Verbal Fillers in Public Speaking

What is a verbal filler or ‘vocalized pause’?

Verbal fillers are words or phrases that are used during speaking, particularly public speaking, to fill in a moment of silence between connecting thoughts or ideas.

- Uh or Um
- Like
- You know

- I mean
- Hmm
- So

So, like, why am I saying ‘um’?

Steven D. Cohen, an award-winning speaker who teaches Oral Communication in the Workplace at Harvard Extension School, says it’s because we learned from a young age to eagerly answer questions, and that we feel the impulse to speak when we are spoken to. Cohen says that we need to watch out for two verbal filler “hotspots,” the beginning of a statement and in between new ideas.

- The next time you answer a question out loud, you may notice yourself say ‘uh’ or ‘um’ before you give the answer because you are using these words to verbally ‘think’.

How do I stop using verbal fillers?

The best way to stop using verbal fillers in your speech is to realize how and when you use them. To do this, practice and record yourself frequently.

- **Activity:** Get your phone voice recorder ready. Find an object in the room, and say the name aloud. Start your recording, and talk about this object for about 30 seconds. After you finished the recording, listen to where you have said any ‘likes’ or ‘ums’. Try it again with a different object, and listen for patterns. Once you become aware of why you are using the verbal fillers, you will learn not to use them as much.

Ultimately, verbal fillers can be distracting during a speech and detract from your credibility if used too frequently. Next time you speak publicly, try pausing intentionally in between ideas so your won’t be tempted to ‘verbally think’ about what you’re going to say next.

- Remember, a pause may feel like 1,000 years to you, but the audience will barely notice it.


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