

FAST COMPANY



HOW TO BE A SMOOTH TALKER AND ELIMINATE FILLER WORDS

A SPEAKING COACH EXPLAINS HOW TO ELIMINATE THOSE PESKY “AHS” AND “ERS” FROM YOUR VOCABULARY.

BY ANETT GRANT

“Ask not what your country can, ah, do for you. Ask what, like, you can do for your country.”

Filler words: They may be small, but as this reimagined quote from John F. Kennedy illustrates, little “ahs,” “ers,” and other disfluencies can have a massive effect on your speaking impact.

In fact, the more filler words you use, the more you diminish yourself as a speaker. You may be extremely capable and confident in what you are saying, but when you use too many filler words, your audience’s attention is deflected away from your message and instead becomes focused on you as the messenger. Your audience begins to wonder if you are unsure of yourself. And if they think you are unsure of yourself, they begin to doubt you and they begin to doubt your message.

Another reason filler words are a big deal is because they interrupt the flow of your ideas. The more filler words you use, the more you invite distraction and your ideas constantly skip.

Worse yet, if your audience starts picking up on a particular filler word that you use often, they start focusing on it. They may even start counting—”How many times did he say, ‘uh?’” or “Can you believe how many times she said, ‘like?’”—and you’ll lose your audience to the math.

To clear up your speaking, you need to analyze the patterns of where your “ahs” and “ers” appear. There are three common patterns: transitional, structural, and verbal.

1. TRANSITIONAL

If you notice your filler words come as you shift from one idea to another, then you use them transitionally. Luckily for you, these are the easiest to fix.

The solution here is to use oral bullet points that link each of your supporting ideas to your main idea. Start each bullet point the same way, and stick with it.

For example, if you are asked why getting rid of filler words is important, you could reply, “One of the reasons I think getting rid of filler words is important is because they diminish you as a speaker.”

Provide evidence for that point, and then say, “Another one of the reasons I think getting rid of filler words is important is because they interrupt the flow of your speaking.”

And so on.

By implementing a consistent oral bullet point structure, you won’t stumble and insert filler words while you transition from thought to thought.

2. STRUCTURAL

Structural filler words come in the middle of large, complex sentences. In these cases you are trying to speak like you write: in long and complex sentences.

But speaking is much more like music than writing—you need to get into a rhythm. The key here is to speak in meaningful phrases supported by breaths, with repetitive words to help you get into rhythm. For example, instead of saying “We have to do X, Y, and Z,” say, “We have do X. We have to do Y. We have to do Z.”

Before the invention of writing, knowledge was passed down orally, which required a lot of repetition for knowledge to be remembered—often in the form of chants, prayers, and songs. We still need that repetition when speaking in order to keep our audiences engaged and help ensure they will remember the content. When you get into the flow of speaking in short, rhythmic phrases, you reduce your “ahs” and “ers” dramatically.

3. VERBAL

Verbal filler words are the most difficult to eliminate. Saying words like “s-so” or “d-do,” for instance—or sound repeats—are actually a form of stuttering.

You can tackle these tics by stretching out the vowel sounds in your phrases and sliding your consonants together. For example, instead of saying “bus stop,” say “busstop.” This helps you keep your airflow smooth.

Like pouring a glass of wine, you have to let your sound flow through the phrase. If you start and stop, you’ll end up making a splash, which really messes up your credibility.

The bottom line is that getting rid of filler words is not rocket science—it’s a straightforward process of analysis and action. By taking action today, you can have a greater impact in every conversation and every presentation—particularly when the pressure is on.

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