented in Section 5.1, Sections 5.2 and 5.3 zoom out to present a more extensive answer. Section 5.2 shows how retention techniques are applied in public-speaking practice by scholars, politicians and TED speakers (chapter 3). It focuses on characteristics and variants of these techniques that were distinguished in the analysed presentation texts, and it reflects on how the rhetorical situation can explain the way these speakers applied retention techniques. Next, Section 5.3 characterises the retention advice that was found in the modern public-speaking textbooks that were analysed (chapter 2). Finally, Section 5.4 paints a broader picture of rhetorical retention research: it offers perspectives on the contribution of this thesis to rhetorical research and future research avenues to explore.

## **5.1 Retention effects of three rhetorical concluding techniques**

This section offers the most concrete answer to the main question. It presents the main conclusions of experiments into the retention effects of three techniques that speakers regularly apply in the conclusion of a presentation: the announcement of the conclusion, circle technique and summary.

These three concluding techniques were investigated for two main reasons. First, the conclusion is the part of the presentation that is most frequently connected to retention in public-speaking textbooks. These three techniques, particularly the summary, are regularly mentioned in textbooks as strategies to make a message memorable. Second, scholars, politicians and TED speakers applied these techniques in different ways. Scholars, who mainly aim to inform, used these three organisational concluding techniques most frequently. Still, all three types of speakers used different variants of these techniques.

This raises two questions: (1) do these techniques indeed influence the audience's information retention and (2) would variants of these techniques affect retention differently? Therefore, these three concluding techniques were selected as case studies to investigate how organisational techniques can influence the audience's information retention in an informative presentation.

Section 5.1.1 presents the main findings of the experiments. Next, Section 5.1.2 provides insight into the application of the three concluding techniques by scholars, politicians and TED speakers, and how the three techniques are linked to retention in public-speaking textbooks.

### **5.1.1 Experiments: concluding techniques can lead to increased retention**

Two experimental studies were conducted: the first experiment involved the announcement of the conclusion and circle technique, the second focused on the summary. These experiments have shown that both an announcement of the conclusion and an informative summary can increase the audience's information retention in an informative presentation. The circle technique appeared to positively influence recall of the restated information from the introduction, but not of other information mentioned in the conclusion.

Furthermore, as a side-effect, two of these techniques positively influenced the audience's appreciation: the circle technique strengthened the audience's sense of closure, while the informative summary led to higher audience appreciation of the peroration (closing statements) compared to a presentation without a summary. All in all, the case studies in this thesis suggest that these three concluding techniques can be beneficial to a speaker of an informative presentation in terms of retention and appreciation. However, the positive effect on retention and appreciation can depend on factors such as the specific variant of the technique that is used and the audience's involvement and interest in the topic of the presentation.

**Retention effect depends on technique characteristics: informative summary most effective**

The specific variant of the rhetorical technique can determine the retention effect. The experiment on the effect of the summary contained two variants: an informative summary (brief restatement of the main points' key information), and an indicative summary (recapitulation of the main points on an abstract level, not of the key information). The informative summary that was used can be characterised as a 'rhetorical summary': it was not a representative overview of the key points in the core of the presentation, but the speaker's strategic selection of main points to be recapitulated in the closing statements. This way, the speaker can influence the key information to be remembered by the audience.

In the summary experiment, the informative rhetorical summary positively influenced the audience's information retention, whereas the indicative summary did not. The inclusion of an indicative summary even had a similar effect on free recall of the concluding information as not including any summary at all. These results suggest that the selection of a specific variant of a rhetorical technique can make a difference when it comes to information retention. In the case of the summary, it was the specific variant of the informative summary that led to an increase of information retention.

**Audience's involvement in presentation topic possible factor of influence**

The audience's involvement and interest in the topic of the presentation can also influence the retention effect of a specific rhetorical technique. The study with an announcement of the conclusion and a circle technique had a 2x2 experimental design. It included two informative presentations in an educational setting (hereafter: presentation 1 and 2), each of which had two recorded versions: one version with the announcement of the conclusion and circle technique and one without these two techniques. In presentation 1, announcing the conclusion led to a significant increase in recall of new information mentioned in the concluding part of the presentation. This indicates that announcing the conclusion can increase the audience's attention level and consequently the ability to retain information. However, results for presentation 2 were less conclusive: no differences in information retention were found between the version with a combination of an announcement of the conclusion and a circle technique and the version without these two concluding techniques. A statistical power analysis suggested that a larger sample size per presentation version is recommended to detect a difference between versions.

The interest of the audience in the topic appeared to be a possible factor of influence here, as the topic of presentation 2 was more appreciated and was found more usable by subjects. If so, it suggests that the need for an attention marker is higher in a situation in which the audience does not highly value the presentation's contents and therefore is less involved. Insights from memory psychology support the idea that an increase in the level of interest and involvement in the issue at stake can determine elaboration of the message (Baddeley et al., 2009; Bruning et al., 2004; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and can nullify the additional retention effect of concluding organisational techniques such as the announcement of the conclusion and the rhetorical summary.

### 5.1.2 Three concluding retention techniques: advice and practice

The experiments showed that the announcement of the conclusion, circle technique, and summary can indeed positively influence audience information retention in the context of an informative presentation. Public-speaking advice on these concluding retention techniques (chapter 2) and observations of their use in public-speaking practice (chapter 3) formed the basis of the experiments conducted. Conversely, the experimental results may be relevant to future advice on and the application of these concluding techniques. The current section discusses the advice regarding these three concluding techniques in public-speaking textbooks and their application by scholars, politicians and TED speakers. It also indicates how the advice and practical application relate to the experimental results.

*Announcement of the conclusion.* This technique is regularly positively connected to retention in textbooks. The conclusion is the part of the speech that is most frequently connected to retention; so, “telegraphing to the audience that the end is indeed in sight” (Rozakis, 1995, p. 136) seems sensible. As the most important part of the speech to affect retention, textbooks authors regularly warn against applying ineffective conclusions (see 2.6.3). Some authors warn that the (ineffective) use of announcing the conclusion could lead to a loss of attention by the audience (Laskowski, 2001; Kenny, 1982). In public-speaking practice, the informative presentations of the scholars contained the announcement of the conclusion most frequently (10 of 16 presentations), followed by the TED talks. Politicians used the smallest number of announcements of the conclusion.

The experiment with an announcement of the conclusion conducted in this thesis did not indicate a loss of attention and negative retention effect; to the contrary, the announcement of the conclusion can increase the audience’s ability to retain information mentioned in the conclusion, depending on the audience’s interest in and appreciation of the presentation’s contents. It therefore seems safe to say that announcing the conclusion is advisable in an informative presentation.

*Summary.* In public-speaking textbooks, the summary is one of the most frequently advised techniques to affect retention; moreover, it was one of the few techniques ancient rhetoricians linked to the audience’s (or judges’) memory. Some modern textbooks distinguish two types of summaries: outline (indicative) and main point (informative) summaries (see Section 2.5.3). A few textbooks provide examples of how to include a summary in the conclusion of a presentation, for example about the level of detail that a speaker should provide. However, in most cases no detailed information on the content and formulation of the summary was provided. From the analysis of public-speaking practice, it appeared that just over half the number of scholars (nine out of sixteen) used a summary. Furthermore, the summaries that were observed varied greatly in length, style and contents (both indicative and informative variants of summaries were found).

The experiment with the summaries indicates that a speaker whose intention is to influence retention in an informative presentation can best be advised to use an

informative summary that includes the main points of the presentation. The indicative summary (known as outline summary in some textbooks) appears less effective to influence retention. Moreover, using a rhetorical summary, which means that a speaker can be selective in the main points that are mentioned and need not be representative (i.e. an exact representation of the presentation's structure), appears to be a good option.

*Circle technique.* The circle technique can be described as a reference to the introduction in the closing statements of a presentation. Almost one fifth of the public-speaking textbooks connected the circle technique to information retention. Two variants were found in the textbooks: a reference to the speech introduction with a clear structure marker and a reference without such a marker (see 2.5.13).<sup>289</sup> Furthermore, the circle technique was said to induce a “sense of closure”. The analysis of public-speaking practice showed that the politicians included a circle technique most frequently (in seven out of sixteen speeches); the mainly informative presentations of the scholars only contained two circle techniques. This suggests that the technique is more popular in persuasive speeches than informative presentations. Both variants of circle techniques were found in the presentation texts.

Based on the experiment, speakers can be advised to use the circle technique if they want the audience to remember information already mentioned in the introduction (a specific form of repetition). It is not shown that a circle technique influences retention of other information mentioned in the presentation, but there may be another reason to use it: the circle technique appears to have the added benefit of increasing audience appreciation for the closing remarks of the speech, thereby creating the “sense of closure” some textbook authors refer to.

### 5.1.3 Limitations and perspectives

A presentation is a complex rhetorical situation that incorporates multiple variables, such as the speaker, audience, message and context. The experimental setup used was aimed at controlling these variables as much as possible in order to relate the results to the specific concluding techniques involved. This approach has its limitations, which need to be taken into account when interpreting the conclusions and relate to perspectives on further research.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> An explicitly marked circle technique includes a reference to the place or part of the speech or the fact that the topic or example had been addressed in the speech (“as I said in the beginning / introduction / before...”); a second variant of the circle technique usually consisted of a repetition of or reference to a part of the introduction without an explicit structure marker or reference to the fact this had already been addressed in the speech (e.g. re-using the words “Berlin Wall” in the conclusion when the introduction also contained an example or anecdote on the Berlin Wall). See Sections 2.5.13 and 3.4.4 for more examples).

<sup>290</sup> A more detailed account of the limitations regarding the experimental setup can be found in chapter 4, Sections 4.1.5 and 4.2.5.

**Experimental design**

The experimental design has two main limitations. First of all, the experiments were carried out with a limited number of messages or, in this case, presentations. The summary experiment was carried out with three versions of a single presentation, while the experiment on the announcement of the conclusion and the circle technique contained two presentations with two versions each (2x2 design).<sup>291</sup> The latter experiment showed differences in retention effects between the two presentations used. Results suggest that a high interest of the audience in the topic attenuates the influence of particular concluding techniques on information retention, as the audience might be more intrinsically motivated to pay attention. To further generalise the results, retention effects of concluding techniques in other presentations should be studied as well (cf. O’Keefe, 2002).

Secondly, only a single specific formulation of the concluding techniques and their variants were taken into account. For example, the announcement of the conclusion was phrased as “Ladies and gentlemen, I will wrap up”, whereas Section 3.4.3 showed that multiple variants of this technique were found in public-speaking practice. The same goes for the summary (both informative and indicative) and the circle technique. A future study aiming to reproduce similar effects could contribute to more generalising conclusions about these concluding retention techniques.

**Ecological validity**

The selected setup could have influenced the ecological validity of the experiments. Recordings were used to ensure that the only difference between versions of the presentations was the presence of the concluding techniques. This means that the audience did not experience the speaker performing a ‘live’ presentation, but rather experienced a mediated presentation. The proximity of a speaker might influence the way an audience processes information, although studies have shown that viewers of a mediated presentation do not necessarily behave differently from an audience attending an actual presentation event (Gross & Dinehart, 2016; Kay, 2012). Still, the experimental situation in which listeners viewed a recording of a presentation alongside about twenty to twenty-five other audience members and were asked to fill out a questionnaire afterwards obviously differs from a regular presentation setting. When translating the results to a regular presentation situation, the ecological validity should be kept in mind: although the experiments give reason to believe these concluding techniques contribute to audience information retention, they do not predict the effect of these techniques in combination with other rhetorical (retention) techniques or the speaker’s particular presentation style (*actio*).

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<sup>291</sup> As the summary experiment entailed the design of three presentation versions as opposed to the two versions in the announcement and circle technique experiment, it was decided that a multiple message design would not be feasible for practical reasons (e.g. arranging a sufficient number of participants).



**Genre-specific results**

The experiments were aimed at the specific genre of informative presentations such as educational presentations (lectures) and conference talks. The results are less easily applied to presentations that mainly aim to persuade or inspire. Research into persuasive document design (text-focused) shows that an explicit conclusion statement supports message retention (Cruz, 1998; O’Keefe, 2002). In line with these results it can be argued that the use of an announcement of the conclusion and informative summary in a persuasive presentation (oral communication situation) could positively influence retention. However, in a persuasive presentation, putting forward a single main concluding statement that is linked to the purpose could be deemed more important than providing a summary of several key points. Furthermore, while the concluding techniques did not negatively influence audience appreciation of the presentation and speaker in the experimental informative presentations, their effect on audience appreciation of a persuasive presentation remains unclear.

**The challenge of measuring retention of a presentation**

Retention of information was measured in various ways (open questions and multiple-choice questions) and in various time-frames (immediately after the presentation and two to three weeks later in a post-test). Results were not always in line with the expectations. Open questions in the summary experiment are better suited to measure recall of information, whereas multiple-choice questions are more suitable for measuring recognition of information (cf. Bruning, 2004; Baddeley et al., 2009). Measuring retention in a presentation situation differs from the experimental context and design of most other studies into recall and retention, which often focus on a particular recall task of information that seems more straightforward (e.g. remembering lists of (random) items). A presentation of 15 minutes opens up a more complex information processing event. This methodological issue needs to be further investigated.

**5.2 Usage of retention techniques in public-speaking practice**

The experiments described in Section 5.1 provided more insight into the effects of three organisational concluding techniques in an informative presentation. What about other rhetorical retention techniques? The use of two other organisational techniques (*partitio* and transitions sentences) and two elaboration techniques (anecdote and question) by speaking professionals and professional speakers (scholars, politicians and TED speakers) was investigated.

Although effects of these techniques were not measured, the rhetorical analyses of research presentations, political speeches and TED talks lead to two general conclusions. First of all, the scholars, the speakers with an informative main purpose, preferred other techniques than the politicians (persuasive main purpose) and TED speakers (inspirational purpose—mix of informative and persuasive main purpose). Secondly, similar to the concluding techniques discussed in Section 5.1, variances in length, style and contents of these techniques were found. Section 5.2.1

presents the main insights on the use of these rhetorical techniques by the three analysed types of speakers.<sup>292</sup> Differences in frequency and form are interpreted from the perspective of the rhetorical situation. Section 5.2.2 touches upon limitations of the method for rhetorical analysis and offers perspectives for future analyses.

### 5.2.1 Preferences and variants of retention techniques in practice

Just as a restaurant's chef intends to find the right balance in ingredients of a dish, speakers need to strike a balance between their intended purpose, the rhetorical techniques they consider using, and other variables in the rhetorical situation. An all too dominant ingredient could influence the attention, appreciation and experience of the audience. In the case of the speaking professionals (scholars) and the professional speakers (politicians and, to a lesser extent, TED speakers), it seems that the rhetorical situation influenced their preference for specific retention techniques. Therefore, insight into the rhetorical situation is valuable in order to explain the choices that speakers make.

How do these three types of speakers apply the selected organisational and elaborative retention techniques and how can we explain the speakers' behaviour? For each type of speaker, the main findings related to these questions and a reflection on the rhetorical retention situation are provided.

#### Scholars

In agreement with their informative purpose, the scholars in this study mainly selected organisational retention techniques. They less frequently selected elaborative retention techniques.

The scholars appear to follow the well-known adage “tell them what you are going to tell them—tell them—tell them what you have told them” more closely than the politicians and TED speakers by using more *partitios*, transitions, announcements of the conclusion and summaries. They usually apply structure markers to emphasise the organisational techniques (e.g. “and with that I have actually already reached my conclusion...” to announce the concluding part of the presentation). The circle technique, which less explicitly emphasises the speech structure, was less popular among scholars. In other words: it appears to be characteristic for scholars to use retention techniques to almost didactically emphasise the overall organisation of a presentation. With this in mind, it is remarkable that almost half the number of research presentations do not contain a *partitio* and a summary. This means that some researchers in these informative presentations might have overlooked an opportunity to influence retention, or purposely ignored it (e.g. because of time constraints).

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<sup>292</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of the analysis of the use of retention techniques in public-speaking practice, see Section 3.6. Furthermore, ample examples of the retention techniques used can be found in Sections 3.4 (organisation techniques) and 3.5 (elaboration techniques). Section 3.2 presents the characteristics of the corpora of research presentations, political speeches and TED talks.

Elaboration techniques are not applied as much by the scholars as by the politicians and TED speakers. Scholars used the smallest number of anecdotes, for example. Moreover, these anecdotes did not always contain clear narrative elements, were quite short and could have been more vividly phrased compared to the anecdotes that were found in the other corpora. Of the question types, scholars preferred the *subiectio*, which is often used for organisational purposes next to its elaborative function.

Regarding the rhetorical situation, the scholars' preference for explicit organising techniques linked to retention can be explained by multiple reasons. First of all, they would probably value retention highly, as they intend to inform their audience. Next, the scholars often need to explain various stages or steps in a sometimes complex research methodology, which prompts them to use many structure markers (hence the frequent use of *partitios*, explicit transitions and summaries compared to politicians and TED speakers). Furthermore, they can be qualified as speaking professionals. This means that they might not (have been able to) meticulously prepare their talk, which could explain why their emphasis is not on techniques that require craftsmanship and a more polished style (such as an anecdote). As they speak to a relatively small audience of (familiar) colleagues, who are mostly interested in the content of the topic, and their presentation will not be made accessible to an audience outside of the actual event, the stakes appear not that high. All these features together can explain their focus on content and organisation.

### **Politicians**

The politicians opt for retention techniques that are in agreement with their main purpose of persuading the audience. They preferred elaborative techniques over explicit organisational retention techniques.

Regarding the elaboration techniques, politicians used questions mostly in an elaborative way to appeal to existing knowledge, for example by *quaestios* (series of questions). Some long *quaestios* were found, in one case consisting of a pileup of 10 questions; these seemed to be specifically designed to amplify an emotional effect. The *subiectio*, often used with an organisational purpose and preferred by the scholars, is not the politicians' favourite question type. Anecdotes were regularly found, but perhaps not as often as expected: on average less than one anecdote per speech. Style-wise, some anecdotes contain all the advised features and seem to be well prepared, but the corpus of political speeches also contains a few examples that only contain a minimum of features that are recommended for anecdotes. The politicians in this study could have focused more on the anecdote, because a story that is carried out properly could both influence persuasion, retention and possibly enhance ethos—three rhetorical aims that seem to suit the persuasive main purpose of the political speeches.

Regarding organisational retention techniques, the politicians analysed are the champions of the circle technique. They use it more frequently than the scholars and TED speakers. This technique not so much emphasises the overall speech structure, but it has a less explicit organisation effect, providing a 'sense of closure'. The politicians are not too fond of the "tell them" adage: they did not use any summary

at all, only one *partitio* was found and they less frequently used transition sentences than the scholars and the TED speakers.

How can the rhetorical situation of the political speeches explain the use of retention techniques? Politicians are professional speakers who would like to share a persuasive message and shape their image (ethos). For politicians, the stakes seem higher than for scholars: parts of their speeches are likely to be broadcast to a more diverse audience (possible electorate) on various media and will be accessible for a longer period of time. Therefore, politicians could consider explicit organisational techniques such as *partitios*, transition sentences and summaries as too ‘didactic’ and straightforward, despite their possible retention effect. These techniques might not contribute to a positive ethos and obstruct the politicians’ persuasive purpose. At the same time, the context of the annual policy reviews in parliament requires politicians to discuss policy that is quite complex at times, which means that they need to include organisational techniques to some extent. Therefore, politicians appear to opt for a retention strategy that is a mix of organisational techniques that less clearly mark the speech structure such as the circle technique and more pathos-related elaboration techniques such as the *quaestio*. Future analyses that also include other retention techniques related to pathos and style, such as metaphors and repetition figures on a sentence level (anaphor or parallelism), could give more insight into politicians’ retention practice.

### **TED speakers**

The TED speakers tend to select retention techniques that are in agreement with their purpose to inspire (a mix of informative and persuasive elements). They focus mostly on elaboration techniques, using the most anecdotes and questions of the three types of speakers analysed. They also stand out in the way they execute these techniques: TED speakers tend to spend time in crafting stylistically compelling phrases.

If the politicians are champions of the circle technique, then the TED speakers are real anecdote adepts. This elaborative retention technique is their favourite, which is not only supported by the number of anecdotes used, but also by their length and formulation. TED speakers often used personal stories that contain many narrative elements, are vividly recounted and are regularly relevant to the main idea or message of the talk. They prefer to use the rhetorical question, which can make the audience think about the topic and thereby enhance retention. They also use quite a few *subiectios* for what seems to be an elaborative purpose, and not necessarily for a structuring purpose.

TED speakers do not rely that heavily on explicit organisational techniques as scholars and they do not refrain from them as much as politicians. The main difference between scholars’ and TED speakers’ use of organisational retention techniques is the style: TED speakers tend to use less structure markers that literally refer to parts of the speech such as the conclusion. For example, they prefer a phrase such as “I want to leave you with this” as an announcement for the conclusion, with which they do not emphasise as much that they have reached “the conclusion”.

Through a rhetorical situation lens, the TED speakers can be qualified as professional speakers compared to scholars (speaking professionals)—especially when the presentation's occasion is taken into account. The TED talks could potentially be viewed by a large (online) audience, which increases the need for an intensive preparation of the overall presentation. Their inspirational purpose appears to turn the TED speakers' focus to narrative techniques such as the anecdote. Furthermore, it could explain the fact that they tend to vary the formulation of structural retention techniques more than scholars do. TED speakers do want to inform to a certain extent, but the audience's expectation to listen to an attractive story and the high stakes of a TED event lead to a focus on stylistic craftsmanship.

### 5.2.2 Limitations and perspectives

Three main points for discussion have to be taken into account regarding the rhetorical analysis of the three speaker types: it explores a limited number of retention techniques, it entails three collections of presentations only and it focused on explicit textual features of the techniques.<sup>293</sup>

First of all, a limited number of retention techniques (seven) were selected. Therefore, conclusions on retention only apply to the use of these specific techniques; the speakers might have applied other retention strategies that were not taken into account (such as standing on their head, as Wagenaar (1996) proposed). For example, visualisation techniques (e.g. presentation slides, pictures and props) form an important category of retention techniques that was not taken into account in the analysis of public-speaking practice and experimental studies (See Section 3.1.1 for a motivation). Still, the use of visualisation techniques is a fruitful topic to further explore, not in the last place because they play an important role in the warnings or *vitia* (how the specific use of rhetorical techniques could obstruct retention effects, see Section 2.6).

Secondly, this exploration only took three collections of presentations into account, which were held in specific contexts. Of these three speaker types, collections of speeches or presentations in other rhetorical situations could be selected to gain a broader insight into genre-specific use of retention techniques. For example, analyses of research presentations in other disciplines such as engineering, behavioural and natural sciences, could show whether the emphasis on organisational retention techniques is characteristic for scholars in general. Analyses of political campaign speeches could provide insight into how politicians use retention techniques if they can only focus on discussing their own ideas and future policy, and are not restricted to reflecting on current governmental policy (as is the practice of the annual policy reviews analysed in this dissertation). Such campaign speeches would probably be held to a more heterogeneous audience (electorate) instead of the annual policy review's 'hybrid' audience of fellow members of parliament and electorate outside of parliament. For the TED talks, talks at locally organised TEDx events could be analysed as opposed to the most popular online talks. Although all TEDx events need

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<sup>293</sup> Section 3.6.3 contains a more extensive discussion.

to adhere to certain general guidelines drafted by the global TED organisation, differences such as the size of the event (and thus direct audience), location and availability of speaker coaching can influence the preparation and performance of the speakers.

Thirdly, the applied method rather rigidly focused on explicit textual features, which means that more subtle variants of a technique were left out. Also, the inter-rater reliability was only applied to evaluate agreement on the presence of selected retention techniques in the corpus texts. The qualitative analyses, which categorise subtypes of techniques and describe variations in style and structure of examples found in the corpora, are analyses of a single researcher. As the study is explorative in nature, no in-depth analyses of stylistic features such as vividness, concreteness or relevance were carried out. This study's value is that it provides a broader overview and can be a starting point for more fine-grained analyses.

### 5.3 Retention as a rhetorical function in public-speaking textbooks

What techniques in public-speaking textbooks are advised to make a message memorable? This question formed the basis of the studies into public-speaking practice and effect of rhetorical techniques on retention.

Information retention by the audience receives little attention in the classical work, as an analysis of four key ancient rhetorical works showed.<sup>294</sup> The ancient rhetoricians most prominently connect the concluding part of the speech to information retention, in particular the summary or recapitulation of the facts in the peroration. The statement of the facts in the introduction and the transition are also referred to as influencing listeners' memory. Not the audience's memory, but the speaker's memory is a key theme in classical rhetoric: it is the subject of one of the five orator's canons (*memoria*). *Memoria* techniques aid the speaker in remembering the speech. They often deal with visualising information, associating it with existing knowledge and placing it in a logical order, culminating in mnemotechniques such as the memory palace and *imagines agentes* (striking images) (see Section 2.1 for a more extensive discussion of memory in ancient rhetoric).

The *memoria* task of the orator plays a marginal role in modern public-speaking textbooks, which generally claim that memorising the whole speech can do more harm than good. Modern authors usually deal with practical aspects of memorisation, advising memory aids and preparatory strategies such as using outlines, cue cards, teleprompters and rehearsal strategies. Only a small number of modern authors stress the power of memory and refer to classical *memoria* techniques. These authors move away from the idea that memorisation merely is the practical act of learning by heart, but rather propose a modern take on the *memoria* task: it is a way for the orator to become (mentally) familiar and comfortable with the speech, which

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<sup>294</sup> Aristotle's *Rhetorica*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero's *De Oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*.

could ultimately lead to a more congruent and compelling performance (see Section 2.3 for a discussion of the *memoria* task in modern textbooks).

From classical rhetoric to modern public-speaking advice, the perspective has shifted from the speaker's memory to the audience's memory. To detect the most frequent retention advice in modern public-speaking textbooks, a corpus of English- and Dutch-language modern public-speaking textbooks published between 1980 and 2009 (eighty books) was analysed. Section 5.3.1 summarises the most important insights into retention that were found in these two sub-corpora of public-speaking textbooks. Next, Section 5.3.2 reflects on the role of public-speaking textbooks in rhetorical retention research and Section 5.3.3 touches upon limitations of the textbook analysis.

### 5.3.1 Main retention advice in modern public-speaking textbooks

A little over 5% of the total number of pages in the corpus of modern public-speaking textbooks contains explicit references to audience retention. Furthermore, a total of 77 techniques are attributed to audience information retention; a varied collection of techniques, which seem to be related to almost all steps required in the process of preparing and delivering a presentation. This suggests that achieving information retention is a public speaking function of considerable importance. The most frequently mentioned techniques are *visual aids*, *summary*, *repetition* and *anecdote*.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, in line with ancient rhetoricians, modern authors view the conclusion as the preferred part of a presentation for a speaker to apply techniques that influence retention.

The main encoding principles that are found in memory research, organisation, elaboration and visualisation, are reflected in the range of techniques that textbooks relate to information retention. These principles offer a helpful organising perspective to discuss the varied collection of techniques that were found and to divide it into three digestible chunks.

*Organisation.* First of all, quite a few retention techniques are linked to organising the presentation. This way, they correspond to the encoding principle of organisation. The frequently advised techniques summary and repetition can be linked to organising the subject matter in the presentation such that it is easier for an audience to remember important information. Other popular organisational retention techniques are chunking, systematic order, *partitio*, circle technique and final statement.

The corpus analysis shows that the concluding part of a speech is most often connected to retention. Warnings against the conclusion's ineffective use, such as a postponed conclusion and or a concluding part that is too long, are said to hinder the audience's information retention (see Section 2.6). What's more, the most important warning on how information retention can be mitigated—information overload—points to structural or organisational problems such as using too many main points.

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<sup>295</sup> See Section 2.4.2 for an overview of the twenty most frequently mentioned retention techniques in both the English-language and the Dutch-language sub-corpora of public-speaking textbooks.

*Elaboration.* Secondly, the overview of retention advice contains techniques that can be associated with the encoding principle of elaboration. Such techniques seem to encourage the audience to associate new information with existing knowledge, to actively participate in the presentation or make an effort in processing the information. Frequently advised retention techniques that appear to be of an elaborative nature are, among others, the anecdote, audience participation, rhetorical question and metaphor.

The anecdote is a narrative technique, which requires the audience to understand the situation that is explained, the main characters that are involved, the story development and the anecdote's relevance to the presentation's key point(s). When actively participating in the presentation, for example by answering questions, taking part in a quiz or carrying out a physical assignment (clapping, singing), the audience is actively working with the information presented. Even when the speaker asks a rhetorical question it can be argued that the audience would probably mentally look for an answer, thereby processing the information. A metaphor usually requires some mental effort to understand the similarity between the compared elements—especially when it is an original metaphor a listener is not often confronted with in daily language.

*Visualisation.* Finally, techniques used to visualise information are very frequently connected to retention. Both in the English-language and the Dutch-language sub-corpora, visual aids are among the most frequently advised to influence audience retention. Most often, the advice refers to visual aids as 'real-time', tangible visualisation such as objects, images, diagrams or graphs on a screen. Next to the advice, visual aids also form the top category of warnings that were found in the corpus: authors regularly discuss ineffective use of visual aids, which could hinder information retention (see Section 2.6.2).

Besides direct visual aids to support a presentation, public-speaking textbooks address retention techniques that stimulate mental visualisation, such as imagery, metaphors and concrete examples. These mental visualisation techniques can be related to both visualisation and elaboration, as the audience forms a visual representation based on associations with existing knowledge and images.

This suggested classification of retention techniques according to encoding principles should be seen as a means to grasp and create a clearer overview of retention advice in modern public-speaking textbooks, and to highlight parallels between rhetorical ideas and memory psychology. The borders between these three categories are not clearly marked; for some techniques, it can be argued that they could be classified in various categories. For example, anecdotes and metaphors often require both visualisation and elaboration taking place. In the case of the anecdote, the connection to the main message or a key point of the speech (its relevance) could also be considered as an organisational aspect.



### 5.3.2 Reflection: quality of retention advice and the role of textbooks

The overview of the attention for retention techniques in modern public-speaking textbooks is helpful to gauge existing ideas on how to make a message memorable in a presentation. However, it does not provide any insight into the quality and context of the advice given in these textbooks. The corpus analysis of public-speaking textbooks revealed factors that help to put the advice in perspective.

The extent to which audience retention is emphasised varies in the public-speaking textbooks in the corpus. Authors such as Walters (1993) and Urech (1998) clearly value audience retention as an overarching public speaking purpose, as they include references to retention ('memorable') in one or more chapter titles. However, other textbook authors do not or hardly explicitly refer to retention (see Section 2.7). The same variation is seen in the descriptions of retention techniques in the textbooks. Authors such as Osborn & Osborn (1997) and Atkinson (2004) often provide examples of techniques connected to retention and explain that factors such as audience and genre need to be taken into account, whereas in other textbooks only a brief reference to retention (something similar to "[technique X] makes your message memorable") was considered sufficient.

Just as the textbooks in these corpora vary in how extensively they discuss and argue for the use of retention techniques, the use of sources and references in these books varies as well. Overall, the retention advice that was found in modern public-speaking textbooks is scarcely supported by explicit references to academic sources. In the rare case a clear reference to an academic study was made, it can be questioned whether the translation of the study's results into easily accessible textbook advice was carried out accurately (see Section 2.7.2 for examples of the quality of references in public-speaking textbooks). Textbook authors generally opt for other source types, such as (anecdotal) experiences from well-known speakers, to corroborate their advice.

The relationship of textbook authors with (academic) sources and knowledge can therefore be qualified as ambivalent: supporting the advice with clear references to trustworthy sources is a good practice that only scarcely finds its way to textbook advice. At the heart of this ambivalence towards reference use might be the nature of the public-speaking textbook as a genre by itself: it is not an academic treatise in the first place, but it should be accessible and easy to read for a general audience. This means that authors have to find a balance between showing that their information relies on trustworthy sources on the one hand and writing a readable, attractive text on the other hand. In doing so they are walking a tight rope, as results from academic studies are usually not straightforward and (empirical) research on effects of public speaking strategies hardly exists. Moreover, academic studies are often specialised and focus on a particular (presentation) situation, leaving textbook authors with the challenge to extrapolate the results and generalise them for a broader presentation context. On top of that, the results of academic studies might be subject to change and interpretation over time, which requires a regular textbook update. Still, within and outside of the corpus, examples of textbooks exist that attempt to be accessible while

acknowledging the sources used via in-text references or an extensive notes section (e.g. Oomkes (2000), Atkinson (2004)), which shows that it is not impossible to incorporate references. As this analysis focused on the contents of the advice (a users' perspective), authors' attitudes towards reference use were not extensively studied.

### **5.3.3 Limitations and perspectives**

Although a sizeable corpus of eighty textbooks was analysed, the selection can still be regarded as limited. The selection of the textbooks was related to their importance in a specific year between 1980 and 2009, based on the availability and distribution of the books in libraries and the number of reprints. Other selection criteria to determine the importance of the work such as the number of citations, were not taken into account.

Next to that, the selection only focused on textbooks, to make a proper comparison. This means that online sources on public speaking such as weblogs and videos (on YouTube or other online channels) were not included. These online sources on public speaking have arguably gained traction in the recent decade, not in the least because of the fact they are easily accessed. Future studies into retention in public-speaking advice should extend the corpus with more recent sources from the latest decade (2010-2019), including online resources on presentation skills such as popular weblogs on presentation skills into account as well. Online resources arguably have become more easily accessible than the printed textbooks.

All in all, audience information retention deserves a more consistent and coherent position in public-speaking textbooks. Although particularly the English-language textbooks already include a considerable amount of retention advice, retention is hardly ever explicitly treated as a key function of public speaking. Retention advice usually is scattered over different parts of a textbook, leaving it to the reader to put together the pieces of the retention puzzle. While recognising the challenge of public-speaking textbooks to strike a balance between clear, attractive and well-supported advice, the use of more supporting examples and references would more properly reflect the variety in appearance and formulation of retention techniques in public-speaking practice and the results of experiments carried out (e.g. the difference in retention effect between an indicative and informative summary). Including a chapter or section on retention as a rhetorical function could introduce readers to the notion that retention is ingrained in many facets of public speaking, from preparation to performance. References to general insights from memory psychology could help to support this notion and provide more context for the role of retention in public speaking as a rhetorical aim for a speaker and a function of specific rhetorical techniques.

## **5.4 Perspectives on rhetorical retention research**

This thesis has led to new insights into the effect of rhetorical techniques on audience information retention. It has also shown that rhetorical retention research potentially covers a vast terrain of rhetorical techniques and situations still to be explored. This

section offers two perspectives on rhetorical retention research: Section 5.4.1 reflects on the position of retention in rhetorical research based on contributions of this thesis, while Section 5.4.2 has a methodological focus on future studies.

#### **5.4.1 Retention as a key perspective in rhetorical research**

“Given the importance of the making ideas stick, it’s surprising how little attention is paid to the subject,” Heath & Heath observed (2010, p. 18). This thesis has given full attention to this subject from a public speaking perspective and in doing so it contributes to rhetorical theory and practice.

This thesis contributes to rhetoric as an interdisciplinary field of study, as it draws parallels between rhetorical theory and memory psychology. In rhetorical studies, principles such as encoding can help to interpret how a specific rhetorical technique might contribute to retention. Moreover, the theory of the rhetorical situation can help to explain the interplay of various elements in a public-speaking situation and their possible influence on retention (e.g. in educational psychology).

Furthermore, this study encompasses a variety of approaches to investigate rhetorical retention. The approaches of systematic literature or corpus research and rhetorical analysis of presentations were used in this respective order to pinpoint techniques of interest to be used in experimental studies. Both quantitative and qualitative results were collected to compose the most complete picture possible. A quantitative approach is not common in rhetorical studies (see Section 1.4 for examples); while I believe that it should go hand in hand with a qualitative, more interpretative approach, the thesis shows that a quantitative method can certainly be valuable in the field of rhetoric. The field of rhetorical studies is both attractive and at the same time challenging, as it includes approaches that range from rhetorical criticism to experimental studies.

The thesis contributes to rhetoric in practice by providing both a broad overview of and more detailed insights into the relationship between rhetorical techniques and information retention by the audience in a public-speaking context. The broad overview comprises the most frequent modern public-speaking advice on information retention compared to the classical ideas on both the orator’s and the audience’s *memoria*. Categorising this advice has resulted in a comprehensive overview that can both serve as a basis for further, more detailed studies and as a resource for practitioners (e.g. educators).

At the same time, the thesis provides more detailed insights on the use of a few specific rhetorical retention techniques in practice and their effects in an informative presentation. This can be helpful for speakers who have to decide what retention technique to include in their speech and how to do so, and to educators who have to coach and guide these speakers.

#### **5.4.2 The future of rhetorical retention research: methodological perspective**

Venturing into new retention topics or further examining the retention terrain already explored, we should not forget methodological perspectives on retention research. Roughly, two paths can be taken: further honing the three main methods used in this study on the one hand, and applying and developing other methods to perform rhetorical research on the other hand.

##### **Refining methods used in the current study**

The most specific results in this thesis were obtained via experimental studies. This is not a standard approach in rhetorical studies, which traditionally relies more on approaches such as rhetorical criticism and rhetorical analysis of specific techniques or concepts. This thesis builds on the work of Andeweg & De Jong (2004), whose work (e.g. on speech introductions) shows that an experimental approach can be complementary to existing rhetorical methodologies and possibly add new insights to rhetorical knowledge. At the same time, experimental design in a public-speaking context has its limitations (see Section 5.1.3) and can be a time-consuming method. The experience gained in this dissertation's experiments can therefore offer help to refine future experimental design. For example, it is recommended to carry out a study with multiple messages (presentations), or to replicate one of the experimental setups already used with other presentations. Next, carrying out similar experiments with a different audience composition would be insightful. Furthermore, the approach to measuring recall with open questions can be refined and the use of multiple-choice questions should be reconsidered (see Section 4.2.5). All in all, with the experiments carried out in this study we have gained the experience necessary to more carefully design follow-up studies.

The second approach described in this thesis, rhetorical analyses of presentation text corpora, can also be further developed. First of all, a more thorough preparation of determining inter-rater agreement is advised. Raters would need to be trained more extensively to apply the labelling instructions prior to the actual analysis. Related to this, it is advised to carry out such a reliability analysis with a smaller group of about three more experienced raters. In this study for practical reasons a rather extensive group of master students (less experienced researchers) were used; although this approach led to satisfactory results in the end, it was a rather complex composition of the rater group. With a more thorough preparation, the analyses that were limited to presentation texts could be extended to recordings (video footage) of the presentations in order to paint a more complete picture, keeping in mind that analysing non-verbal behaviour would also require an additional theoretical framework and methodological approach.

As a final development of this method, the qualitative interpretation of the labelled text fragments could be further supported with instruments for interpreting textual and stylistic features. This way, not only agreement on textual features but also on stylistic characteristics could be determined. An example is to apply methods for establishing stylistic text features such as concreteness and vividness of texts more

precisely (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2015; Sadoski, 2001). This would call for a more focused study into a specific rhetorical phenomenon linked to retention whereas the current thesis can be characterised as explorative, mapping the diverse application of retention techniques.

#### **Developing other methods for rhetorical retention research**

Deploying different approaches in rhetorical retention research than those applied in this thesis can lead to new, complementary results. For example, next to presentation and speech analyses by scholars of rhetoric, the audience's reception of these presentations can be the focal point of future studies (cf. Kjeldsen, 2018). Useful methods could be questionnaires to measure audience response during and after a live presentation, to find out what information is best retained and to what extent audience members retain similar information. Additionally, the audience's level of attention and focus could be measured with eye-tracking or less obtrusive means. At the same time, questions on the appreciation of the presentation could provide insight into the trade-off between influencing retention and other possible speaker aims.

Furthermore, interviewing could be a fruitful method. Viewers of both live presentations and recordings or online talks could be interviewed more in-depth about the information they remember, either individually or in focus groups. Besides audience members, speakers could share their intentions, aims and preparatory work in interviews as well. This way, the most complete picture of the rhetorical retention situation can be composed.

To conclude: if Aristotle were to embark on a journey to this day and age, he would have been able to retain some key insights on retention. He would be aware of the possible connection between encoding principles, such as organisation and elaboration, and related rhetorical techniques, such as strategically summarising the story and telling an anecdote. He would be aware of the impact on retention that organisational techniques such as the summary and a seemingly negligible sentence such as the announcement of the conclusion can have in informative presentations. And finally, he would be aware of the variety of rhetorical techniques that authors of modern public-speaking textbooks relate to the function of audience retention, encompassing almost all of the orator's canons, and the genre-specific use of these techniques by various types of speakers in different 'genus' such as educational, political and inspirational presentations. And who knows, if he were to make a similar journey a few decades from now, the terrain of rhetorical retention research might be further explored. By then, we would know more about how messages are made memorable.

