

## A Homiletical Hack: Talk Like Hamilton

*Nextgen sermon hearers may be distracted if you are talking too slow*

Rod Casey

You may be boring your congregants at the speed of sound—the sound of your voice. If you talked like *Hamilton*, the Broadway craze of 2020, it would hack your hearer’s attention span, particularly those listeners that are younger.

Statistically, baby boomers and beyond speak at an average rate near 150 words per minute. However, our ability to hear and comprehend words per minute is 1.5 to 2 times that amount. We can hear faster than we can talk. Like your mother said, “God gave you two ears and only one mouth.”

In 2003, the news show *20/20* reported that the family TV shows that I grew up on like *Leave it to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, and *Gilligan’s Island*, indeed met those 150 words per minute benchmark. But in the 1970s, that sound barrier was broken by Bruce Willis and Sibyl Shepherd when their prime time hit *Moonlighting* registered an average of 220 words per minute. Though I wasn't a fan of the show I do remember thinking when I did watch, “What did they say? I didn't catch it.” But TV wasn't done breaking records, wagging their tongues and flapping their jaws. The popular hit drama of my two daughter’s teen years were clocked at averaging 330 words per minute. Want to guess which series? *Gilmore Girls*.

Some are thinking, *well, of course, that makes perfect sense. I listen to all my podcasts or audio books on 1.5 to 2 times speed, or at least I know people who do.* But have you applied that reality to the practice of preaching? Let me say it again. Our preaching maybe boring our listeners at the speed of the sound of our voice. Particularly if they were born after 1980.

Neurologically, the same case can be made. The brain activity of the next generation population has easier access to more parts of their brain hemispheres than their older counterparts do. In other words, when asked the same question while measuring the brain's activity, more pathways light up the younger you are. This explains that grandparent's confusion when looking over Katie’s shoulder and finding her personal computer has nine tabs open listening to the band Radiohead, messaging Kyle, watching Serena Williams win the U.S. Open, all while finishing her math homework. To say it even stronger, Katie may be less focused if she weren't doing these additional things, she might be bored.

Some “well-meaners” in the church will protest (regardless of their age). “You talk too fast!” will likely be a criticism you have to endure from time to time if you apply this homiletical hack. Others may suggest preachers ought not cater to this cultural phenomenon. “Teach them how to focus, kids these days need to learn to pay attention,” well intentioned congregants might protest. Rather than contextualizing and practicing hospitality to the learner, some will insist on a “business as usual” posture to this cultural reality. But if you see value in pushing your vocal pace, let me suggest a few practices to help as you add this hack to your quiver of speaking tools. First, ask a few next generation hearers of your sermons their perspective on this hack’s validity. Ask them if they've noticed. Ask them for their encouragement as you hone this skill.

Secondly, make a recording of yourself or transcribe a sermon then speak it out loud and quantify **your** average words per minute. If it’s less than 200 or so and you’re convinced by this

hack's assertion, begin practicing in private, hurrying your pace until you can hear and feel the difference. Like other muscle memory activities, whether it be a jump shot or a golf swing, you can make a lasting change by being aware and working on it. An added benefit of this exercise of recording yourself can be noticing your "uhs," "ums," and "you knows," those filler words you're unaware of and helping them die a quick death as well.

A third way to improve this homiletical hack is to listen faster. You can do this by listening to podcasts and audiobooks at an increased speed setting. You can watch an episode of one of the TV shows that have this reputation or watch the Broadway musical *Hamilton* again and try to imitate their style around the house for a few days. Your spouse and kids will love it.

Speaking of *Hamilton* and finishing this hack where we started, it will surprise you to know that the average words per minute rate of that Broadway show is only 140 to 160. It's fast for that genre which speaks while singing to music, but only as fast as I mentioned earlier that most older generations speak. Without this hack, it's estimated that if *Hamilton* were the pace of other typical Broadway productions, the show wouldn't take a bow until six or seven hours after the first curtain went up. How curious!

Apply that principle to preaching and it's obvious another advantage to speaking faster—you can add more content and still get your congregation to the restaurant for lunch on time!

The validity of this homiletical hack, Talk Like Hamilton, was brought home to me when our Generation X daughter visited a church with us one Sunday and the Millennial associate pastor was preaching. "I liked him," she commented over tacos later. "He kept my attention. He talks fast." He preaches Jesus, but he talks like Hamilton.

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<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/hamilton-is-the-very-model-of-a-modern-fast-paced-musical/>

\*Rod is the director of the Theological Education Initiative in central Missouri, a study center providing theological resources for area church and campus leaders. He has taught preaching at both Bethel (St. Paul) and A.W. Tozer Theological Seminaries, as well as for [rightonmission.org](http://rightonmission.org).