

WALK THROUGH

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 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 traction.

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.

In one of our previous Nuts and Bolts episodes, we talked about the process or stages of developing a great message. In today's episode, I'm just going to walk through what that actually looks like in my own life.

Now, I'm not saying you should follow exactly this same pattern. I think every communicator has to find their own rhythm for message development. This is what works best for me, but you'll have to find what works best for you.

Having said that, there are a few things that I think need to be part of everyone's process.

1. Message development needs to be your first priority. It can't be the thing you do after you've already done all the other things clamoring for your time and energy. It's just too important, because preaching is the primary way that you exercise pastoral leadership of a congregation.

Personally, I believe this is true in every size church, because unless you meet with every member of your Congregation one-on-one every single week, then the message you deliver on the weekend is the primary opportunity you have to care for them and challenge them to follow Jesus. I think it's true in small churches and I know it's true in large churches.

I realize that you have a lot of other responsibilities besides message development. Trust me, I know. I lead a pretty good-sized church, which means that I have a lot of responsibilities... and they're all important. I'm constantly working to empower other people to do as many of those things as I can, but there are still a lot of things that I have to be directly involved in. So I totally understand that there are a lot of things competing for your time. But message preparation should be winning that competition every single week. It's that important.

And the only way to make something a priority is to schedule it. So I strongly encourage you to put blocks of message development time into your weekly schedule as permanent appointments.

2. The second common element is that you need to schedule time to work on the message earlier rather than later in the week. Three reasons: first, after you write a rough draft of the message, you need time to revise and if you aren't writing until late in the week, you just won't have the time for as much revision as you should. Second, by the end of the week, you're tired and you're not giving your best self to the process of message creation. Third, if you wait until late in the week to write, you're going to go into the writing feelings stressed and rushed. And I know some of you are thinking that you do your best work when you're stressed and rushed, but you don't. Trust me, you don't.

3. Third, develop a consistent rhythm. If the basic process that you use to develop your messages is different every week, it is very difficult to gain traction. You'll probably need to experiment a little to find the best rhythm for you, but my recommendation is that once you've found it, stick to it as much as possible.

Ok, let's just recap the six stages of message development that I talked about last time: There's the dream stage, the collection stage, the pile it up stage, the carving stage, the decoration stage and the rehearsal stage.

What I'm going to do for the rest of our time today is just kind of walk you through what that looks like for me on a weekly basis.

1. We'll start with the dream stage: I start dreaming about a series as much as a year and a half out. I actually take a week in the spring to go away and plan out each week's message for the next calendar year. It's a rough draft and it's always open to modification as we

go, but planning that far out allows me to get a huge jump start on potential resources, insights, illustrations, approaches and whatever, long before I have to sit down and start writing actual Messages.

2. I do the collection stage and the pile it up stage on Mondays. Mondays is all about sermon prep for me, so I don't take any meetings other than my 5 minute daily check in with my exec team. The whole day is devoted to getting the rough draft of the manuscript finished. I usually have the rough draft in hand by 4pm or so on Monday afternoon. That usually takes between 6 and 8 hours for me. If time permits, I might start the carving stage a little on Monday too.

3. On Tuesday mornings, I walk through the rough manuscript with a planning team and get feedback on what works and what doesn't. They usually have great ideas for ways to get something across and they have fantastic insight into the parts of the message that really resonated and I need to push into a little bit more. I try to take at least a half hour right after that meeting to carve up the manuscript based on their feedback.

4. I typically have some time blocked out on Wed afternoon to continue carving and then move into the decoration stage. I like to do this in the afternoon because I find that, while I'm more analytical in the morning, I'm more creative in the early afternoon. So I try to take some time Wed afternoon to think about how to make key elements of the message more portable and memorable.

5. Then I try to have an hour or two on Thursday to continue refining things and maybe even to start rehearsing. I like to rehearse as soon as possible because I find that when I say things out loud, I see them in a different light which often leads to useful changes.

6. Friday and Saturday morning I try to leave the message alone completely, at least on the conscious level. I try not to think about it much at all. But my subconscious is still chewing on it so when I get to the office on Saturday around noon, I often find that I have immediate insights into how to make things clearer and more impactful.

7. So even as I'm rehearsing on Saturday afternoon for about 3 hours, I'm making small decorative modifications along the way. Our church has a Saturday night service at 5, so that's the first time I deliver the message.

In my early days preaching, I usually spent 20-25 hours each week getting a message ready, but over time, I've gotten quicker at some parts of it. These days, I find that I usually put in about 15 hours on a message.

So that's my process. if you have any questions about my rhythm or if there's any way I can help you find your own rhythm, 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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