# Minding Your Uhms and Ahhs: 5 Tips for Reducing Filler Words

by Andrew C. MacDonald on July 28, 2010

Hit "pause" on your filler words

This morning at [Bay Street Breakfast Club](http://www.baystreetbreakfast.com/), our Tipster provided an excellent tip which spurred the idea for this blog post. In keeping with the Toastmasters theme, he stated that “when speaking, a pause defies logic because you get something for nothing.” This member suggested that rather than use filler words such as uhms and ahhs, we simply pause. A well timed pause can add style and impact to a formal speech or your side of any conversation.

At a Toastmasters meeting, one of the members will fulfill the role of Grammarian. Among other things, the Grammarian is responsible for counting filler words such as uhms and ahhs. What sounds like a very simple role can actually be quite difficult since there is some debate on what qualifies as a “filler word”.

### ****Types of Filler Words****

The way I see it, filler words are any crutch used to bridge a gap when speaking. Since joining Toastmasters, I have become much more aware of minding my use of filler words and made a more conscious effort to avoid filler words when speaking. Despite my efforts I still have plenty of room for improvement.

I like to consider a broad variety of words to be filler words and classify them into a few different types:

* Simple filler words – uhm, er, ah
* Bridge filler words – so, but, and
* Meaningless filler words – like, you know, basically, actually, literally

### ****Why We Use Filler Words****

Simple filler words are neutral vowel sounds and seem to be a natural way to bridge a gap in speech while we figure out what to say next. In our (civilized) every day conversations, two or more parties generally take turns speaking. Rather than allowing for a pause we often use filler words to bridge a short gap in speech to make sure we don’t lose our turn at speaking.

Bridge filler words are also used to keep our turn in a conversation. Unfortunately after a great deal of repetition, the use of these words becomes a habit and they find their way into formal speeches. Stringing together sentences with a variety of bridge words leads to incredibly long run on sentences and can make it tough for your audience to follow.

In addition, there are several other words which are frequently used out of context and also end up serving as filler words. These meaningless filler words amount to nothing more than a bad habit, but can be eliminated with a little conscious effort.

### ****Why Filler Words Should be Avoided****

Reducing your use of filler words may not be your top priority in life but if you’d like to become a better speaker it is important to mind your uhms and ahs. Minimal use of filler words is tolerable and can even help you connect with your audience. On the other hand, excessive use of filler words is considered to:

* Be annoying
* Weaken your presentation
* Detract from the power of your argument
* Cause your audience to lose interest

Filler words are certainly a hurdle to being a great speaker, but not impossible to overcome.

### ****5 Tips for Reducing Your Use of Filler Words****

Here are 5 simple ideas for reducing your use of filler words:

1. **Catch yourself** – The first step to reducing your use of filler words is to catch yourself in the act. When you start to pay attention, you’ll be surprised how often fillers make their way into your conversation.
2. **Speak the filler word silently** – Once you start to become aware of your use of filler words, try eliminating them by speaking the filler word silently in your head and then continuing with what you were going to say. Most of the time filler words can be omitted without causing any gross grammatical errors.
3. **Replace filler words with pauses** – As you get better at skipping over filler words you can begin to directly substitute pauses. Often the places where filler words creep in also make effective places for brief pauses.
4. **Plan your speech** – If you are delivering a formal speech or presentation, then you have the opportunity to organize your material and plan the flow. Taking the time to layout your content and create well planned segues will help you to eliminate filler words during your delivery.
5. **Join Toastmasters** – Finally, if you are not already familiar with Toastmasters I would suggest joining a [local Toastmasters club](http://reports.toastmasters.org/findaclub/). Following a proven model and having a supportive group that will help you track your use of filler words is the best way to improve your speaking skills.

### ****A Challenge****

My challenge to you is this; count your uhms, ahhs, and other filler words for the rest of the day and see if you can catch yourself before letting the filler words out. Remember that less is more in many cases. Silence is golden – even in the form of a brief pause.