**What Are Filler Words?**

Filler words are words (and phrases) that are used to fill silence when you’re speaking. They’re words that don’t add any real value to the sentence. They simply keep you going while you come up with the rest of your sentence.

Their actual name is “discourse markers,” but they’re much more commonly known as “filler words.”

You might already use filler words without realizing it. When you can’t think of the right word to use in a sentence, you might say “umm.” This gives you a break while you think, without an awkward, silent pause.

Since filler words don’t really add any meaning to the sentence, you don’t need to think about using them. This leaves your brain free to think of other things—like the word you’re trying to remember.

Many filler words actually have other meanings, so not every “like” is a filler word, for example. We can see a real example of this in the following conversation from the show “Community,” when Pierce tries to stop Shirley from using filler words:

**Shirley:** Okay. These brownies are, uh—

**Pierce:** Uh!

**Shirley:** They, um—

**Pierce:** Um!

**Shirley:** These brownies are delicious. They taste like–

**Pierce:** Like!

**Shirley:** That’s not a filler word.

One way to finish Shirley’s sentence would be, “They taste like heaven.” In this example, “like” is used to compare brownies to heaven, so it’s not a filler word in this context.

**When Are Filler Words Used in English?**

You only need to use filler words when you’re speaking out loud. Generally you won’t use fillers when you’re writing. When you’re speaking out loud, though, you might need some extra time to figure out what to say. That’s when you can use filler words.

Sometimes people use certain filler words (“like,” “literally” or “believe me”) when they’re writing online in website comments, chats or social media. This is fine too, since conversations online are very similar to spoken conversations.

Filler words are used for a number of reasons:

* **To show that you’re thinking.** Use filler words when you need to think about your answer or statement. For example:

“I have *basically*… ten more years of college.”

* **To make a statement less harsh.** When your friend has some broccoli stuck between his teeth, you could just tell him, “You have something in your teeth,” but that might make him embarrassed. It might be nicer to say something more like:

“*Well*, you have, *um*, you have a little something in your teeth.”

* **To make your statement weaker or stronger.** While filler words don’t add anything to sentences, they can be used to change the sentence *tone—*the attitude of the sentence. See how different these three statements sound:

“I think pugs are cute” is just a regular statement.  
“*Actually*, I think pugs are cute” shows contrast—that someone else doesn’t agree.  
“*At the end of the day*, I think pugs are cute” is something you might say as a conclusion to a discussion about pugs and their ugly (or cute!) wrinkles.

* **To stall for time.** To stall for time means to do something to try and gain more time. Filler words are an excellent way to stall when you don’t know how to answer a question, or when you don’t want to. For example, if your teacher asks you “Where’s your homework?,” your response might sound a bit like this:

“*Uhh. Umm. Well, you see..* My dog ate it.”

* **To include the listener in the conversation without ending your sentence.** A conversation takes at least two people. Some filler words and phrases can include the other person in the conversation. It’s a bit like reaching out to them as you’re speaking to keep their attention. For example:

“It was a really big bear, *you know?*”

This sentence includes the listener without ending your speaking turn. Your listener might nod in agreement, allowing you to continue telling him about your pet bear.

Even if you’re just starting to learn English, filler words can make you sound more like an advanced English learner. As you can see, filler words seem useless at first, but they can be really important!

**Why Should You Learn English Filler Words?**

When you think of someone as being a fluent English speaker, you probably think they speak perfectly without stopping. In reality, even native English speakers use filler words, and they use them often. These words are an important part of sounding natural when you speak English.

You’re allowed to pause and think, to be unsure of how to answer, or even to forget the right word to use. The trick is knowing the right filler words to use while you put your thoughts together.

Every language has its own set of filler words. Learning English filler words will help you sound more like a native speaker.

**Use Filler Words in Moderation**

Like with anything else, you could use filler words too much. *Overusing* filler words (using too many, too often) can make you sound unprofessional. Even worse, it can make it difficult to follow your sentences. So do use filler words when you speak, but don’t use them too much.

Some people think all filler words are bad, and should be used as little as possible. For an English learner, though, they can be a very helpful way to speak more fluently and confidently. Still, it’s a good idea to use as few filler words as possible in interviews and professional settings.

If you find yourself using too many filler words when you speak, it might be time to either study some more vocabulary or slow down your speech.

With all that in mind, here are some of the most common filler words and phrases used in American English:

**15+ Common English Filler Words You Should Know**

**1. Well**

“Well” can be used in a few different ways. You can use it to show that you’re thinking.

*“****Well****, I guess $20 is a good price for a pair of jeans.”*

You can also use it to put a pause in a sentence.

*“The apples and cinnamon go together like,****well****, apples and cinnamon.”*

You can even use the word to *stall.*

*“****Well****… fine, you can borrow my car.”*

**2. Um/er/uh**

“Um,” “er” and “uh” are mostly used for hesitation, such as when you don’t know the answer or don’t want to answer.

*“****Um****,****er****, I****uh****thought the project was due tomorrow, not today.”*

You can use any of the words at any time—they don’t all have to go together.

*“****Umm****… I like the yellow dress better!”*

**3. Hmm**

“Hmm” is a thoughtful sound, and it shows that you’re thinking or trying to decide something.

*“****Hmm****, I like the pink bag but I think I’ll buy the black one instead.”*

**4. Like**

“Like” is sometimes used to mean something is not exact.

*“My neighbor has****like****ten dogs.”*

In the above example, the neighbor probably doesn’t have exactly ten dogs. Rather, the neighbor has a lot of dogs.

Usually, though, the word is used when you need a moment to figure out the next word to use.

*“My friend was****like****, completely ready to****like****kick me out of the car if I didn’t stop using the word****‘like’****.”*

Keep in mind that the word “like” as a filler is seen as a negative thing. The word is often overused by young females, and can make you sound like you’re not sure what you’re talking about.

**5. Actually/Basically/Seriously**

“Actually,” “basically” and “seriously” are all adverbs—words that describe actions. Many adverbs (though not all of them) have an “-ly” at the end of the word, which makes it easier to recognize them. All these words can be used as fillers which change the strength of a statement.

For example, the word “actually” is used to point out something you think is true, when others might not agree:

*“****Actually****, pugs are really cute!”*

“Basically” and “seriously” change the sentence in slightly different ways too. “Basically” is used when you’re summarizing something, and “seriously” is used to show how strongly you take the statement.

*“****Basically****, the last Batman movie was****seriously****exciting!”*

Other adverbs that are often used as fillers are **“totally,”** **“literally”** and **“clearly.”**

* The word **“literally”** means “something that is true,” but many times in conversation it’s used with a different meaning: to state strong feelings. For example, you’re not just laughing you’re *literally* dying from laughter.
* **“Totally”** means “completely,” and is used to emphasize (show that you feel strongly) about something.
* The word **“clearly”** means the same as obviously, and is used to state something that is very obviously true.

These three words don’t have to be used together either, but here they are in one sentence:

*“****Clearly****you****totally****didn’t see me, even though I was****literally****in front of your face.”*

**6. You see**

“You see” is used to share a fact that you assume the listener doesn’t know.

*“I was going to try the app, but****you see****, I ran out of space on my phone.”*

**7. You know**

“You know” is used to share something that you assume the listener already knows.

*“We stayed at that hotel,****you know****, the one down the street from Times Square.”*

It can also be used instead of an explanation, in cases where we feel the listener just understands what you mean.

*“When the elevator went down, I got that weird feeling in my ears,****you know?****”*

**8. I mean**

“I mean” is used to clarify or emphasize how you feel about something.

*“****I mean****, he’s a great guy, I’m just not sure if he’s a good doctor.”*

It’s also used to make corrections when you misspeak.

*“The duck and the tiger were awesome but scary.****I mean****, the tiger was scary, not the duck.”*

*“The cave is two thousand—****I mean****—twenty thousand years old!”*

**9. You know what I mean?**

“You know what I mean?” is used to make sure the listener is following what you’re saying.

*“I really like that girl,****you know what I mean?****”*

**10. At the end of the day**

“At the end of the day” is a phrase that means “in the end” or “in conclusion.”

*“****At the end of the day****, we’re all just humans, and we all make mistakes.”*

**11. Believe me**

“Believe me” is a way of asking your listener to trust what you’re saying.

*“****Believe me****, I didn’t want this tiny house, but it was the only one I could afford.”*

It’s also used to emphasize what you’re about to say.

*“****Believe me****, this is the cheapest, tiniest house ever!”*

**12. I guess/I suppose**

“I guess” and “I suppose” are used to show that you’re hesitant, or not really sure about what you’re saying.

*“I was going to eat dinner at home, but****I guess****I can go eat at a restaurant instead.”*

“I guess” is used more often in speech, but “I suppose” can sound classier (a bit smarter).

**13. Or something**

“Or something” is a sentence ending that means you’re not being exact.

*“The cake uses two sticks of butter and ten eggs,****or something****like that.”*

**14. Okay/so**

“Okay” and “so” are usually used to start sentences, and can be a sign that a new topic is starting.

*“****So****what are you doing next weekend?”*

They can also be used to introduce a summary.

*“****Okay****,****so****we’re going to need to buy supplies for our trip this weekend.”*

**15. Right/mhm/uh huh**

“Right,” “mhm” and “uh huh” are all affirmative responses—they all mean a “yes” response.

*“****Right****, so let’s prepare a list of all the things we’ll need.”*

*“****Uh huh****, that’s exactly what he told me too.”*

Right, so you should be an expert on filler words by now! Some of these words and phrases can be hard to use correctly, since the meaning is so flexible.

So now you may be wondering: how can I practice using filler words?

To get a deeper sense of how to use these, you should watch English videos. In general, videos made for English speakers are helpful in showing “real” speech. Plus, with videos, you get to see and hear how filler words work in different sentences in different situations.

Movies and TV shows are two great examples. If you have any favorite English shows, watch them again but this time, really pay attention to how the characters talk. See how many filler words you can hear!

Filler words can require a lot of subtlety, but master them and you will be sounding like a native speaker in literally no time.