

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## IF YOU WANT A LECTURER

**Mortimer Adler**

Last year Good Housekeeping published an article by Gretta Palmer entitled “How To Look After a Lecturer.” She gave clubwomen good advice about how to entertain celebrities. Her list of “Don’ts” and “do’s” was compiled from the experiences of lecturers and their managers. “They ought to know,” she said. And, as one of the lecturers, I can vouch for the soundness of her precepts. I have been tempted to get her rules printed on a card to carry with me when I am on tour.

There is another problem, however, which Mrs. Palmer did not touch. That is the problem of how to pick lecturers you will enjoy listening to. You have to look for them, before you can look after them. Program chairmen face this problem annually. The women’s clubs of this country are probably the largest group of organizations in the market for lecturers. I would hesitate to say what their annual purchasing power was, but I am sure that the “lecture business” is largely supported by them. Despite that fact, they *take* the lecturers which the high pressure tactics of the leading lecture bureaus “recommend” to them. They don’t really pick their lecturers. They only seem to. And one reason for this is that most program

chairmen do not have a clear enough notion of how to get what they want – how to avoid imitations and substitutes.

They do know what they want. It is a very simple thing after all. Audiences want to hear something they do not already know. They want to have their minds stimulated by questions they had not thought of, or by answers to old problems which make these perennials come to life again. They do not want to be bored. They are not only anxious to entertain a lecturer properly; they also want to be properly entertained by him – and why I say “properly entertained” I do not mean “amused” or “relaxed” as by a movie. Lecturers are not to be confused with other forms of entertainment, even though most lecture bureaus use the theatrical word “attraction” for their speakers. A lecture should be entertaining in its own way – not as a sedative or as recreation, but in the same way that all good education is entertaining, through being stimulating and attractive to the mind.

Clubwomen, who make up the largest group of lecture audiences know this. Their program chairmen know this. Yet, year after year, there are more lecturers on the programs who do not meet this basic requirement than those who do. I have been told again and again by clubmembers about their disappointments – the “big names” they have looked forward to, only to be exasperated by tivialities, or bored by vacuity. I usually tell them frankly that the fault is largely their own. If they had picked lecturers who have something to say and who can say it well, they would not have suffered through so many dreary sessions. If these same women furnished their homes or stocked their larders with as poor an eye for the real thing, or with as little discrimination, the American home would not be the comfortable place it is.

When I say that the fault is largely their own, I am not forgetting that the clubs or their program makers may be misled by the circulars, posters, and publicity which the lecture bureaus send out each year. My point is that if they kept clearly in mind what it was they wanted, they could not be so frequently and so easily deceived by all the bally-ho. Let me mention two obvious mistakes they could readily avoid making.

A good lecturer may be a celebrity, but a celebrity need not be a good lecturer. He or she may have achieved fame through well-deserved eminence in some line of work that is neither educational nor related to the abilities of an instructive and stimulating speaker. If “Babe” Ruth or Sonje Henie, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. or Wallis Warfield Windsor ever decided to go on a lecture tour, they would

have no difficulty in getting a full booking. The audiences would discover, of course, that they had paid for the pleasure of looking at or shaking hands with the celebrity, but not for the pleasure of *listening*, which, after all, is what an audience should be bargaining for. If women's clubs and other audience groups want that sort of thing, no one has any right to complain; but if what they *want* is a lecturer, then *they* have no right to complain when, with their eyes open, they pick a "big name" for its own sake. Commercial lecture forums may have to pick the "big names" in order to sell tickets in large quantity, but the women's clubs have no such excuse.

The other mistake, though somewhat similar, is not so obvious. It is the confusion of literary with lecturing ability. The ability to write well is not guarantee of a decent performance on the platform. A good lecturer, like any good teacher, has to have something of the actor's ability, and also something of the trained orator's skill in public speech. He has to have a certain presence and poise on the platform, a certain fluency of expression, and at least a moderate eloquence – clarity, force, and audibility. Stammering and mumbling, stage-freight, and self-consciousness, will spoil any lecture. Now there is no reason why a great novelist should be free from such defects and disabilities. His skill as a writer is unaffected by them. Being the author of a best-seller does not depend on elocution and histrionics. Despite the fact that no one should expect a "best-seller" to be a good talker, thousands of lecture audiences are disappointed each year by the currently famous authors on their programs. They have only themselves to blame for not inquiring whether the literary light can speak and, even if he can, what he has to say.

The program chairman may come back at me by saying that the lecture bureaus have no right to send out people who cannot speak and have little to say. No *right*, of course, but business is business, and in the lecture business, as in any other, *caveat emptor!* It is the customer's responsibility not to buy bogus articles – in the case of lecturers as with every other commodity. The lecturer is, after all, not a gift horse, and can be looked in the mouth.


But, the program chairman may still insist, there is no way of telling, from all the bally-ho the bureaus send out, which of the names on the list are real lecturers and which are "attractions" of another sort. That may be so in some instances, but for the most part the advertising literature does betray, often inadvertently, the significant facts. The lecturer's titles are announced, usually accompanied by brief descriptions of what the lectures are about. The lecturer's claim to fame – and thereby to an audience – are glowingly

recited. The program chairman should be wary in proportion as the lecturer's fame is made much of – especially his fame for other things, in fields remote from lecturing. She should pay most attention to the description of the lecture itself, and when in doubt whether it is going to be worth listening to, she should write the lecture bureau for an amplification. If this were done more frequently, the bureaus might try to be more careful and helpful in their advertising.

Let me summarize my advice in a few “don'ts” to be followed by any group that is seriously interested in listening to good lectures and wishes to avoid all the usual substitutes.

- (1) Don't get taken in by the “star system.” Don't pick big names, unless your main interest is in the lion and not his roar.
- (2) Don't be fooled by the fact that writers and speakers both deal in words. The written and the spoken word belong to different arts. Most good writers should be read. Few deserve to be listened to.
- (3) Don't engage famous foreigners – even if they have some fame as lecturers – unless you make sure that they not only can speak, but can speak English.
- (4) Don't try to have a brand new set of lecturers each year. A lecturer who has proved that he has something to say deserves a second hearing. It is the silly demand for new names and faces every year which gives so many “phonies” currency in the lecture circuit.
- (5) Don't pick a lecturer in terms of age, sex, profile, family connections, scandals, etc. None of these make him interesting on the platform, however much they may suggest his attractiveness in a drawing room or elsewhere. Pick a lecturer for what he has to say and for his ability to say it; and make the lecture bureau give you creditable information on the relevant facts.

Underlying all these “don'ts,” there is, of course, one “if.” These rules apply only *if* you want a lecturer and not some other sort of entertainer. And if you do, there is one more “don't” I must add. Don't avoid choosing a good lecturer because you've heard or fear that he will talk over the audience's head. Everyone knows that the worst experience one can have, as part of an audience, is to be talked down to. It is worse than boring; it is insulting. A lecture which is not a little over your head is not worth listening to at all. This does not mean that a good lecturer must be high-brow or academic. Far from it: the high-brow lecturer is insulting in another way – by condescending flattery. What I mean is simply that the

lecturer should have something to say that everyone does not already know. What you do not know or have not thought about must, in consequence, be a little over your head. But that very fact makes the lecture do its proper work – of lifting your head up to a little higher level of knowledge and understanding. 

*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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