

THE PROCESS

Clarity | Nuts + Bolts

Craig Smith

Craig // Welcome to Clarity, a podcast all about helping you communicate God's Truth with power and...clarity. I'm Craig Smith, the host here at Clarity and I am really honored that you would take a little time out of your day to invest in sharpening the gift of communication that God's given you. I believe you're going to find this to be time well-spent, because when our message gets clearer, our mission gains momentum. And I know that you aren't communicating just to be heard... you're communicating to change lives, to advance the Gospel and to bring God honor and glory. And all of those things happen more effectively when our preaching gets clearer.

So today is another one of our pre-launch Nuts and Bolts episodes. The full podcast, which will be bringing you interviews with great Christian communicators each month, will launch this Fall, but in preparation for that launch, we're bringing you these short, hyper-focused episodes that give you super practical ways to start getting clearer as a communicator.

And that focus today is on the process of preparing clear messages.

One of the most common questions I'm asked preaching is just about my process: how do I go about crafting a message from start to finish? So today I'm going to share what I believe are the six key stages of message preparation.

And if I can get a little creative in the way I do that...I'm going to compare it to building a sand castle.

I love to build sand castles. I don't really remember ever doing it when I was a kid, but as soon as I became a dad, I jumped into it with both feet. My wife and I have two daughters and this is just something we've always done together. We still do, actually, even though both of our kids are teenagers now. Rochelle is in college and Lynae is a sophomore in High School, but we still build sand castles together every chance we get.

And what I've realized is that there are a lot of parallels between the steps to building a sand castle and crafting a message. So I'm going to share those six steps with you today:

1. The first stage is the **dream stage**. It's the moment where you go "oh, wouldn't it be great if we built this cool thing." And the earlier that you start dreaming about this thing you're going to build, the better it's going to be. We don't live near a beach, so we only build sand castles when we're on vacation somewhere near the ocean. But we actually start to dream about building sand castles long before we get to the beach. We start talking about building sand castles before we even pack for vacation. And what that means is we make sure we pack tools that we'll need when we get to the beach and start construction. Sometimes I even make a special trip to Walmart or search Amazon for cheap, light kids tools that would help us build a great sand castle...then we have those with us when we start the actual construction. In message creation, I do a similar thing. For a long time now I've made sure I'm dreaming about a sermon series at least 6 months out. Recently I've made the commitment to making that a full year. So I actually go away for a week in May and plan the message series for the entire next calendar year. I use an excel sheet and I have 52 rows and 6 columns where I put down the series title, the passage of Scripture, the general theme of that passage and any early ideas I have about creative elements. What I'm doing is starting to dream about a series and even the individual messages in that series a long time before I have to sit down and actually write a message. And I look at that document throughout the months leading up to a series and make new notes about ideas. Also, I share that list with my team at church and let them suggest ideas along the way. What that means is that when I get to the week where I need to actually write an individual message, I have the right tools with me. So that's stage one of building a sand castle and writing a message: dream about...and start your dreaming as much in advance as you can.

2. The second stage is the **Collection Stage**. When you build a sand castle, you find the spot where you're going to build it, you get all your tools together, you dig a pit down to the waterline so that you have good wet sand to work with. In other words, you get everything together that you're going to need to build the actual castle. In message prep, this is the phase where you gain a clear understanding of the intent of the text through study...that study usually provides most of the raw materials that you're going to need to construct the message.

3. The third stage is the **Pile it Up stage**. when you build a sand castle, you almost always start by making a big pile of sand. Now it has the rough floor plan of what you're going to do, but you're usually putting more sand than you're going to end up with in roughly the right places. In message prep, this is all about creating a rough draft of the message. And just so you know, I always manuscript my sermons, meaning that I write out every word that I want to say in the message, including illustrations and stories. The goal is to have a manuscript that I could just read

out loud from the platform on the weekend. Now, I want a manuscript that I could read, but I don't actually do that. I actually don't use any notes when I preach, but this process of manuscripting is an important part of being able to do that and still be super clear. So during this Pile It Up stage, I write out the whole message but, and this is almost always true...the manuscript that I produce at this point is significantly larger than the final message will actually be. Because I'm not worried about getting it perfect at this point. I'm just trying to get everything that needs to be in there...in there...at roughly the right places, like when I pile up mounds of sand for my sand castle.

4. The fourth stage is the **Carving Stage**. In sand castle building, this is the stage where you start carving away at the pile to make smooth lines and sharp edges. To carve out sand to make arches and windows. In message writing, this is where I go back through the rough manuscript and start getting rid of things that really don't need to be there because they don't help move us towards the big idea. I usually find that I take out about 25% of the material from the rough draft at this point because I'm seeing that it just isn't necessary.

5. The fifth stage is the **Decoration Stage**. I have girls, so they always felt that a sand castle wasn't really done until it had been prettied up with seashells and pieces of coral and pebble walkways and that kind of stuff. In a similar way, during the Decoration Stage of message creation, I go back and I pretty up key points to make them pop more, to make them memorable or portable. So for instance, I recently did a message where I had an initial point that was something like: "God doesn't ask us to pay him back for his grace, but he does call us to do for others what he has done for us by helping those who are unable to help themselves." That's how I said it during the Pile It Up stage...and it was a point that survived the carving stage because I thought it was necessary to move us towards the big idea of the message...but during the refinement stage I started asking "how can I make this more portable?" How can I make this pop a little more so that it's more memorable? And what I landed on during the decoration stage was "God doesn't expect us to pay Him back, but he does expect us to pay it forward".

6. The final stage is the **Rehearsal Stage**, and here's where the sand castle analogy stops being useful. We don't rehearse the sand castles that we've built, but we have to rehearse the messages that we've crafted before we deliver them. The first time you deliver a message should never be in front of your audience. I usually run through a message 5 or 6 times. The first couple of times I'm actually reading the manuscript. The next few times I'm starting to try to do it without the manuscript. And the last couple of times I just make sure that I know the outline of the message well enough that I really don't need any notes to be able to hit all the main parts of the message.

So those are the six key stages of message development as I see them. The dream stage, the collection stage, the pile it up stage, the carving stage, the decoration stage and the rehearsal stage.

In the next episode I'll actually walk you through my weekly process of message prep so you can see what that looks like in practical terms in my context.

In the meantime, if you have any questions about this content, just shoot me an email at clarity@missionhills.org and I'll not only try to answer it directly, but I might even address it in an upcoming episode of this podcast.

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