

# 17 Speaking Habits That Make You Sound, Like, Totally Unprofessional

Talking big is easy. Speaking well is hard.

By Bill Murphy Jr.

We all do it sometimes. We undermine ourselves by using [less-effective language](#), verbal tics, and other oral miscues. That means there's always room for improvement to help [your messages get through effectively](#).

We can all also use a little reminder now and then, so here are 17 of the worst offenses.

(Got a few I forgot? Let us know in the comments or [contact me directly](#).)

## 1. “No problem” (when you really mean “you’re welcome”)

Admittedly, [I’m on a crusade against this one](#). When you say “no problem” in response to “thank you,” you’re actually devaluing the person who offers thanks by suggesting that whatever you did for him or her was of so little value to you that it hardly required effort.

## 2. “Sorry” (when you mean “excuse me”)

Everyone appreciates a sincere apology, but using “sorry” when you really mean “excuse me” (or perhaps simply “get out of my way”) undermines your professionalism--and can make you sound a little like a bully.

## 3. “Just ...”

There’s not enough justice in this world, but when you use the word *just* in the wrong context, you minimize your impact. “I just want to bring up one point,” for example, telegraphs that whatever you’re about to say is of little importance.

## 4. Speaking Canadian

Fun fact: I’m technically half-Canadian, so I can say this: Canadian accents often include an uptick at the end of a sentence, which suggests that any statement you make is actually a question. Do you know what I mean?

## 5. “Know what I mean?”

I’m aware that I just ended the last paragraph with this phrase, but it’s another bad habit. While it’s smart to ensure that people you’re speaking with are on the same page, it’s pretty annoying--and unprofessional--to be so unaware of your verbal tics that you keep repeating the same phrases.

## 6. Syllogisms

We live in a time of syllogisms: “It is what it is” and “It’s all good,” for example. These are harmless phrases in the abstract, and they were probably even witty once upon a time. But if you pepper your speech with them, you undermine the sense that you’re a serious person.

## 7. “You guys ...”

I admit, I fall prey to this one myself sometimes. Using “you guys” as an all-purpose substitute for the second-person plural is a bad habit that can undermine your message by making assumptions about how familiar your audience really wants to be.

### **8. Apologetic (nervous) laughter**

Unapologetic laughter is great, and often contagious. Apologetic, nervous laughter is at best undermining, and at worst, unnerving.

### **9. Wandering eyes**

Rule number 1: Try to maintain eye contact. Rule number 2: If you can’t maintain eye contact, at least try not to stare at the person’s *other* body parts. It drowns out anything you might try to say.

### **10. “I do apologize ... ”**

I once knew a federal judge who said that when lawyers began their argument by saying, “With all due respect,” what he heard instead was “Eff you.” This is the same kind of phrase--an apology that in many contexts (imagine, say, a cable company customer service representative using it) means you’re really not sorry about anything at all.

### **11. “It’s our policy ... ”**

This is the fraternal twin of “I do apologize”--a filler phrase that suggests your hands are tied and you can’t help someone, when they’re truly only tied by your own choices.

### **12. Intentional obfuscation**

There’s rarely a benevolent motive behind intentionally choosing language or creating explanations so that your audience won’t actually understand what you’re saying. Sometimes it’s quite sinister, in fact.

### **13. “In my opinion ... ”**

If you’re going to assert something, in most cases you come across as more professional if you simply assert it--not undermine your own point by saying it’s only your opinion. (We know it’s your opinion; convince us of it.)

### **14. “Like ... ”**

There’s a lot to like about *like*, but there’s little to like about its use as an all-purpose filler.

### **15. “Um ... ”**

Only the smoothest, most-rehearsed talkers are able to overcome the fact that the intelligent human brain thinks much faster than we’re able to express those thoughts; that’s part of why we all rely on verbal crutches like “um” and “uh.” That said, overusing these is highly distracting and undermines your credibility.

### **16. Cursing**

Well-timed strategic profanity can be effective. Lazy cursing is distracting in many cases, and can be totally undermining depending on your audience.

## 17. "Full disclosure"

Sure, it's fair and positive to disclose facts that might make your audience question your biases--doing so can help defuse those issues before others raise them. The verbal tic is to refer to this act of coming clean as "full disclosure." Very few of us are aware and selfless enough to disclose everything that could potentially undermine what we have to say. Better just to offer a "disclosure," and let your audience decide whether it's full or not.

Bill Murphy Jr. is executive editor at [TheMid.com](http://TheMid.com) and the founder of [ProGhostwriters.com](http://ProGhostwriters.com).

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