

Speech Pauses: 12 Techniques to Speak Volumes with Your Silence

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Effective use of speech pauses is a master technique.

If you do it *right*, nobody is conscious of your pauses, but your ideas are communicated more persuasively.

If you do it *wrong*, your credibility is weakened, and your audience struggles to comprehend your message.

In this article, we examine:

- **benefits of effective speech pauses;**
- **techniques for using pauses naturally** (there are more than you think); and
- **communications research** which provides clues to *why* pauses help us communicate effectively.

Benefits of Effective Speaking Pauses

Pausing is one of the most overlooked delivery techniques, but there are many benefits of using pauses effectively.

1. Pauses help your audience understand you.

Pauses allow you to punctuate your spoken words, giving your listeners clues as to when one phrase, one sentence, or one paragraph ends, and the next begins.

Research says:

Brigitte Zellner notes that pauses “participate in rendering human communication more intelligible.” Zellner also points to research by Grosjean and Deschamps (1975), which shows that “the more complex the communicative task, the greater the number of pauses.” She writes:

In other words, pauses “stick out like sore thumbs”, and thus may occupy “beacon” positions in speech, serving to structure the entire utterance for both speaker and listener. By subdividing speech into smaller segments, pauses probably contribute a great deal to the improvement of speech comprehension.

The key takeaway is that your audience doesn’t have the benefit of punctuation, bolding, italics, bullets, and other formatting as in written material. You’ve got to provide that, and pauses are a central way to do it.

2. Pauses help convey emotion.

Research says:

Janet Cahn shows that, along with other linguistic factors, **pauses help to convey emotion**. That is, the placement and duration of pauses should differ depending on whether you are conveying sadness, anger, gladness, or some other emotion.

To capitalize on this, **use pauses authentically** to convey emotion, just as you would during a conversation with a friend or family member.

3. Pauses control the overall pace of your delivery.

Your audience has cognitive limitations, and cannot absorb information beyond a certain rate. Pauses allow you to slow your rate to match their listening capacity.

Research says:

Estelle Campione and Jean Véronis observed that speech consists of short (0.15 seconds), medium (0.50 seconds), and long (1.50 seconds) pauses. Further, they note that read speech (speaking from written text) tends to produce only short and medium pauses, while spontaneous speech (speaking without reading) shows more frequent use of medium and long pauses.

So, if you *must* read a portion of your speech, be sure to **deliberately extend your pauses** to mimic a more natural spontaneous speech style. Otherwise, your audience will have difficulty keeping up.

4. Pauses are healthy.

Lengthy pauses are healthy, allowing you to take deep breaths, swallow, or even drink water. Not only will this aid your brain (by providing more oxygen), but your vocal quality will be enhanced by keeping your mouth and throat lubricated.

5. Pauses help engage your audience.

Speaking *without* pauses means your audience expends all their effort just to keep up with you.

Using pauses, on the other hand, gives your audience **time to reflect on your words**, and start making connections with their own experiences or knowledge in real time. Forming these personal connections with your content is the basis of audience engagement.

6. Pauses replace filler words.

Excessive use of filler words (um, er, ah) undermines your credibility, and signals lack of knowledge, lack of preparation, or lack of authenticity. An earlier Six Minutes article discusses “How to stop saying um, uh, and other filler words.” Using pauses is one of the best ways to do so, while still providing time for you to think of your next words.

7. Pauses let your mind “catch up” to your mouth.

A speaker performs two tasks simultaneously:

- The first task is internal, and involves thinking what to say (and what to do) next.
- The second task is external, and involves vocally projecting those words, using body language, and other interactions with an audience.

Ideally, the internal tasks build up a queue of words and actions for a speaker to deliver, always having words ready when needed. Pausing gives the advantage to the internal task, and helps your mind “catch up” to your mouth.

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Pause Techniques

Now that we’ve examined the benefits of speech pauses, let’s look at the various types of pauses, and when they should be used.

A. The Clause Pause (or the Comma Pause)

Use short pauses in your speech whenever a comma would be used in written language to separate two clauses, or to separate items of a list clearly. For example:

- Wanting to impress my wife on our anniversary *[pause]* I prepared eggs *[pause]* bacon *[pause]* and pancakes for breakfast.

In *Speak Like Churchill, Stand Like Lincoln*, James C. Humes advocates breaking your speech text into a series of short clauses, one per line. Through rehearsal, short pauses are introduced whenever the line ends — at the end of each clause.

B. The Sentence Pause

Use medium pauses in your speech wherever a period (or question mark, or exclamation mark) would be used in written language to separate two sentences. For example:

- We were married ten years ago *[pause]* I still remember my first look at her coming up the aisle.

A sentence pause should generally be longer than a clause pause, just as a period is a more forceful punctuation mark than a comma.

*Beware of the tendency to connect sentences with “and” infinitely. Doing so robs your audience of this critical semantic break.

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C. The Paragraph Pause

Use longer pauses in your speech whenever you are transitioning from one idea to the next, in the same way as paragraphs are used in written language.

Two very common applications for this type of pause are:

- Separate two “points” from one another. e.g. The second benefit of this approach is ... *[pause]* The third benefit of this approach is...
- Separate a story/anecdote diversion from the “normal” speech with paragraph pauses before and after the story.

D. The Emphasis Pause

When you want to emphasize a key word (or phrase), try pausing immediately before and immediately after the key word (or phrase). In tandem with variations in pitch, volume, or intonation, these pauses draw attention to the key word. The preceding pause signals “listen up”, while the succeeding pause says “put that in your memory.”

Before/after a transition or contrast word:

- Folk wisdom suggests picturing your audience naked *[pause]* however *[pause]* I think this is terrible advice.

Before/after a key word:

- Olivia Mitchell offers a cure [pause] called chunking [pause] to eliminate ahs and ums.

Research says:

I was surprised to discover that, in certain cases, “um” helps auditory word recognition. (More precisely, the word immediately following the utterance of “um” is recognized more frequently.) However, Corley and Hartsuiker point out that the same benefit is realized by a silent pause preceding the target word. According to the temporal delay hypothesis, a **delay of any kind immediately before a key word helps listeners remember it.**

E. Rhetorical Question Pause

After you ask your audience a rhetorical question, pause for a little while. This stimulates your audience to engage, to think internally about their answer to your question. The same is true for other ways that you invite silent participation from your audience e.g. *“Think for a moment about how you would feel if...”*

On the other hand, failure to pause after a rhetorical question frustrates your audience. (They’ve been asked a question, and now you are moving on without allowing them time to think about it!)

F. New Visual Pause

When speaking with slide visuals, it’s generally good to pause when switching to a new slide to give your audience a moment to study the visual in silence. When you continue to speak, you signal that the focus should be back to you. Simple images require only a short pause before continuing; more complicated visuals require a longer pause. (Of course, you should simplify visuals as much as possible...)

G. “I’m in Thought” Pause

Despite your best intentions at speech preparation and moderating your pace, you will sometimes find that you get ahead of yourself, with your lips locked as your brain searches for the next word. You may feel a tendency to fill this space with a filler word — ah, er, um — but it’s much better to just pause until you’ve gathered yourself.

This technique can also be used as a deliberate pause for dramatic effect, even if you know exactly what you are going to say next. Although, perhaps that makes it a...

“Pause immediately before and immediately after a key word (or phrase). The preceding pause signals ‘listen up’, while the succeeding pause says ‘put that in your memory.’”

H. Dramatic Pause

Part rhetorical and part theatrical, a dramatic pause is used whenever you want to generate some drama or suspense. A dramatic pause could be used before continuing your spoken speech, or it could be used just before displaying a slide, or a prop.

I. Punchline Pause

Professional comedians argue that pauses should be used just before a humorous punch line, and research agrees! Archakis, et. al. concludes that, along with variations in speech rate and intensity, **pauses are used before and after punch lines in jokes.**

- Pause immediately **before your punch line** to create heightened anticipation and signal a payoff.
- Pause immediately **after your punch line** to allow your audience to release their laughter. Extend the pause as long as there is laughter. Otherwise, your words are competing for attention, and will be diminished. Similarly, never try to speak over applause.

J. Power Pause

In *Trust Me: Four Steps to Authenticity and Charisma*, Nick Morgan suggests that powerful people indulge in longer pauses.

In the first chapter of *Speak Like Churchill, Stand Like Lincoln*, James C. Humes advocates starting your presentation with a deliberate pause:

Before you speak, try to lock your eyes on each of your soon-to-be listeners. Force yourself before you begin your presentation to say in your own mind each word of your opening sentence. Every second you wait will strengthen the impact of your opening words. Make your Power Pause your silent preparation before any presentation you make.

I have used the Power Pause regularly in my own presentations, and I find it has two wonderful effects. First, it earns the attention of my audience. Second, it allows me a few seconds to center myself, take a deep breath, and confidently launch into my opening words.

K. Get-a-Drink Pause

In longer presentations, you'll occasionally need a drink of water. Don't hesitate to do so, but try to time it appropriately. The best time to grab a drink is when you are already in a longer pause, such as when you are transitioning to a new section of material, or when you've just put up a slide visual for your audience to study.

Occasionally, you can use this technique to conceal that you need a moment to think and recover. In *Lend Me Your Ears: All you Need to Know about Making Speeches and Presentations*, Max Atkinson points out that “the sight of speakers pausing to have a drink or to check their notes is so familiar to audiences that they are unlikely to notice that anything is wrong.”

L. Check-Your-Notes Pause

See the Get-a Drink Pause, above.

How many seconds should a “short/medium/long pause” be?

There’s no strict rules on precisely how long your pauses should be. Appropriate lengths for pauses (from a fraction of second to several seconds or more) will vary considerably based on your speaking style, the nature of your message, the duration of your talk, your audience, and cultural norms.

Consider the following guidelines:

- While the duration of your pauses may be different than another speaker, you should **vary your pause length consistently**. For example, *your* comma pauses (however long they are) should be shorter than *your* paragraph pauses. Failure to do so will negate the benefits of using pauses, and will confuse your audience.
- For long pauses, **pause longer than you think is necessary**, perhaps longer than is comfortable for you.
- **Seek feedback** on your use of pauses. Ask for candid feedback through questions such as: Did my pauses seem natural? Were there any awkward pauses? Was my overall pace too fast, or too slow?
- **Use video recordings** to perform a self-assessment of your pause performance.



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