11.5: What to do When Delivering Your Speech

The interplay between the verbal and nonverbal components of your speech can either bring the message vividly to life or confuse or bore the audience. Therefore, it is best that you neither overdramatize your speech delivery behaviors nor downplay them. This is a balance achieved through rehearsal, trial and error, and experience. One way to think of this is in terms of the Goldilocks paradigm: you don’t want to overdo the delivery because you might distract your audience by looking hyper or overly animated. Conversely, someone whose delivery is too understated (meaning they don’t move their hands or feet at all) looks unnatural and uncomfortable, which can also distract. Just like Goldilocks, you want a delivery that is “just right.” This middle ground between too much and too little is a much more natural approach to public speaking delivery. This natural approach will be covered in more detail in the following sections where we discuss specific aspects of your delivery and what you need to think about while actually giving your speech.

Hands

Almost everyone who gives a speech in public gets scared or nervous to some extent. Even professionals who do this for a living feel that way, but they have learned how to combat those nerves through experience and practice. When we get scared or nervous, our bodies emit adrenaline into our systems so we can deal with whatever problem is causing us to feel that way. Unfortunately, you will need to be standing relatively still for the next 5-7 minutes, so that burst of adrenaline is going to try to work its way out of your body and manifest itself somehow. One of the main ways is through your hands.

It may sound funny, but we have seen more than one student unknowingly incorporate “jazz hands” (shaking your hands at your sides with fingers opened wide) at various points in their speech. While certainly an extreme example, this and behaviors like it can easily become distracting. At the other end of the scale, people who don’t know what to do with their hands or use them “too little” sometimes hold their arms stiffly at their sides, behind their backs, or in their pockets, all of which can also look unnatural and distracting.
The key for knowing what to do with your hands is to use them naturally as you would in normal conversation. If you were standing around talking to your friends and wanted to list three reasons why you should all take a road trip this weekend, you would probably hold up your fingers as you counted off the reasons (“First, we hardly ever get this opportunity. Second, we can…”). Try to pay attention to what you do with your hands in regular conversations and incorporate that into your delivery.

However, with all that said, if you have nothing else to do with your hands, such as meaningful gestures, the default position for them is to be resting gently on the sides of the lectern (see Figure 11.2). You don’t want to grip the lectern tightly, but resting them on the edges keeps them in position to move your notes on if you need to or use them to gesture. As stated above, you want to practice this way beforehand so you are used to speaking this way when you come to class.

Feet

Just like your hands, a lot of nervous energy is going to try to work its way out of your body through your feet. On the “too much” end, this is most common when people start “dancing” behind the lectern Another variation is twisting feet around each other or the lower leg. On the other end are those who put their feet together, lock their knees, and never move from that position. Both of these options look unnatural, and therefore will prove to be distracting to your audience. Locking your knees can also lead to loss of oxygen in your brain, not a good state to be in, because it can cause you to faint.

The default position for your feet, then, is to have them shoulder-width apart with your knees slightly bent (see Figure 11.3). Again, you want to look and feel natural, so it is fine to adjust your weight or move out from behind the lectern, but constant motion (or perpetual stillness) will not lead to good overall delivery.

These two sections on hands and feet mention “energy.” Public speakers need to look energetic—not hyperactive, but engaged and upbeat about communicating their message. The energy is part of the muscle memory we saw in Chapter 1. Slumping, low and unvarying pitch and rate, and lack of gestures telegraph “I don’t care” to an audience.

Objects

There is a very simple rule when it comes to what you should bring with you to the lectern when you give your speech: **Only bring to the lectern what you absolutely need to give the speech.** Anything else you have with you will only serve as a distraction for both you and the audience. For the purposes of this class, the only objects you should need to give your speech are whatever materials you are speaking from, and possibly a visual aid if you are using one. Beyond that, don’t bring pens, laptops, phones, lucky charms, or notebooks with you to the lectern. These extra items can ultimately become a distraction themselves when they fall off the lectern or get in your way. Some students like to bring their electronic tablet, laptop computer, or cell phone with them, but there are some obvious disadvantages to these items, especially if you don’t turn the ringer on your cell phone off. Cell phones are not usually large enough to serve as presentation notes; we’ve seen students squint and hold the phone up to their faces.
Not only do you need to be aware of what you bring with you, but you should also be aware of what you have on your person as well. Sometimes, in the course of dressing for a speech, we can overlook simple issues that can cause problems while speaking. Some of these can include:

- Jewelry that 'jingles' when you move, such as heavy bracelets;
- Uncomfortable shoes or shoes that you are not used to (don't make speech day the first time you try wearing high heels);
- Anything with fringe, zippers, or things hanging off it. They might become irresistible to play with while speaking;
- For those with longer hair, remember that you will be looking down at your notes and then looking back up. Don’t be forced to “fix” your hair or tuck it behind your ear every time you look up. Use a barrette, hairband, or some other method to keep your hair totally out of your face so that the audience can see your eyes and you won’t have to adjust your hair constantly. It can be very distracting to an audience to watch a speaker pull hair from his face after every sentence.

The Lectern and Posture

We have already discussed the lectern, but it is worth mentioning again briefly here. The lectern is a tool for you to use that should ultimately make your speech easier to give, and you need to use it that way. On the “too much” end, some people want to trick their audience into thinking they are not nervous by leaning on the podium in a relaxed manner, sometime going so far as to actually begin tipping the podium forward. Your lectern is NOT part of your skeletal system, to prop you up, so don’t do this. On the “too little” end are those who are afraid to touch it, worried that they will use it incorrectly or somehow knock it over (you won’t!).

As always, you want the "Goldilocks" middle ground. As stated above, rest your notes and hands on it, but don’t lean on the lectern or “hug” it. Practicing with a lectern (or something similar to a lectern) will eliminate most of your fears about using it.

The lectern use is related to posture. Most of us let gravity pull us down. One of the muscle memory tricks of public speaking is to roll your shoulders back. Along with making your shoulder muscles feel better, doing so with feet apart and knees bent, rolling your shoulders back will lead to a more credible physical presence—you’ll look taller and more
energetic. You’ll also feel better, and you’ll have larger lung capacity for breathing to support your tone and volume.

---

**Eye Contact**

As we’ve said consistently throughout this book, your audience is the single biggest factor that influences every aspect of your speech. And since eye contact is how you establish and maintain a rapport with your audience during your speech, it is an extremely important element of your delivery. Your professor may or may not indicate a standard for how much eye contact you need during the speech, such as 50%, but he or she will absolutely want to see you making an effort to engage your audience through looking directly at them.

What is important to note here is that you want to establish genuine eye contact with your audience, and not “fake” eye contact. There have been a lot of techniques generated for “faking” eye contact, and none of them look natural. For example, these are not good ideas:

- **Three points on the back wall** – You may have heard that instead of making eye contact, you can just pick three points on the back wall and look at those. What ends up happening, though, is you look like you are staring off into space and your audience will spend the majority of your speech trying to figure out what you are looking at. To avoid this, look around the entire room, including the front, back, left, and right sides of the space.

- **The swimming method** – This happens when someone is reading his or her speech and looks up quickly and briefly to try to make it seem like they are making eye contact, not unlike a swimmer who pops his head out of the water for a breath before going back under. Eye contact is more than just physically moving your head; it is about looking at your audience and establishing a connection. In general, your eye contact should last at least five seconds at a time and should be with individuals throughout the room.

- **The stare down** – Since you will, to some degree, be graded on your eye contact, some students think (either consciously or not), that the best way to ensure they get credit for establishing eye contact is to always and exclusively look directly at their professor. While we certainly appreciate the attention, we want to see that you are establishing eye contact with your entire audience, not just one person. Also, this behavior is uncomfortable for the instructor.

---

**Volume**

**Volume** refers to the relative softness or loudness of your voice. Like most of the other issues we’ve discussed in this section, the proper volume for a given speaking engagement usually falls on the scale in Figure 11.4. If you speak too softly (“too little” volume), your audience will struggle to hear and understand you and may give up trying to listen. If you speak with “too much” volume, your audience may feel that you are yelling at them, or at least feel uncomfortable with you shouting. The volume you use should fit the size of the audience and the room.

Fortunately, for the purposes of this class, your normal speaking voice will probably work just fine since you are in a relatively small space with around twenty people. However, if you know that you are naturally a soft-spoken person, you will need to work on breathing to get more air into your lungs, and on projecting your voice to the people in the last row, not just those in the front. Of course, if you are naturally a very loud talker, you may want to make other adjustments when giving your speech. Obviously this will all change if you are asked to speak in a larger venue or given a microphone to use.
Public speaking relies on the voice for interest, credibility, audibility, and clarity. The British Prime Minister of the 19th century was quoted saying, “There is no greater index of character so sure as the voice.” While that seems exaggerated today, a public speaker at any level cannot ignore the energy, loudness, and clarity in their voice. There are four steps to voice production: breathing (produced by the lungs, which are largely responsible for the vocal characteristic of volume); phonation (the production of the sound in the vocal folds, which close and vibrate to produce sound as the air is exhaled over them; phonation creates pitch); resonation (a type of amplification of the sound in the larynx, oral cavity, and nasal cavity, which creates the characteristic of quality); and articulation, which produces the sounds of language others can understand and is responsible for rate and for being understood.

The visual in Figure 11.5 shows a cutaway of these parts of the anatomy. Your instructor may give you more directions on maximizing the power of your voice to achieve more variety and power. In section 11.6 we include a vocal exercise for doing so. We have all listened to a low-energy, monotone, monorate speaker and know how hard it is, so you should pay attention to your recording, perhaps by closing your eyes and just listening, to see if your voice is flat and lifeless.

![The Upper Respiratory System](image)

Figure 11.5

**Pitch**

*Pitch* is the relative highness or lowness of your voice, and like everything, you can have too much or too little (with regard to variation of it). Too much pitch variation occurs when people “sing” their speeches, and their voices oscillate between very high pitched and very low pitched. While uncommon, this is sometimes attributed to nerves. More common is too little variation in pitch, which is known as being **monotone**.

Delivering a speech in a monotone manner is usually caused by reading too much; generally the speaker’s focus is on saying the words correctly (because they have not practiced). They forget to speak normally to show their interest in the topic, as we would in everyday conversation. For most people, pitch isn’t a major issue, but if you think it might be for you, ask the people in your practice audience what they think. Generally, if we are interested in and passionate about
communicating our thoughts, we are not likely to be monotone. We are rarely monotone when talking to friends and family about matters of importance to us, so pick topics you care about.

Rate

How quickly or slowly you say the words of your speech is the rate. Too little rate (i.e. speaking too slowly) will make it sound like you may not fully know your speech or what you are talking about, and will ultimately cost you some credibility with your audience. It may also result in the audience being bored and lose focus on what you are saying. Rate is one reason you should try to record yourself, even if just audio on your phone, beforehand and be mindful of time when you practice. Your voice’s rate will affect the time it takes to give the speech.

By contrast, too much rate (i.e. speaking too fast) can be overly taxing on an audience’s ability to keep up with and digest what you are saying. It sometimes helps to imagine that your speech is a jog or run that you and your friends (the audience) are taking together. You (as the speaker) are setting the pace based on how quickly you speak. If you start sprinting, it may be too difficult for your audience to keep up and they may give up halfway through. If you know you speak quickly, especially when nervous, be sure to practice slowing down and writing yourself delivery cues in your notes (see Chapter 6) to maintain a more comfortable rate. As always, recording and timing your speech during practice helps.

You especially will want to maintain a good, deliberate rate at the beginning of your speech because your audience will be getting used to your voice. We have all called a business where the person answering the phone mumbles the name of the business in a rushed way. We aren’t sure if we called the right number. Since the introduction is designed to get the audience’s attention and interest in your speech, you will want to focus on clear delivery there. Regulating rate is another reason why video-recording yourself can be so helpful because we often to not realize how fast we speak.

Pauses

The common misconception for public speaking students is that pausing during your speech is bad, but that isn’t necessarily true. You pause in normal conversations, so you shouldn’t be afraid of pausing while speaking. This is especially true if you are making a particularly important point or want for a statement to have a more powerful impact: you will want to give the audience a moment to digest what you have said.

For example, consider the following statement: “Because of issues like pollution and overpopulation, in 50 years the earth’s natural resources will be so depleted that it will become difficult for most people to obtain enough food to survive.” Following a statement like this, you want to give your audience just a brief moment to fully consider what you are saying. Hopefully they will think something along the lines of What if I’m still alive then? or What will my children do? and become more interested in hearing what you have to say.

What will my children do? and become more interested in hearing what you have to say.

Of course, there is such a thing as pausing too much, both in terms of frequency and length. Someone who pauses too often (after each sentence) may come off seeming like they don’t know their speech very well. Someone who pauses too long (more than a few seconds), runs the risk of the audience feeling uncomfortable or, even worse becoming distracted or letting their attention wander. We are capable of processing words more quickly than anyone can speak.
clearly, which is one of the reasons listening is difficult. Pauses should be controlled to maintain attention of the audience.

### Vocalized pauses

At various points during your speech, you may find yourself in need of a brief moment to collect your thoughts or prepare for the next section of your speech. At those moments, you will be pausing, but we don’t always like to let people know that we’re pausing. So what many of us do in an attempt to “trick” the audience is fill in those pauses with sounds so that it appears that we haven’t actually paused. These are known as **vocalized pauses**, or sometimes “fillers.” Another term for them is “nonfluencies.”

Everyone uses vocalized pauses to some degree, but not everyone’s are problematic. This obviously becomes an issue when the vocalized pauses become distracting due to their overuse. We have little doubt that you can remember a time when you were speaking to someone who said the word “like” after every three words and you became focused on it. One of your authors remembers attending a wedding and (inadvertently) began counting the number of times the best man said “like” during his toast (22 was the final count). The most common vocalized pause is “uh,” but then there are others. Can you think of any?

The bad news here is that there is no quick fix for getting rid of your vocalized pauses. They are so ingrained into all of our speech patterns that getting rid of them is a challenge. However, there is a two-step process you can employ to begin eliminating them. First, you need to identify what your particular vocalized pause is. Do you say “um,” “well,” or “now” before each sentence? Do you finish each thought with, “you know?” Do you use “like” before every adjective (as in “he was like so unhappy”)?

After figuring out what your vocalized pause is, the second step is to carefully and meticulously try to catch yourself when you say it. If you hear yourself saying “uh,” remind yourself, I need to try to not say that. Catching yourself and being aware of how often you use vocalized pauses will help you begin the process of reducing your dependence on them and hopefully get rid of them completely.

One of the authors uses a game in her class that she adopted from a couple of disc jockeys she used to hear. It is called the “uh game.” The callers had to name six things in a named category (items in a refrigerator, pro-football teams, makes of cars, etc.) in twenty seconds without saying a vocalized pause word or phrase. It sounds easy, but it isn’t, especially on the spot with a radio audience. It is a good way to practice focusing on the content and not saying a vocalized pause.

The ten items listed above represent the major delivery issues you will want to be aware of when giving a speech, but it is by no means an exhaustive list. There is however, one final piece of delivery advice we would like to offer. We know that no matter how hard you practice and how diligent you are in preparing for your speech, you are most likely going to mess up some aspect of your speech when you give it in class, at least a little. That’s normal. Everyone does it. The key is to not make a big deal about it or let the audience know you messed up. Odds are that they will never even realize your mistake if you don’t tell them there was a mistake. Saying something like “I can’t believe I messed that up” or “Can I start over?” just telegraphs to the audience your mistake. In fact, you have most likely never heard a perfect speech delivered in your life. It is likely that you just didn’t realize that the speaker missed a line or briefly forgot what they wanted to say.
As has been the driving maxim of this chapter, this means that you need to

**Practice your speech beforehand, at home or elsewhere, the way you will give it in class.**

Since you know you are likely going to make some sort of mistake in class, use your practice time at home to work on how you will deal with those mistakes. If you say a word incorrectly or start reading the wrong sentence, don’t go back and begin that section anew. That’s not what you would do in class, so just correct yourself and move on. If you practice dealing with your mistakes at home, you will be better prepared for the inevitable errors that will find their way into your speech in class.

A final thought on practice. We have all heard, “Practice makes perfect.” That is not always true. Practice makes permanent; the actions become habitual. If you practice incorrectly, your performance will be incorrect. Be sure your practice is correct.