

Want to Be a Better Public Speaker? Stop Talking and Do This Instead

Successful presentations motivate, educate, and inspire listeners to take action. From the attention-getting opening to the powerful close--and the concrete, key messages in the middle--memorable presenters know how to deliver their content in an engaging way.

I have found that the "power of the pause" is my secret weapon in keeping listeners engaged--and myself on track. I spend almost as much time planning when I am going to pause and for what purpose, as I do preparing for what I am going to say and how I am going to say it.

Why? Because a pause is a gift to you and to your audience. Most of us know that pausing is key to building suspense, telling a joke successfully, and conveying confidence. Here are 8 more reasons why you should pause more in your next presentation:

1. To breathe

If you're like many presenters, you get nervous--especially at the beginning of your talk. You might find yourself speaking faster and faster out of stress, and forgetting to breathe. If this sounds like you, plan to memorize your introduction, deliver it, and then take a pause to breathe before you go into your agenda of what you're going to cover.

2. To take a drink of water

If you've ever heard a speaker with a dry or sticky mouth, you probably wanted to yell, "TAKE A DRINK!" Don't wait for your audience to get grossed-out by you. Take a pause and have a sip (not a gulp!) of water so that you sound and feel better. This is also important if you sweat when you speak.

3. To check your notes

You might be tempted to recite your whole presentation from a script. Don't. You might think it's ok to present to the audience while facing your PowerPoint screen. It isn't. You need to be familiar enough with your content that your notes are for reference, not for reading. Build in pauses so that you can check your notes to make sure you're hitting your main points. I recommend you do this during the transitions between points, which leads us to...

4. To reduce "um" and "uh"

Filler words are a replacement for pauses--a replacement that undermines your professionalism. Replace these words with silence and you'll immediately sound more confident.

5. To make a transition

You don't want your presentation to feel like one long run-on sentence. Use a pause to signal to the audience that you've concluded one part, and that you're moving on to the next part. This can be for a content transition (from point A to point B), a structural transition (from the introduction to the agenda) or a tone transition (from the bad news to the good news).

6. To give the audience time to process

According to researchers at the University of Minnesota, many of us listen to the content while simultaneously a) evaluating the content, and b) looking for confirmation that the content proves us right. Both of these get in the way of your audience comprehending the content. Pause so that your listeners can think about what you're saying.

7. To check for confusion

Say "Let me pause for a moment here and see what questions you have before I move on." And then be silent. Maybe even longer than feels comfortable for you or your audience. But if you don't give them the opportunity to ask, they may be confused or concerned throughout the entire presentation, and never say anything about it.

8. To check for disagreement

Say "Let me pause for a moment here and see who might have a different experience or perspective than mine." Then be silent. This takes guts to invite potential dissent; however, you'll be better off letting someone air it rather than having them be silent and festering. And if someone gives you an answer you didn't want or expect, do you know what you should do before replying? You guessed it: pause.

Pausing can be a powerful tool to take your presentations from good to great, In the words of Mark Twain, "The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause.