

How to Stop Saying Um, Uh, and Other Filler Words

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Filler words — including *um* and *uh* — are never written into a speech, and add nothing when a speaker utters them.

Yet these insidious verbal hiccups are ubiquitous, uttered by most speakers in most speeches every day.

Robin Hutchins writes:

I teach a college speech class. The most common struggle my students have is the use of filler words such as um and uh. Do you have a strategy that helps to omit filler words?

What can be done? Is it hopeless?

In this article, we examine why filler words have a negative impact on your effectiveness, and **learn a five-step strategy for reducing them.**

Um... What's the Problem?

Some people adopt a zero tolerance policy when it comes to filler words, believing that a few ruin the delivery and invalidate an otherwise solid speech.

I'm not one of those people. An *occasional* filler word does not trump passion and a great message. Furthermore, I've heard audience members comment that an occasional filler word makes the speaker seem human (and not robotic).

Nonetheless, **speakers should strive to minimize filler words.** They contribute nothing, and weaken your effectiveness as a speaker in two primary ways:

- **Filler words represent verbal static** that has to be filtered out by your audience. (It's one of the [communication barriers](#) cited in a recent article by guest author Stacey Hanke.) Why say it if the audience has to immediately filter it out?
- Repeated and **excessive use of filler words weakens your credibility.** It may be perceived as indicating lack of preparation, lack of knowledge, or lack of passion. All of these perceptions are bad for you.

Filler Sounds, Filler Words, and Filler Phrases

I've started this article using the collective term "filler words," but this is really a convenient shorthand for three related speech fillers:

- **Filler Sounds** — e.g. um, uh, ah, mm
- **Filler Words** – e.g. basically, actually, literally
- **Filler Phrases** – e.g. "I think that," "you know," "what I'm trying to say is"

All of these — and there are more in each category — contribute nothing and could be completely wiped from your vocal patterns without any loss in meaning.

[Note: There are cases where some of the words/phrases do convey meaning, but this is rare.]

A Strategy for Removing Filler Words from Your Speech

I wish there were a switch that could be flipped to strike these from a speaker's vocabulary. (I would flip the switch for myself!) Since the magic switch is elusive, here are the steps I recommend for minimizing these fillers.

Step 1 — Assess how often you are using filler words.

Before you embark on an effort to extinguish filler words, you should assess how frequently you utter filler words in your presentations. There are three easy ways to do this:

1. **Recruit an audience member** to track it and provide feedback. Ask them not only to provide a count of each filler word used, but also to comment on the impact.
2. **Record your voice**, and do an objective analysis. I occasionally do this with a [digital voice recorder](#). This can be done non-obtrusively for nearly any speech you deliver.
3. **Record yourself on video**. This is marginally more obtrusive, but delivers more benefits. You get verbal feedback, but you also get to see the expressions on your face and what happens to your eyes when you are... uh... filling in words.

Your goal in assessment is to answer the following:

- How often are you inserting filler words?
- Are they distracting?
- Are they undermining your credibility?

Step 2 – Understand why you are doing it, and why it is unnecessary.

Filler words — that is, filler sounds, filler words, and filler phrases — are inserted when our brain needs a moment to catch up to our mouth.

In certain contexts, filler words can serve a minor purpose. In a phone conversation, for example, a filler word sends a signal to the other person, which says, “I’m still thinking, and I’m not willing to pass the conversation back to you just yet.” In this way, the filler word *fills* the otherwise dead space, which might indicate that you have completed your thought.

In the majority of public speaking situations, however, this is a completely useless signal. There isn’t any risk of someone in the audience taking over as soon as you go silent for a moment. You don’t need to fill that space to say that you’re thinking. You just need to ... think, and your audience will understand.

Step 3 – Raise your level of preparation.

I have observed my filler word usage is *highest* when my preparation is *lowest*. Failure to prepare adequately has two effects:

1. Your brain needs to “create” words on the fly, as opposed to pulling them from (preparation) memory. This increases cognitive strain, making it more likely that you’ll fall behind.
2. You are (usually) more nervous when unprepared. Feeling nervous makes most people speak quicker, thus making it more likely that your brain won’t keep up.

One additional aspect of preparation, which merits mentioning, is the importance of **adequate rest**. When you are rested, your brain will be sharper, and you will find it easier to articulate your thoughts without stumbling.

Adequate preparation (which has many other benefits) will thus reduce the occurrence of filler words.

Step 4A – Slow down.

Slowing your pace will also reduce those um’s and ah’s because it makes it easier for your brain to keep up. It doesn’t have to be a drastic change; even a modest reduction in pace will help. As an added bonus, speaking a bit slower probably improves the ability of your audience to understand you.

To make this possible, you must **be realistic about your time constraints and the amount of material you have**. As speakers force more and more content into their presentation, they'll have to talk faster and faster to complete it on time. Avoid this temptation.

Step 4B – Embrace the pause.

The best advice I ever received to reduce um's and ah's is to *just pause*. Replace the filler word(s) with silence. Since you've probably become accustomed to using filler words, replacing them with silence will take practice. Commit yourself to the change, and it will happen.

Step 5 – Monitor your progress, and be patient.

Every so often, step back and monitor your progress. Revisit the assessment tasks in Step 1 and compare the results.

- Have you reduced the frequency of filler words in your speech?
- Have you reduced the negative impact on your effectiveness caused by using filler words?
- Do you notice a correlation between preparedness and speaking filler-free?
- Is your pace slower?
- Are you simply pausing when you think about what to say next?



Andrew Dlugan is the editor and founder of *Six Minutes*. He teaches courses, leads seminars, coaches speakers, and strives to avoid Suicide by PowerPoint. He is an award-winning public speaker and speech evaluator. Andrew is a father and husband who resides in British Columbia, Canada.