**Why Prosody Matters: The Meaning of Proper Pronunciation in Public Speaking**  
  
  
  
Prosody, the defining feature of expressive reading, comprises all of the variables of timing, phrasing, emphasis, and intonation that speakers use to help convey aspects of meaning and to make their speech lively. One of the challenges of oral reading is adding back the prosodic cues that are largely absent from written language.

In the context of oral reading, prosody can reflect linguistic features, such as sentence structure, as well as text features, such as punctuation. Skilled readers pick up on these features, and respond to them when reading aloud, as when they pause briefly at relevant commas, pause slightly longer at sentence boundaries, raise their pitch at the end of yes-no questions, and lower their pitch at the end of declarative sentences.

Prosody can also reflect aspects of meaning. For instance, slight fluctuations in pitch, timing, and emphasis can change a simple question (e.g., “What did you do?”) into an expression of censure.  Learning to read dialog in a manner that reflects the intentions and emotional states of the characters is a great way for adolescent readers to delve deeply into literature. However, younger students may not understand this use of prosody well enough to apply it to oral reading

Why is Prosody Important?

Researchers have found strong links between oral reading prosody and general reading achievement. For example, after comparing students’ reading prosody in first and second grades with their reading comprehension at the end of third grade, Miller and Schwanenflugel (2008) concluded that, “early acquisition of an adult-like intonation contour predicted better comprehension.”

**How to make perfect Public Speaking by using Prosody?**

I don’t know a single person, even a seasoned professional speaker, who doesn’t get at least a few nervous butterflies before they speak. But I’m also aware there’s a big difference between a few excited butterflies and paralyzing fear. Let’s review some of the main areas of delivery and strategy and provide exercises you can do to practice and improve.

Good public speaking skills are important in other areas of your life, as well. You might be asked to make a speech at a friend's wedding, give a eulogy for a loved one, or inspire a group of volunteers at a charity event.

However, while good skills can open doors, poor ones can close them. For example, your boss might decide against promoting you after sitting through a badly-delivered presentation. You might lose a valuable new contract by failing to connect with a prospect during a sales pitch. Or you could make a poor impression with your new team, because you trip over your words and don't look people in the eye.

#### **Key Points**

Chances are that you'll sometimes have to speak in public as part of your role. While this can seem intimidating, the benefits of being able to speak well outweigh any perceived fears. To become a better speaker, use the following strategies:

* Plan appropriately.
* Practice.
* Engage with your audience.
* Pay attention to body language.
* Think positively.
* Cope with your nerves.
* Watch recordings of your speeches.

If you speak well in public, it can help you get a job or promotion, raise awareness for your team or organization, and educate others. The more you push yourself to speak in front of others, the better you'll become, and the more confidence you'll have.

# **Articulation and Pronunciation**

### Articulation, the last step in speech production

We as humans are unique in our use of tongue, lips, and other movable parts of the speech mechanism. The first act of speech is breathing, in which you get air into a storage chamber; second is phonation, the process by which you force air into vibration by the action of the vocal folds; third, resonation, in which your mouth,nose and throat cavities amplify the sound so you can hear it; and finally there is articulation, in which you modify the sound by movement of the teeth, tongue, and lips into recognizable patterns. There are only forty-four sounds to master, and as young child you started making them by mastering simple sounds which you later articulated into repetitive sound combinations and then words.

Can the audience comprehend what you are saying? If you produce the basic sounds of the language in a manner which is different from the language users in the audience, at the most basic level your speech will not be understood. You might substitute one sound for another at the beginning of a word such as*'dis* for *this and*"w" for "r" so you would say "wabbit" rather than "rabbit." Or you might leave a sound off the end of a word, such as in *goin'* for *going*, in casual speech. But, the real challenge is whether or not you can produce the "correct" sound when it is required. If you can not physically produce the sound, then you may want to consult with a professional speech therapist to help you with articulation.

We are often judged by how well we speak in general. A measure of perceived intellect or education is how well we **articulate**. That is: how well and correctly we form our vowels and consonants using our lips, jaw, tongue, and palate to form the sounds that are identified as speech. **Diction** and **enunciation** are other terms that refer to the same idea. For instance, saying “going to” instead of “gonna” or “did not” instead of “dint” are examples of good versus poor articulation. Consonant and vowels are spoken with standard accepted precision, and serious students and speakers will strive to practice the clarity of their sounds. Proper diction is as integral to the English language as proper spelling, but it takes practice.

Tips for Speaker

* Practice to make sure you are not substituting or omitting sounds when you say a word, or adding sounds such as *needcessity* for *necessity.*
* Pay particular attention to common sound substitutions such as*t* for *th*so that you don't say *'tin*for*thin and d* for*th* so that you dont say*'den* for *then.*
* Practice reading and recording passages with the problem sounds. Listen to the practice recording with a learning partner or tutor.

### Pronunciation in spoken language

How you articulate and pronounce words is important because people need to be able to understand you. But if you get a little nervous, you probably tend to speak faster and faster, until you’re not enunciating well and your clarity is going to suffer. Your audience won’t catch everything you’re saying and you’ll lack maximum effectiveness. Following are some ways to help with your enunciation and pronunciation.

When we talk about pronunciation, we focus on the word rather than the individual sound, as with articulation. The syllable is a unit of organization for a sequence of speech sounds. For example, the word *water*is composed of two syllables: *wa* and *ter.* A syllable is typically made up of a syllable nucleus (most often a vowel) with consonants around it at the beginning and end. Syllables are often considered the phonological "building blocks" of words. A word that consists of a single syllable (like English dog) is called a monosyllable, and is said to be monosyllabic. Similar terms include disyllable and disyllabic, for a word of two syllables; trisyllable and trisyllabic for a word of three syllables; and polysyllable and polysyllabic, which may refer either to a word of more than three syllables or to any word of more than one syllable. Your job in pronunciation involves recognizing the different syllables that make up a word, applying the stress to the right syllable and using the right up and down pitch pattern for intonation.

Intonation is also used in English to add function to words such as to to differentiate between wh-questions, yes-no questions, declarative statements, commands, requests, etc. You can change the meaning by varying the intonation pattern.

Tips for Speaker

* Listen to recordings of different people you admire, to check the pronunciation.
* You can connect to one of the online dictionaries which has an audio of the preferred pronunciations if you are unsure.
* You can download an app for your cellphone or tablet so you have it readily available to check pronunciation and meaning of words.
* If you are using a non-English word, you can also use Google's translate function with audio pronunciation guide with the translation.
* If you *spell*a word differently than other language users, you may also *pronounce* the word differently. Check to determine if the word is pronounced as it is spelled. There are fourty-four sounds in English, but over five hundred spellings for the different sounds.
* You may want to practice reading a story or article aloud with a learning partner or tutor to check your pronunciation.

### ****TRY THIS! PRONUNCIATION****

1. Flip though a book, article or scholarly work until you come to a word that is unfamiliar and you can only guess its pronunciation.

2. Go to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary website, and look up the word.

3. When the definition appears, click the icon of the loudspeaker. The word is audibly pronounced for you.

The online dictionary is useful in both articulation as well as pronunciation.

## ***Quick practice tips***

The best way to improve on your public speaking is to get out there and do it! Then get it on video so you can review your delivery style.

To practice before a presentation, first record your presentation with just audio. Pay attention to the paralanguage and the enunciation and pronunciation. Also note the feeling. Does your voice elicit emotion? If not, focus on improving that.

## **Vocal Aspects**

Voice, or vocal sound, is made when controlled air being exhaled from the lungs, passes over the vocal cords causing a controlled vibration. The vibrating air resonates in the body, chest cavity, mouth, and nasal passages. The vibrating air causes a chain reaction with the air in the room. The room’s air, set in motion by the voice, is captured by the listener’s ear. The vibration of the air against the eardrum is transferred to electrical impulses that are interpreted by the listener’s brain. Thus, the sounds we can make are predicated on the breaths that we take.

## **Pitch and Inflection**

Identical to musical parlance, the **pitch** is the “highness” or “lowness” of the voice. Each of us has a range of**tone**. Vocal sounds are actually vibrations sent out from the vocal cords resonating through chambers in the body. The vibrations can literally be measured in terms of audio frequency in the same way music is measured. When the **pitch** is altered to convey a meaning (like raising the pitch at the end of a sentence that is a question), it is the inflection. **Inflections** are variations, turns and slides in pitch to achieve the meaning.

The human voice is the most beautiful instrument of all, but it is the most difficult to play. – Richard Strauss

### ****TRY THIS! VOCAL VARIATION****

Find a listening partner. Using only the sounds of “la” ha,” and “oh,” covey the meaning of the following:1. It’s the biggest thing I’ve ever seen!

2. I’ve fallen and can’t get up!

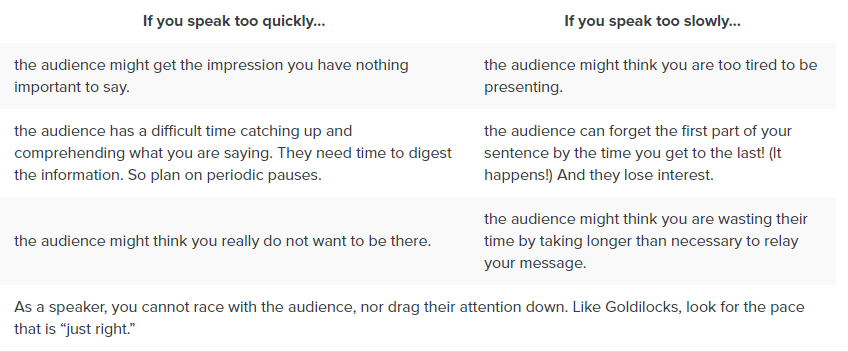
3. I’ve got a crush on him/her.

4. That soup is disgusting and spoiled.

5. I got an “A” in my Speech Final!

If you cannot relay the meaning with just sounds, try a second time (each) with gestures and facial expressions until the listener understands. Then say the lines with the expressive inflections you have developed using only the sounds.

## **Rate of Speaking**



It is simple nonsense to speak of the fixed tempo of any particular vocal phrase. Each voice has its peculiarities. – Anton Seidl

## **Pauses Versus Vocalized Pauses**

A text that is read has punctuation that the reader can see…miniature landmarks to define the text. When spoken, similar punctuation is needed for comprehension, and the speaker’s responsibility is to offer the text with pauses. Space between phrases, properly planted, gives the audience the opportunity to understand the structure of the speaker’s sentences and paragraphs. It also gives time for the audience to “digest” crucial phrases.

Generally, spoken sentences and paragraphs need to be simpler and shorter than what can be comprehended by reading. Pauses can help increase comprehension.

However, pauses that are filled with “uh’s, “um’s,” etc., are called **vocalized pauses**, or **fillers**, and should be avoided. They can be distracting and annoying, and give the impression of a lack of preparation if used excessively. Even worse is the use of vernacular phrases like, “y’know” (a contraction of “Do You Know”) which gives the impression of lack of education or lack of concern for the audience. The use of vocalized pauses may be the result of a habit that deserves an effort to be overcome. Avoid using phrases such as “Uh,” “OK?”, “y’know”, “like…, I mean,” “right?”

One final note: If public speaking is or will be an important part of your career, it would be sensible to have an evaluation of your voice, articulation and projection done by an objective professional so you can take any remedial action that might be recommended. There are courses of study, private lessons, and professional voice coaches to work with your voice projection, tone, and pitch.

Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with deeper meaning. – Maya Angelou