

THE REAL STORY OF THE KING'S SPEECH

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story looks at the Academy Award-winning film *The King's Speech*. The film chronicles the efforts of King George VI to overcome a speech impediment at a time when Great Britain needed to hear a voice of hope and inspiration.

It's not like he had a choice. Prince Albert—born into the House of Windsor, the second son of King George V—was bound by his birthright to speak for the monarchy to the people of England and, by extension, to the people of the Commonwealth. The problem Albert faced was that he couldn't utter more than a few sentences publicly without stuttering awkwardly. Imagine being in such a public position and having so many people witness your struggle to speak.

With the unwavering support of his wife, Elizabeth, the prince tried numerous therapies to correct what he referred to as his "speech defect." Little progress was made until his wife discovered an eccentric speech therapist—with no recognized credentials—whose radical therapies appeared promising. His name was Lionel Logue.

An Australian immigrant, Logue had moved to London to pursue an acting career. While his main goal of becoming a renowned actor never really materialized, he did manage to establish himself as a successful speech therapist. Logue's approach to speech therapy involved a unique blend of theatrical techniques and clever exercises that brought rhythm and confidence to his patients. His empathy and compassion, along with sound teaching practices, took his stuttering students to new heights, as they became able to communicate with a clarity they had never imagined.

This is precisely what happened with Prince Albert. Eventually Logue was able to teach him how to speak to the beat of his own rhythm, thus making his public speaking more clear and concise. As it turned out, Albert would need to be at the top of his game because, in 1936, his elder brother, King Edward VIII, abdicated the throne, making Albert the new king. He chose the title King George VI in honour of his late father and reigned from the time of the abdication until his death in 1952.

The King's stuttering problem was no secret to the people of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. His ascent to the throne coincided with the rapid expansion of radio broadcasting, and there were times when he struggled through his radio speeches. However, by the time George VI assumed the throne, Logue had helped him enough to make the stuttering less noticeable.

The story of King George VI's battle with stuttering became the subject of an Academy Award-winning film called *The King's Speech*. The film, written by screenwriter David Seidler—himself a stutterer—chronicled the friendship between Prince Albert and Lionel Logue from the moment of their first appointment to the King's historic address to the nation as Britain entered the Second World War. *The King's Speech* won four Academy Awards, including the Oscar for Best Picture.

To Consider

1. Why was it important that the King have the ability to speak clearly in public?
2. Are there certain stereotypes or biases that people have toward those that stutter? If so, what might those be?
3. Do you think it is significant that the film *The King's Speech* was written by a man who stutters? Why or why not?

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Video Review

Questions Before Viewing

Take a minute to respond to these questions.

1. Have you ever been afraid to speak out loud? What made you afraid? Did you avoid speaking or did you force yourself to confront your fear?

2. What do you think when you hear a person stutter? Do you assume they are nervous or incapable of speaking properly? What opinions do you form about them when you hear someone stutter?

Questions for Viewing

Record your responses to the following video questions in the spaces provided.

1. Why was the leadership of King George VI so important at the time he assumed the throne?

2. What speech disorder did the King suffer from?

3. Why was David Seidler the ideal person to write the screenplay for *The King's Speech*?

4. a) What happened when Seidler asked the Queen Mother for permission to tell her husband's story?

- b) How long did he have to wait to make the film?

5. How did you feel while watching the King—either the one portrayed in the film or the actual footage of King George VI—struggle to deliver his speeches? What thoughts occurred to you while you watched?

6. What efforts were made to cure the King of his stammer?

7. According to his grandson Mark Logue, what was the real Lionel Logue like?

8. a) By what name does Logue call the soon-to-be king in the film?

b) Why does Sarah Bradford think that this sort of familiarity was unlikely?

9. According to his former patient George Metcalfe, what made Logue such an effective speech therapist?

10. How did Prince Albert's father respond to his stuttering?

11. How grateful was Albert for Logue's efforts?

12. What happened to the young prince when his father discovered he was writing with his left hand?

13. According to speech therapist Elaine Kelman, stuttering is not caused by emotional trauma. What does she believe causes stuttering?

14. What did Logue do to help King George VI deliver his historic address on the first day of the Second World War?

15. Why does the story of friendship and courage depicted in *The King's Speech* appeal to so many people?

16. What role did Canada play in preparing the King for the speech that is presented in the film?

Post-viewing Question

How did viewing the video affect your opinion of people who stutter? Would you behave differently around someone who stutters based on what you have learned?

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And the Oscar goes to . . .

Focus for Reading

In your opinion, how accurate are the Academy Awards in terms of determining the best in motion pictures?

The Stuttering Writer

David Seidler knew first-hand the pain associated with stuttering. He developed his stutter after his family fled Britain for the United States during the Second World War. Just a toddler at the time, Seidler's family was travelling in a convoy of three ships when Italian submarines attacked them. One of the boats sank, but Seidler's vessel escaped and made its way to New York. However, the attacks terrified Seidler, not quite three years old at the time, and shortly after landing in the U.S., he developed a stutter. The condition stayed with him until he was 16.

Seidler tried just about everything to overcome his speech disorder. Eventually he came to a realization, which he shared in an interview with the CBC. Seidler said, ". . . basically my thought process went like this: Well, this is unfair. Why have the gods inflicted this upon me? . . . I'm not a bad chap. And if I'm stuck with stuttering . . . [y]ou're stuck with listening to me. I have a voice. I have a right to be heard. And that psychological turning of the corner is vastly liberating, and my stutter just melted away within two weeks" (*The National*, "When the King spoke," February 24, 2011).

Writing an Inspiring Story

One source of inspiration during Seidler's long battle with his stutter was King George VI. When he struggled to speak, his parents would remind him that even the King had trouble speaking. Eventually Seidler researched the life of the King and found very

little on the topic of the monarch's speech impediment. As his career as a screenwriter began to take shape, Seidler kept the idea of the stuttering King on the back burner until he came to the realization that he really wanted to tell George VI's story. So he wrote the Queen Mother a letter asking for permission to proceed. Her reply was delivered on Buckingham Palace stationery, thanking him for his request, but denying him permission to tell the story while she was alive. "Not during my lifetime," she responded. "The memory of those events is still too painful" (*The Globe and Mail*, January 26, 2011).

Seidler accepted the Queen Mother's request and figured he wouldn't have to wait too long. After all, she was in her 70s when he wrote to her. Even if she lived another 15 years, he would still have time to tell the story. Well, the Queen Mother lived to the age of 101, forcing Seidler to wait 28 years. Nonetheless, once he got started he was determined to bring the story to life. After he finished the first draft of his screenplay, Seidler shared it with his wife, who was also his writing partner.

She convinced him to rewrite it as a play because the story was essentially about an unlikely friendship between two people. So Seidler wrote a play about King George VI and his speech therapist, Lionel Logue. The play eventually made it to the stage and was seen by the mother of director Tom Hooper. She called her son after the performance and told him she had just seen a great

Did you know . . .

It cost \$15-million to make *The King's Speech*. By the time it won the Academy Award for Best Picture it had made over \$130-million.

play that would make a great film. After looking into the prospect, Hooper agreed with his mother and took on the project.

Meanwhile, without Seidler knowing it, someone had dropped the script for *The King's Speech* off at the home of actor Geoffrey Rush in Australia. Seidler had always envisioned Rush playing Lionel Logue when he was writing the story. He didn't really hide this fact, so one of his associates took the liberty of hand-delivering the screenplay to the actor. Rush like what he read and contacted Seidler about bringing the film to the screen.

Making the Movie

With Hooper and Rush on board, all that needed to be done was to convince investors to put their money into a movie about a king who stutters. As you can imagine, this was no easy task. However, the producers were able to drum up \$15-million—a modest amount for a historical drama that was going to require elaborate costumes and sets. But this was enough to get the film into production. By this time, Seidler had worked through 50 drafts of the screenplay for *The King's Speech*.

Follow-up

1. How did Seidler tame his stutter?
2. Why might it have been difficult to convince a Hollywood studio to make a film of *The King's Speech*?
3. How is there a kind of poetic justice in David Seidler's victory at the Academy Awards?
4. Compare your response with the Focus for Reading from the beginning of this two-page feature.

The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). Audiences immediately loved it, with the 2 000 people attending the premiere giving a standing ovation to the filmmakers. Seidler said of the ovation, "I was overwhelmed because for the first time ever, the penny dropped and I felt I had a voice and had been heard. For a stutterer, it's a profound moment" (*Newsweek*, November 22, 2010).

The movie gained momentum after TIFF and eventually emerged as a favourite heading into Oscar nomination season. In the end, *The King's Speech* received 12 Academy Award nominations and won four. The film was crowned best picture as well as taking Oscars for best actor (Colin Firth), best director (Tom Hooper), and best screenplay (David Seidler).

For Seidler it marked the end of a very long journey. From a stuttering boy to an accomplished screenwriter, Seidler had made it to the top—even if he did have to wait a quarter century to tell the most inspirational story of his life. At the age of 73, the writer had certainly shown the world that he had a voice.

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A Canadian Connection

Definition

Abdication occurs when a monarch gives up the office of king or queen.

Reading Prompt

In the play *Twelfth Night* William Shakespeare writes, "Be not afraid of greatness; some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them." While reading the following information, keep this quote in mind.

Scandal and Abdication

Prince Albert probably never wanted to admit to himself that he could become king. It was unlikely that he, the second son of King George V, ever would unless something dramatic happened. After all, abdication was rare in British history, and when it did happen it usually reflected rival political or military ambitions that forced the monarch from power.

But Albert did become king, and it was because of the decisions made by his elder brother, Edward. Edward fell madly in love with a married American socialite named Wallis Simpson. After his father, King George V died early in 1936, Edward assumed the role of monarch. However, his fondness for Simpson—still not formally divorced from her second husband—did not abate, and their affair caused quite a stir.

King Edward decided to marry Wallis Simpson after her divorce was finalized. But when this information came to light, the politicians of Great Britain felt they had to do something to stop the King from making a mockery of the monarchy. After all, they did not want Wallis Simpson, twice divorced and the subject of many scandalous rumours, to become their queen.

British politicians weren't alone. Other commonwealth leaders, as well as many British citizens, didn't want King Edward VIII to bring scandal to the throne either. Governor General Lord Tweedsmuir told the British government that while Canadians loved

King Edward VIII, they would not stand behind him if he married Simpson. Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King also made it clear that if the King wanted to marry her, he would need to abdicate the throne.

Eventually King Edward VIII met with British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and told him that he planned to marry Wallis Simpson. Baldwin informed the King that the people of Great Britain and the Empire would not tolerate the constitutional crisis he was creating and advised him to give up the throne. So Edward resigned, abdicating the throne and handing the title of King to his younger brother Albert.

The Reluctant King

Suddenly Albert found himself in a position that terrified him on a number of levels. Certainly he was aware of his royal responsibilities. He had undergone the training and education befitting a member of the royal family. But Edward was the one who was subject to the more intense scrutiny and training because he was the eldest son—the one who would inherit the position of king.

Complicating matters was an uncomfortable family secret that stood to become very public: Albert suffered from a terrible stutter. Certainly he had tamed the stutter quite a bit over the years but he was about to become the voice of the British Empire in an era where his words would be broadcast to British subjects at home and around the world on the radio.

Coronation and a Trip to Canada

Albert chose the title George VI to let his kingdom know that he would restore stability to the monarchy—something they were used to under his father’s rule. After his coronation in 1937, the King assumed control of royal affairs. His first order of business was to rebuild the reputation of the monarchy. He did this in both action and words. A devoted family man and skilled administrator, George VI righted the royal ship and brought a sense of order to a chaotic situation. Once stability was restored, he prepared to embark on his first tour as King—a tour that would take him across the Atlantic by ship and onto a train that carried him across Canada.

The King and Queen arrived in Canada in May 1939. People responded to the royal couple with warmth and appreciation. In Ottawa, the King met with officials at Rideau Hall and openly recognized Canada’s independence as reflected in the Statutes of Westminster of 1931. In Montreal, over 60 000 school children welcomed the royal couple to Canada and, while attending

one public dinner engagement, the King felt compelled to get up from his seat to acknowledge the cheers of the thousands of people who had gathered outside. In Winnipeg, the King delivered his broadcast to the Empire with barely a sign of his stutter. In fact, in the four speeches that George VI made in Canada, none showed significant signs of the paralyzing stutter that he had demonstrated just a few years earlier.

When the trip came to an end, after two months and nearly 7 000 kilometres on a train, enthusiastic Canadians bade farewell to the King and Queen. Canadians were unaware that by the fall, the world would be at war again and George VI, their reluctant King, would be back in the spotlight, hoping to inspire the Empire in a new fight against a common enemy. Some say the speech George VI made just after the outbreak of war was the most significant of his reign. Many Canadians wonder if his tour of Canada, and the speeches he made here, prepared him for this pivotal moment in his public life.

To Consider

Review the quote cited at the beginning of this article. How did King George VI respond when he had greatness thrust upon him?

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Stuttering

Further Research

Contact the Canadian Stuttering Association for more information at www.stutter.ca.

Questions Before Reading

What would you do if, halfway through telling a story, you couldn't continue speaking or your words weren't coming out clearly? How would you feel? What thoughts would be running through your mind? How do you think the people you were sharing your story with would react?

What is stuttering?

Stuttering, or stammering, is a communication disorder characterized by repetition, prolongation, or stoppages

when certain words and syllables are pronounced. The following chart should help explain the differences. Our sample sentence will be: "I like pizza."

Stuttering characteristic	Example	Description
Repetition	I li-li-li-like pizza.	The 'li' sound repeats.
Prolongation	I l-l-l-l-like pizza.	The 'l' sound is held for a prolonged period.
Stoppages	I (pause) like pizza.	The pause between 'I' and 'like' presents a break in the flow of the speaker's ideas.

Sources: Canadian Stuttering Association, www.stutter.ca; The Stuttering Foundation, www.stutteringhelp.org

Stuttering affects over 300 000 Canadians, with males being four times more likely to stutter than females. Most people who stutter grow out of the disorder but, in about 20 per cent of cases, the condition persists. While strategies can be employed to improve stuttering, there is no cure.

What Stuttering Is Not

Stuttering is not a reflection of a person's intelligence. People who stutter do not have a problem thinking about the words they want to say. Stuttering comes somewhere between the thinking and the saying. People who do not stutter have the ability to think and say words in a kind of closed circuit where an almost immediate connection between thought and speech is executed. People who stutter suffer some sort of break in the circuit. While researchers continue to investigate the precise causes of stuttering, a concise answer has yet to be found.

Stuttering is not an anxiety disorder. While people who stutter often display signs of anxiety while speaking, this anxiety is a result of social angst associated with being unable to speak fluently. People who stutter tend to feel stigmatized by society. As a result, anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, and stress are often characteristics that develop in people who stutter.

The Causes of Stuttering

Genetics

About 60 per cent of people who stutter have an immediate or extended family member who also stutters.

Child Development

Children who suffer from other speech problems are more likely to stutter.

Speech Processing Difficulties

Researchers have found that people who stutter process speech information differently than people who don't

stutter. Most researchers believe there is something in a stutterer's neurophysiology—their nervous system—that causes the speech disorder.

Family Dynamics

Children from families with high behavioural or academic expectations or a fast-paced lifestyle may be more likely to stutter.

Treatments for Stuttering Fluency-Shaping Therapy

This therapy focuses on breathing, phonation (sounds emanating via the vocal chords), and articulation (manipulating the lips, jaw and tongue to shape words). Essentially the person is taught to speak fluently by slowing the rate of speech so that consonants and vowels can be connected effectively and efficiently. As the patient develops their skills in therapy, the pace is increased until a more natural speaking rate is established.

Electronic Devices

Some electronic devices have been developed to help people who stutter. The devices look like a hearing aid and are used to provide people who stutter with immediate feedback regarding what they are saying. In other words, the person speaks, the device picks up the sound—sometimes altering the sound's frequency and pitch—and gives the person a rapid indication of what they

are saying. In many cases, this kind of auditory feedback can dramatically reduce a person's stutter.

Stuttering Modification Therapy

This therapy doesn't try to eliminate stuttering, it just tries to make the disorder easier to live with. In a sense, Stuttering Modification Therapy teaches people who stutter strategies that allow them to stutter less. It also teaches them how to deal with their fear of stuttering and to get rid of unproductive coping mechanisms like avoiding speaking.

Medication

There are some medications that can help to diminish the effects of stuttering. As with any medication, patients need to contend with potential side effects.

What You Can Do

- This should be obvious but it needs to be said: don't make fun of, tease, or insult any person who stutters.
- Don't finish the person's words or sentences.
- Be patient and maintain eye contact to let the person know you are listening.
- Ask the person to repeat what they have said if you didn't understand rather than pretending you understood them.
- Don't tell a person who is stuttering to relax. Stuttering is not caused by an inability to relax. It is a speaking disorder that is very difficult to overcome.

Follow-up

1. Define stuttering.
2. Why might someone who stutters feel that people view them as unintelligent?
3. Which causes of stuttering are biological? Which causes come from a person's home life or environment?
4. Which of the treatments for stuttering do you think shows the most promise? Give reasons for your choice.
5. How has reading this information changed the way you view people who stutter? How will it affect your behaviour in the future?

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Activity

Your Task

Write a review of *The King's Speech*.

Instructions

1. Study the movie.

A movie reviewer is more than an audience member. A reviewer studies the movie they are watching, noting key scenes, filmmaking techniques, music, and acting. Take notes while watching the movie so you can keep track of your thoughts.

2. Gather some background information.

Go to a site like the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) to get some background information on the movie. Get the names of the actors and review the storyline before writing.

3. Make an outline of your review before writing, following a format like this:

Paragraph 1 – A clear introduction to the film that includes your opinion of the film

Paragraph 2 – Provides a basic plot summary without spoiling the experience for people who haven't seen the movie. This should be a short paragraph.

Paragraph 3 – First example that demonstrates why you think the film is successful or unsuccessful, e.g., a key scene, acting, directing, production, cinematography, set design, music, costumes

Paragraph 4 – Second example that demonstrates why you think the film is successful or unsuccessful

Paragraph 5 – Third example—if you think you need a third example—that demonstrates why you think the film is successful or unsuccessful

Paragraph 6—Conclude your review with a clear statement of whether you liked the movie or not. Support your opinion by reiterating some of the points you made earlier in your review.

4. Write your review.

Use the outline you created above and write your review.

Note: At the start of your review indicate your rating of the film. Use a four-star system, with four stars meaning the film was superb and one star meaning the film was not very good. Feel free to use half stars if you wish.

5. Make a good copy and hand it in.

Either neatly write or type your review and submit it to your teacher.