



ISTOCK

BY LISA B. MARSHALL

AS THE SHOW HOST FOR “THE PUBLIC SPEAKER: QUICK AND DIRTY Tips for Improving Your Communication Skills,” I regularly receive questions from my listeners. Perhaps the most commonly asked question goes like this ...

Most of the time I feel that I am reasonably articulate, but on occasion my sentences get sprinkled with the flavorless additives “um,” “uh,” and “er.” I know it is a habit from childhood that I just can’t seem to shake. Could you please help me?

Here’s how I always respond: You know, like, OMG! Although it’s difficult to completely rid yourself of “credibility killers” in your speech (e.g., like, so, you know, right, uh, ah), it’s actually pretty easy to reduce them.

Technically, they are called disfluencies. According to Wikipedia, “disfluencies include any of various breaks, irregularities, or utterances ... words and sentences that are cut off mid-utterance, phrases that are restarted or repeated ... grunts or unrecognizable utterances occurring as ‘fillers.’”

### Um ... you are not alone!

For those with trouble in this area, you are not alone. Spontaneous conversation is notoriously disfluent. In fact, according to researchers, disfluencies sometimes represent up to about 20% of the “words” in everyday conversation. In fact, if you listen to President Barack Obama when he is “off teleprompter,” you’ll notice that he struggles with this, too.

Unfortunately, excessive use of filler words can have a significant negative impact on listeners. In 2009, when Caroline Kennedy announced her candidacy for Senator of New York, she used many “ums” and “ahs” during one particular interview with the *New York Times*, and she said “y’know” 139 times. You probably saw the YouTube video where she was mocked with a buzzer — 30 times in less than two-and-a-half minutes!

Research suggests that utterances of “ah” and “um” in spontaneous conversation signal an impending pause. However, when you are in front of an audience, long pauses in your speech give the impression that you are unprepared. Which, of course, is a bad thing.

As a public speaking coach, I notice filler words the most when people are nervous or are presenting a topic they are not comfortable with. In fact, for some people it's the only time these filler words show up. Unfortunately, that's usually when clear and confident communication is most important!

## How to reduce credibility killers

How can you lessen your use of disfluencies? Again, I am suggesting reduction versus complete elimination.

### Prepare and practice

My first suggestion is to prepare and practice as much as possible so that you can become more comfortable with the material. Practice, via video, is perhaps the single best way to relax and become more comfortable with your presentation.

That advice will help you in general; however, perhaps the most important step toward more *fluent* speaking is to become aware of your distracting speech habits.

The fastest way to find out if you have trouble in this area is to ask a close trusted friend (or pay a public speaking coach).

Another option is to post your practice videos to YouTube and wait for comments. But that might take too long, and you'd need to prepare yourself for potentially harsh comments.

### Record

I think the BEST way is to record yourself. If you are comfortable with technology, I suggest using free audio editing software (Garageband on Mac and Audacity for PC). With this software you can see your words in audio format. For a more simplistic solution try Drop.io — with this you can call a phone number and it will record your voice. Then you can send the link to your “drop” (the recording) to your friends or teachers to review.

Even if you choose to not send your recording to other people, you'll be able to hear so much that you wouldn't normally hear just by playing back your recordings several times. It's important to listen specifically for your disfluencies — maybe even go ahead and make a game

of it. First just list them and then start counting them. If you are counting past three or four, you'll know you have a problem.

### Listen

If recording seems like too much effort, just focus, for one full week, on listening — *really* listening — for distracters when you talk. Some experts like to suggest putting tiny “um” and “ah” stickers on your computer or cell phone as reminders. I recently



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attended a training session and the expert suggested wearing a rubber band around your wrist. The idea was to snap the rubber band every time a disfluency occurred.

After a week of listening, or recording and listening, (or worse, a week of snapping your wrist with a rubber band), you'll become acutely aware of your specific problems. And that's exactly what you need: awareness. You need to be able to hear your disfluencies in your

## It's not just an American thing

**D**id you know that people around the world fill pauses in their own way? My husband is a native Spanish speaker and when I was first learning Spanish I would listen closely while he was speaking with his mother. I couldn't understand why he used the word “esto” so frequently. I thought I just didn't understand. But it turns out, that for Spanish speakers, that's a common disfluency.

Then I researched it more, and found out that in Britain they say “uh,” Hebrew speakers say “ehhh,” and the Turks say “mmmm.” The Japanese say “eto” (eh-to) and “ano” (ah-no), while Mandarin speakers say “neige” (NEH-guh) and “jiege” (JEH-guh). In Dutch and German it's “uh, um, mmm.” In Swedish it's “eh, ah, aah, m, mm, hmm, ooh, a, and oh.” (Hmm, this is starting to sound a bit X-rated!)

mind before you blurt them out. I can't stress this enough. You need to be able to hear every time you use a filler word, or you won't be able to fix this problem.

### Pause

If you've done your homework, you'll know when one of your credibility killers is just about to escape from your mouth. Then, all you need to do is to keep quiet. Of course, slowing down will also help. I know, it's easier said than done!

At first you may have awkward pauses in your speech, but that's still better — actually far better — than speech peppered with “likes” and “ums.” I'm convinced President Obama is working on this very issue, and that's why you often hear long pauses in his speech. With patience and practice, eventually the pauses get shorter. With time, you'll be more fluent and have fewer “ums” and “ahs.”

It's worth it to take some time to record and listen to yourself. Using filler words can have a significant negative impact.

Um, you know, don't let, like ums and ahs, kill your credibility, y'know?



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