Have You Heard Me?
By Terisa Green

Just at this moment, right now, no matter where you might be while you're reading this, you are experiencing the perfect sound bite – guaranteed, absolutely *no* exceptions.

How do I know?

Back in 1968, the average political sound bite in a newscast was 42.3 seconds long. Today, it's 8 – that's right, only 8 seconds. Maybe that shouldn't come as a surprise since the average attention span of humans is, by no small coincidence, about 8 seconds. So, as a writer, I need to make my point in 8 seconds or less, or risk losing the attention of a reader. It just so happens that the average adult reading speed is somewhere between 200 and 300 words per minute. Choosing a reading speed of 200 words per minute means that only about 27 words can be read in 8 seconds. If you go back to the first sentence, you'll see that it's 27 words long. Even so, it manages to convey the central point of this article, while putting your experience at the forefront, and using memorable trigger words such as "perfect", "guaranteed", and "absolutely". That first sentence was designed specifically to fit all these criteria.

The same timing criteria apply to public speaking**.** In fact, most studies done on attention span and retention have been done specifically with public speaking, audio, and video in mind – especially advertising. In his book, *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less*, Milo Frank notes that almost all radio and television commercials fall into the 30 second range. Advertisers know from their media research that the average person can tolerate only so much information in one continuous flow. The length of such a flow is about 30 seconds. Indeed, it's been said that if you can't say it in 30 seconds, you probably can't say it at all. Public speaking opportunities, however, whether they are at Toastmaster's, a social gathering, or in the workplace, rarely come in a neat 30 second package.

As public speakers, we can look again to the industry that has put so much research time into how to convey information and retain attention. Many news stories are longer than 30 seconds. But their segments – the setup, the interview, the summary – are each 30 seconds long. This fact is the important one for public speaking. As we design our speeches, we can adhere to the 30 second segment rule as well. No matter the topic of a speech, or its total length, we can vary our information flow to the audience. For example, a one minute introduction to a five minute speech might be two 30 second segments – a 30 second hook (something to grab interest) and then perhaps an outline of the rest of the speech. The three minutes of the body of the speech might then be well suited to three pieces of information, each delivered with two 30 second segments. Or, the three minute body might be two pieces of information of 90 seconds, each broken down into a 30 second segment – the setup, the meat, the summary. It might seem like overkill for a short speech, but in reality we must understand the limits of our audience or we risk their not being able to listen to us. Add to the attention span issue the fact that we speak and listen at very different speeds. We speak much more slowly than we read, only about 125 words per minute. We are able to process spoken words, however, at a blazingly fast 700 words per minute. To keep the attention of an audience, who can process information much more rapidly than we can give it, we can, at a minimum, attempt to conform to the 30 second segment.

Finally, what if our public speaking opportunity is much greater than five minutes, say, an hour? According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the general continuous attention span of an adult is 8 to 14 minutes. Here again, television broadcasts capitalize on this type of behavior by switching to a set of commercials in this time frame. As public speakers, rather than test the limits of that span, we need to cater to it. A one hour speech might potentially be broken down into five segments of 12 minutes each. While the overarching topic may not change from one 12 minute segment to the next, we could, for example, change perspectives. Our one hour speech will be on the new food pyramid that was released by the government last month. Perhaps there are tiers or sections to the pyramid that naturally dictate the number of segments we should use in a hour. Let's say that there are four levels to the food pyramid and that we'll spend roughly 12 minutes on each one (leaving the remaining 12 minutes of the hour for an introduction, summary, close, questions, etc.). In one 12 minute segment, in addition to switching from dairy to protein, perhaps we can ask the audience to switch perspectives and review their own eating habits compared with those of their parents, as a tool for discussing different meats, for example. Perhaps we can use visual aids in the discussion of vegetables, using two platters heaped with the different quantities recommended by the old and new food pyramids. The possibilities are endless for how we can vary our segments. But the critical point is that there are very specific time limits to the attention spans of our audiences, even over relatively long periods of time.

Are you still with me?

This article was designed with a 1,000 word limit in mind, typically considered a short article length across a range of different types of publications. It should have taken you anywhere from about 4 to 5 minutes to read it, keeping you well under the general continuous attention span time limit. In attempting to cater to reading speeds and attention spans, I hope to increase the chances that what I've written is actually read. In designing and timing our speeches, we do much the same. Going from the 8 second sound bite to the 30 second segment to 14 minutes of continuous attention is a progression, each block building on the previous, with an end product a length of our choosing and our design. In attempting to use these numbers to our advantage in speeches, we can hope to increase not only our public speaking ability but also the chances that when we have spoken, we have been heard.