

## High Word Quota

By Cassidy Reese

My mother says I have had a higher-than-average word quota since birth. I've always been a talker. My parents have a home video of me from when I was just over a year old, talking as much as a new toddler is able. I was sitting on their old plaid couch across from my grandfather with a play telephone in hand (a bright red, plastic one modeled after the brick cell phones from the '90s, pretend antenna and all) and my grandfather had his thumb and pinky held up to his ear. As a newly one-year-old, I wasn't exactly speaking fluent English yet, but I was speaking my own toddler language, babbling away to my grandfather on my pretend phone, listening to him, and responding in turn. My words were gibberish, but my cadence, vocal inflection, and facial expressions were spot on, mimicking the style of many real languages. This family home video of mine is famously nicknamed "The Great Conversation."

This talkative nature stayed with me as I grew older. My most excited, sad, angry, scared, and vulnerable moments are almost always experienced out loud. Sometimes I talk to an unhealthy extent. The perfect example shows up in a final exam for my Theological Topics class as a senior in high school. The exam was composed of a three-hour conversation in which I used what I had learned that semester to respond to questions and common theological debate topics posed by my teacher. Afterwards, I went home so energized by the three-hour conversation that I spent an hour recounting it over the phone to my significant other who barely got two words in during my recap (I am now married to him; he stuck around, don't worry). I had become what some would call an *external processor*, my expression almost always revolving around speech.

Growing up, I was also heavily involved in music and theater. Singing and playing piano had become passions of mine and worked very much in tandem with my talkativeness. Something about the audible expression of emotion through music really resonated with me. Picking up on singing and playing as the “speaking” of music turned them into two more ways of finding satisfaction and, dare I say, fulfillment through outward, audible expression. From the intricate drama of classical music to the cliché heartbreak songs of Taylor Swift to writing songs myself, music very quickly became my “Speaking 2.0.” It’s also notable that I have never *listened* to a lot of music in my free time. I sing and play significantly more than I listen, because I prefer expressing myself out loud actively; that’s where the magic of music is for me. It is a pastime I still value and exercise to this day.

Training as a young musician and pianist also put me on track to explore theater at a young age. My stage debut took place when I was in fifth grade, a cameo appearance in the high school production of *Cinderella*. I had no lines. However, my next role was the female lead of the lower school musical *Androcles and the Lion* . As the lead, I had a lot of lines and, I’m not going to lie, I loved it. I continued in musical theatre in a wide variety of parts through all of middle school, all of high school, and even early on into college. My time in theater included playing everyone from an old, over-the-top drama teacher to a naive, newly-wed ingénue to a young boy that can fly. Each part allowed me to verbally and audibly express myself in a new way. The emphasis on speaking in theater is incredible and I don’t doubt it played at least a small part in my love for talking today. Scripts are almost solely dialogue and lyrics. That makes the value of what you are speaking and singing priceless, because it serves as the foundation for

every detail of the entire show. My literacy in speaking was largely shaped by these musical and theatrical experiences that were a near-constant presence in my life growing up and into early adulthood.

The last full-length traditional musical theater show that I was in took place the semester before I started as a communications consultant at the CommLab. At the very beginning of that job, I went through a training period where I observed an experienced consultant in their tutoring sessions and then transitioned to being observed by the experienced consultant while I tutored the student. I felt nervous the first time I was observed, as many would be. I specifically remember that my biggest concern was that I wouldn't know what to say. During my very first session, my observer sat at a table nearby and was doodling away on a scrap piece of paper the whole time seemingly not paying too much attention. Overall, I felt that the session went well, given that it was my first. When we met afterwards to discuss how the session went, the observer showed me his drawing. It displayed a person with a mouth as wide as the paper, spewing out as many words as the artist was able to draw fitting inside. His drawing helped me understand that I didn't need to take up all the airspace by talking the whole time and saying everything I could possibly think of to help the student, as I had done in that first session. As a consultant, my goal was to help students become better communicators themselves. Simply telling them what to fix right up front wasn't going to better the communicator, just the paper. To better the communicator, I needed to function more like a guide to help hone the student's intuition for the long run. The best way to guide wasn't to cram a non-stop stream of advice into the thirty minutes that we have together. It looked more like asking questions that helped shepherd the student's mind in the right direction,

and giving enough space and silence in a session to allow the student to think through those questions themselves and come to conclusions on their own. It was only when they had the chance to see their own communicating patterns that I was able to equip them with tools that they could run with to better their communicating, not short-term fixes that wouldn't have any lasting impact on their skill. In the context of literacy in speech, tutoring requires just as much listening as it does actually talking.

Looking at my musical and performing background, the same concept has always applied. As a performer, there is just as much (and sometimes more) power in the pauses between lines of dialogue or right after the climax of a song as there is in the words or notes themselves. The pauses are the moments when you can see a character at their most vulnerable, taking the moment to process and grow internally before your very eyes. The pauses birth the motives that spur what a character or a melody does next. These breaks in speech or song are just as revealing to both the character and the audience. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart described this beautifully when he said, "Music is not in the notes, but in the silence between." As someone who has spent the majority of my life in the abstract and creative world of performing, using the silences and pauses to deepen a performance is something I was trained to do early on, so it now comes quite naturally and almost subconsciously in those contexts. But seeing that concept applied in an area of life as concrete and real as tutoring made me more aware of it than I ever had been. I'm grateful to have learned this early on in my time at the CommLab, because it gave me the opportunity to look for that perfectly balanced dance between speaking and listening in each tutoring session. Seeing that dance in tutoring every week made me more aware of that in

day-to-day life as well. I still very much value and enjoy processing out loud in conversation with other people. I still sing my heart out on a regular basis as a form of self-expression. But I no longer talk people's heads off for hours on the phone after intense three-hour conversations.