

## 6 ways to stop saying 'uh,' 'you know' and other word fillers

By Russell Working for *ragan.com*

Maybe you've felt this way: You listen to a recording of your interview with that employee of the month or hear yourself on a radio newscast, and your every utterance grates like nails on a chalkboard.

It's not just the weird sound of your voice when it originates from outside your head (though there's that, too). It's the "uhs" and "ums" that litter your speech, the "you knows" and "likes," the insecure "right?" that is favored in PR circles, as if you were desperate for approval. (Right?)

It drives me nuts when I transcribe interviews to hear how many of my questions begin with a variation of, "Well, you know, um, like..." Furthermore, if you're prone to swearing, you're probably also doing that far more than you realize.

If it's any comfort, we stand in good company. President Barack Obama is recognized as a gifted orator, but as David Letterman noted as far back as 2008, he does [say "uh" a lot](#) in interviews. (Amusingly, in a segment on the topic, the first word out of Letterman's mouth is "uh.")

Others have pondered how to delouse their speeches of what Russians call "word parasites." Otherwise known as filler words, these [indicate uncertainty](#), reports a website called The Art of Manliness. (Just quoting the site makes me feel like slapping on some aftershave and bagging a grizzly with a crossbow.)

The blokes at Manliness assert this:

Um's and uh's indicate that we're not as confident about what we're about to say. When asked a question, people use more filler before responding when they're less sure they have the right answer (and are in fact more likely to get the answer wrong).

Here are some tips for combing out those lice that infest your speech:

### 1. Get the help of an "uh" counter.

In [Toastmasters International](#), a group of clubs devoted to improving public speaking, every session appoints an "ah counter" (their spelling of "uh") who tallies speakers' use of words such as "uh," "um," "like," and "you know" in each speech.

You can try that. Give an extemporaneous speech a few minutes long to a friend, spouse or colleague. Set a timer. Now survey your results. Train this way, and over time you will become aware of and able to avoid the fillers.

If you're shy about asking someone, seek out your child, niece or nephew for help. Kids will be delighted to tally an adult's verbal goofs. Best of all, they'll keep doing it for months at the dinner table and when you have guests over.

### 2. Record yourself.

Record your voice—either audio or video—and do an objective analysis, suggests [Andrew Dlugan](#). He occasionally does this with a digital voice recorder, which can be a non-obtrusive way to check out any speech you deliver. Or try video.

"This is marginally more obtrusive, but delivers more benefits," he writes. "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."

### **3. Do your homework.**

Several experts say preparation reduces the amount of fillers in your speech. If you don't do so, Dlugan writes, "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."

This includes not only familiarizing yourself with the material, but practicing a big speech. Find that "uh counter" kid.

### **4. Pause, think, answer.**

At a loss for what to say or unable to pull up that word that's eluding you? Don't just babble "uh, uh, uh." Pause. Consider your answer. This can add power to your speech as surely as stressing the right word.

"When you use a filler word such as 'um,' you are thinking verbally," writes [Steven D. Cohen of Harvard Extension School](#). "In other words, you are verbalizing your thought process. Armed with this information, it is easy to realize that the best way to avoid using filler words is to pause. If you are not speaking, you can't say 'um!'"

### **5. Slow down.**

Honest, we're fascinated, but you're talking way faster than you realize.

"If you talk too fast, you're likely to get a little tongue-tied, especially if you haven't quite figured out what you're going to say next," states [Lifehacker](#). "If your mouth moves faster than your brain, you're going to use a lot more filler words. If you slow down, you'll not only cut out the filler, but you'll be much more understandable, which is crucial if you're giving a speech or presentation.

### **6. Tell great stories.**

I am extrapolating from a thought offered by the grizzly-wrestlers at The Art of Manliness, but bear with me. Even if you do say "uh" a lot, there is a way you can come off as well-spoken: "Concentrate on always making the content of what you say outstanding," Manliness barks.

Sure, tons of data might be fascinating—if you're speaking to the [International Conference of Labour Statisticians](#). But the best communicators use stories (even stories culled from the data).

As the hairy-chested fellas at Manliness note, "good speakers, by keeping substance, not style, the center of attention, will effectively hide their hesitancies."

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