

Filler words are more than just unnecessary clutter in your speech. They are a distraction.

Filler-Word Therapy

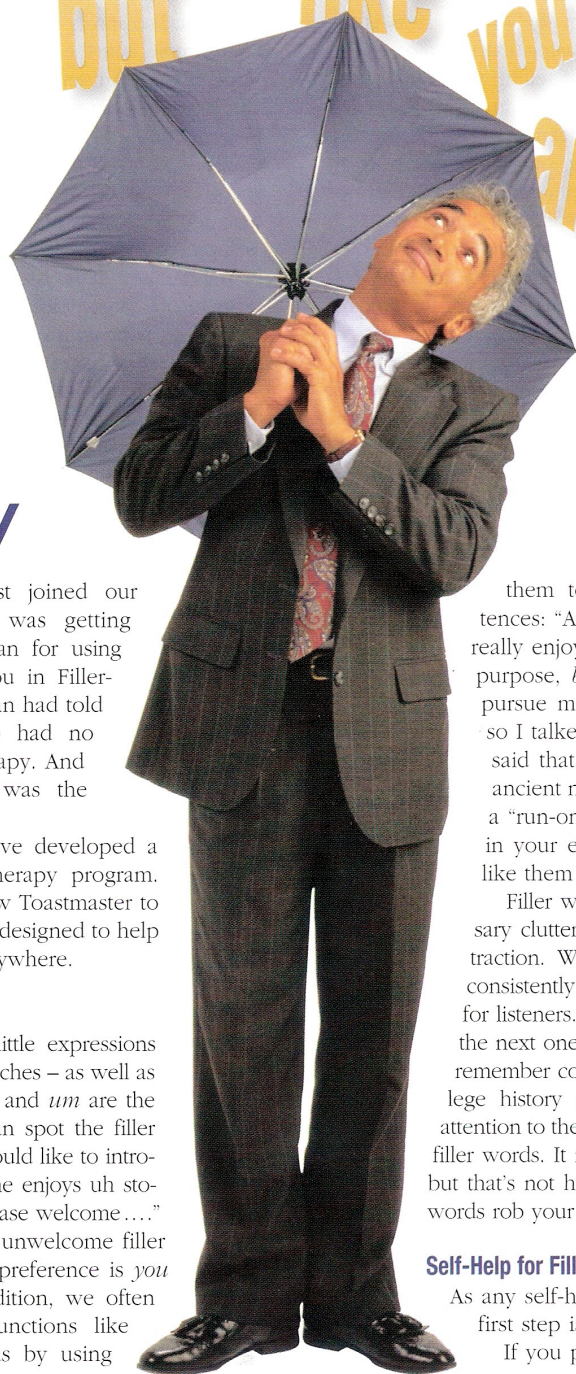
Poor guy. Larry had just joined our Toastmasters club and was getting nailed by the Grammarian for using filler words. "We're putting you in Filler-Word Therapy," the Grammarian had told him. Unfortunately, our club had no such thing as Filler-Word Therapy. And even more unfortunately, I was the Grammarian that day.

As a service to Larry, I have developed a comprehensive Filler-Word Therapy program. But you don't have to be a new Toastmaster to benefit from this program. It is designed to help innocent filler-word users everywhere.

Um, What's a Filler Word?

Filler words are those pesky little expressions that find their way into our speeches – as well as into our daily conversation. *Uh* and *um* are the classic offenders. See if you can spot the filler words in this sentence: "I uh would like to introduce our um speaker today. She enjoys uh storytelling and um ham radio. Please welcome...."

Uh and *um* aren't the only unwelcome filler words. For many people, the preference is *you know*, *like* or *actually*. In addition, we often turn perfectly innocent conjunctions like *and* and *but* into filler words by using



them to string together multiple sentences: "And then I studied biology, *and* I really enjoyed it *and* I felt I had found my purpose, *but* I wasn't sure if I wanted to pursue medical school or animal studies, so I talked to my mentor about it *and* he said that I should...." This is what your ancient ninth-grade English teacher called a "run-on sentence." She didn't like them in your essays, and your audience won't like them in your speeches.

Filler words are more than just unnecessary clutter in your speech. They are a distraction. When a person uses *uh* and *um* consistently, the habit becomes a focal point for listeners. They find themselves waiting for the next one and cringing when that hear it. I remember counting the filler words in my college history professor's lectures. I paid little attention to the content sandwiched between the filler words. It might have been interesting stuff, but that's not how I remember it. Don't let filler words rob your speech of its potential impact.

Self-Help for Filler-Word Users

As any self-help community will tell you, the first step is admitting you have a problem.

If you participate regularly in Toastmas-

ters meetings, your fellow Toastmasters have probably told you if you have a filler-word problem through the constructive feedback of the Grammarian or a speech evaluator. If you know you have a problem and you are ready to overcome it, follow the four steps outlined below.

1 Develop the ability to hear or “catch” filler words.

This skill is critical because you can't deal with the filler words if you can't hear them. So practice listening with this specific purpose in mind. Start by listening for other speakers' filler words. Try it with radio personalities, or with the speaker at your next company meeting. Then begin listening for your own filler words. If you have difficulty, ask your friends and family to help you by alerting you to the filler words you use during conversations.

2 Once you have learned to listen for your own filler words, identify the reasons or occasions that you use them.

For many people, using filler words is just an unconscious nervous habit, little different from repeatedly pushing your glasses up on your nose. You would never even notice this habit unless someone pointed it out to you.

For other people, using filler words is not a sign of nervousness; it's simply a bad habit. We put in *uh* and *um* to help us stall for time during Table Topics, to fill an awkward pause, or to bridge the gap between two thoughts.

Some people automatically begin each sentence with *um*, perhaps in an effort to sound informal or relaxed.

When you catch yourself using filler words, try to identify the reason you're doing it. Ask an objective listener or evaluator to help you with this step by making note of recurring patterns in your speech.

3 Once you have identified the reasons you use filler words, conquer those reasons.

If your filler words are borne out of nervousness or fear of public speaking, tackle that problem. Toastmasters International has published numerous techniques for dealing with nervousness.

If you use filler words routinely to stall for time during Table Topics, develop other techniques for accomplishing the same thing. For example, repeat the question, and have some stock responses ready to buy you some time while you think.

If you use filler words to fill awkward pauses, practice inserting deliberate pauses in your speech so that you become comfortable with them. Don't feel that you have to be speaking every second. Not all pauses are awkward – some are quite welcome. They give both you and the audience a nice break.

If you often use filler words in your prepared speeches, spend more time practicing the delivery. If you are extremely confident with your material and use deliberate transition phrases such as *in addition*, *on the other hand* and *in other words*, your thoughts will flow easily and you won't be as likely to use filler words.

If you use filler words in an attempt to sound casual or relaxed, realize that filler words only make you sound unsure and unpolished. Instead, alter your vocabulary level, sentence complexity and vocal tone to achieve the appropriate level of formality.

4 Using all that you have learned through the previous steps, practice speaking very deliberately.

Take this time to concentrate on leaving out the filler words. First try just a few sentences, then gradually expand. Do this with every speech you prepare, giving yourself plenty of time to practice. If it helps, visualize the sentences in your mind before you say them, and keep the sentences short and simple so that your brain can generate them easily.

Filler-Word Therapy can work for you, especially when you have the support and feedback of your Toastmasters club. Eventually, your need to use filler words will disappear. You will sound much more polished, you will feel much more confident, and your speeches will be much more powerful. But be warned: Once you have conquered filler words, they will become your biggest pet peeve! **T**

Holly Webber, CTM, is a member of Capital City club 2048-55 in Austin, Texas.

Are you Nervous about Public Speaking



The Phobia Clinic specializes in helping clients rapidly overcome anxiety...

Personal Sessions: The Phobia Clinic's certified team of anxiety experts will work with you one-on-one to eliminate the fear and get you comfortable and confident. Our accelerated methods mean that for most clients just a few hours are all that is needed – but we work as long as it takes you to overcome the anxiety or nervousness, all for a fixed one-time fee. Call us now for details of the remarkable guarantee on this service.

Seminars: Join us for an extraordinary life-changing weekend in one of the world's greatest cities. Learn how to master your feelings in any situation, and how to release the negative emotions from past experiences so they'll never haunt you again. Like our personal work, every seminar is fully guaranteed, so if it doesn't work for you, it doesn't cost you a penny.

Call now for these complimentary services:

- 20-minute consultation on how to conquer your fear
- Free Book on how your thinking governs your feelings
- Free Paper: *How to Conquer Speaking Anxiety*

THE PHOBIA CLINIC
www.PhobiaClinic.com 1-800-828-7484