

Your voice is a powerful instrument of expression, and one to which audiences are highly sensitive. Used properly in the speaking situation, it should express who you are and convey your message in a way that engages listeners. Your voice is also key in determining whether the audience perceives you to be in control of the situation.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the quality and importance of your message, if you have inadequate mastery of your voice, you may lose your audience's attention and fail to deliver a successful speech. Fortunately, as you practice your speech, you can learn to control each of the elements of vocal delivery. These include volume, pitch, rate, pauses, vocal variety, and pronunciation and articulation.

## Volume

**Volume**, the relative loudness of a speaker's voice while giving a speech, is usually the most obvious and frequently cited vocal element in speechmaking. If you do not speak loud enough for the entire audience to hear you, your speech is essentially a failure. *The proper volume for delivering a speech is somewhat louder than that of normal conversation.* Just how much louder depends on three factors: (1) the size of the room and the number of people in the audience, (2) whether or not you use a microphone, and (3) the level of background noise.

Speaking at the appropriate volume is critical to how credible your listeners will perceive you to be. Speakers whose volume is too low are viewed less positively than those who project their voices at a pleasing volume. One expert suggests that, as a rule, when you speak too softly, you will initially have to project more than you think is necessary:

As you breathe from your diaphragm, you will gain the force for vocal projection from your diaphragm—not your vocal cords. So don't strain your vocal cords; instead, start the breath with your diaphragm and let it propel your voice beyond the last row of the audience.<sup>2</sup>

The easiest way to judge whether you are speaking too loudly or too softly is to be alert to audience feedback.

## ✓ CHECKLIST

### Tips on Using a Microphone

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Perform a sound check with the microphone at least several hours before delivering your speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When you first speak into the microphone, ask your listeners if they can hear you clearly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Speak directly into the microphone; if you turn your head or body, you won't be heard.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. To avoid broadcasting private statements, beware of "open" mikes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. When wearing a **lavalier microphone** attached to your lapel or collar, speak as if you were addressing a small group. The amplifier will do the rest.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. When using a **handheld or fixed microphone**, beware of *popping*, which occurs when you use sharp consonants, such as *p*, *t*, and *d*, and the air hits the mike. To prevent popping, move the microphone slightly below your mouth and about six inches away.

Source: Susan Berkley, "Microphone Tips," *Great Speaking* 4, no. 7 (2002), <http://www.anton.com/ezone/v4n7.txt> (accessed July 16, 2005).

## Pitch

Imagine the variation in sound between the left end and the right end of a piano or a harmonica. This variation represents the instrument's **pitch**, or range of sounds from high to low (or vice versa). Pitch is determined by the number of vibrations per unit of time; the more vibrations per unit (also called *frequency*), the higher the pitch, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> The classic warm-up singing exercise "*Do re mi fa so la ti do*" is an exercise in pitch. Vocal pitch is important in speechmaking—indeed, in talk of any kind—because it powerfully affects the meaning associated with spoken words. For example, say "Stop." Now, say "*Stop!*" Hear the difference? The rising and falling of voice pitch across phrases and sentences, termed **intonation**,<sup>4</sup> conveys two very distinct meanings. Intonation, or pitch, is what distinguishes a question from a statement:

It's time to study already.

It's time to study *already?*

What differences in meaning do you get from these two expressions?

As you speak, pitch conveys your mood, reveals your level of enthusiasm, expresses your concern for the audience, and signals your overall commitment to the occasion. When there is no variety in pitch, speaking becomes monotonous. A monotonous voice is the death knell to any speech. Speakers who are

consistently monotonous rapidly lose the audience's attention, along with its goodwill. If you tend to be monotonous, practice and listen to your speeches with a tape recorder. You will readily identify instances that require better inflection.

## Rate

The most effective way to hold an audience's attention, as well as to accurately convey the meaning of your speech, is to vary your **speaking rate**, the pace at which you convey speech. A slow rate at the right time indicates thoughtfulness, seriousness, solemnity, and the like. A lively pace indicates excitement, adventure, happiness, and so on.

The normal rate of speech for adults is estimated to be between 120 and 150 words per minute. The typical public speech occurs at a rate slightly below 120 words per minute, but there is no standard, "ideal," or most effective rate. Being alert to the audience's reactions is the best way to know whether your rate of speech is too fast or too slow. An audience will get fidgety, bored, listless, perhaps even sleepy if you speak too slowly. If you speak too rapidly, listeners will appear irritated and confused, as though they can't catch what you're saying. One recent study suggests that speaking too fast will cause listeners to perceive you as tentative about your control of the situation.<sup>5</sup> *To control your rate, count 150 words from your speech, and time yourself as you read it aloud. Do this until you achieve a comfortable speaking rate.*

## Pauses

Many novice speakers are uncomfortable with pauses. It's as if there were a social stigma attached to any silence in a speech. We often react the same way in conversation, covering pauses with unnecessary and undesirable **vocal fillers**, such as "uh," "hmm," "you know," "I mean," "it's like," and "anyways." Like pitch, however, pauses are important strategic elements of a speech. **Pauses** enhance meaning by providing a type of punctuation, emphasizing a point, drawing attention to a key thought, or just allowing listeners a moment to contemplate what is being said. In short, they make a speech far more effective than it might otherwise be. Both the speaker and the audience need pauses.

In his well-known "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. exhibits masterful use of strategic pauses. In what are now the most memorable segments of the speech, King pauses, just momentarily, to let the audience anticipate the words that are about to be spoken:

I have a dream [pause] that one day on the red hills of Georgia. . . .

I have a dream [pause] that one day even the great state of Mississippi. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Imagine how diminished the impact of this speech would have been if King had

## Vocal Variety

Rather than operating separately, all the vocal elements described so far—volume, pitch, rate, and pauses—work together to create an effective delivery. Indeed, the real key to effective vocal delivery is to vary all these elements, thereby demonstrating **vocal variety**. For example, as King speaks the words "I have a dream," the pauses are immediately preceded by a combination of reduced speech rate and increased volume and pitch—a crescendo, you might say. The impact of this variety leaves an indelible impression on anyone who has heard his speech.

### ✓ CHECKLIST

#### Practice Check for Vocal Effectiveness

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. As you practice, does your voice project authority?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Is your voice too loud? Too soft?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Do you avoid speaking in a monotone? Do you vary the stress or emphasis you place on words to clearly express your meaning?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Is your rate of speech comfortable for listeners?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Do you avoid unnecessary vocal fillers, such as "uh," "hmm," "you know," and "I mean"?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Do you use silent pauses for strategic effect?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Does your voice reflect a variety of emotional expressions? Do you convey enthusiasm?

## ESL Speaker's Notes

### Vocal Variety and the Non-Native Speaker

Learning to deliver a speech with the vocal variety that English-speaking people in the United States expect can be particularly challenging for non-native speakers. In addition to having concerns about pronunciation and articulation, the non-native speaker may also be accustomed to patterns of vocal variety—volume, pitch, rate, and pauses—that are different from those discussed in this chapter.

The pronunciation of English depends on learning how to combine a series of about forty basic sounds (fifteen vowels and twenty-five consonants) that together serve to distinguish English words from one another. Correct pronunciation also requires that the speaker learn proper word stress, rhythm, and intonation or pitch.<sup>1</sup> As you practice your speeches, pay particular attention to these facets of delivery. Seek feedback from others to ensure that your goal of shared meaning will be met whenever you deliver speeches.

1. Maryann Cunningham Florez, "Improving Adult ESL Learners' Pronunciation Skills," National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, 1998, <http://www.cal.org/caela/digests/Pronun.htm> (accessed July 16, 2005).

screaming “I hate you!” to someone who has done you a grave injustice. Similar shifts in meaning occur with gestures. If you said “I hate you” while screwing your face up into a nasty grimace and shaking your fist, you would convey a greater sense of vehemence than would be the case if you said it in a flat tone without this gesture.

### FACILITATE FEEDBACK

Listeners use a host of body cues—head shaking (either in agreement or in disagreement), smiles or frowns, arms rigidly folded across the chest, and friendly gazes or facing-away postures—to communicate their pleasure or displeasure with a speech. Being alert to such feedback and responding to it can mean the difference between an alienated audience and one that feels recognized and respected. Coughing and excessive shifting around, for example, may indicate difficulty in hearing and flagging interest. In response, you might try to increase your speaking volume and look in the direction of the affected listeners more frequently and for longer periods. If you receive negative cues such as frowns and head shaking, you might try presenting some additional evidence or interjecting some relevant humor.

### ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SPEAKER AND AUDIENCE

Nonverbal behavior, such as how you position yourself vis-à-vis your listeners, allows you to adjust your relationship with them, establishing a level of familiarity and closeness that is suitable to the topic, purpose, and occasion. To stimulate a sense of informality and closeness, for example, you can move out from behind the podium and walk or stand among audience members. Pioneering talk-show host Phil Donahue was a master of this technique, which is now emulated by many of today’s television talk-show hosts and news anchors. By taking off his suit coat, loosening his tie, speaking at a moderate rate, and engaging in spontaneous movement, Donahue established a casual speech atmosphere. Conversely, remaining behind the speaker’s stand, using a more reserved vocal quality, and speaking at a somewhat slower and consistent rate establish a more formal relationship with listeners.

### ESTABLISH SPEAKER CREDIBILITY

Nonverbal communication plays a key part in the audience’s perception of your competence, trustworthiness, and character.<sup>3</sup> For example, audiences are more readily persuaded by speakers who emphasize vocal variety, eye contact, nodding at listeners, and standing with an open body position than by those who minimize these nonverbal cues.<sup>4</sup> Audience members also respond more positively to speakers whom they perceive to be well dressed and attractive. They are apt to take them more seriously and are more objective in their responses than they are to speakers whom they do not find attractive.

## Pay Attention to Body Language

Audience members are quick to detect discrepancies between what you say and how you say it. As they listen to you, they are simultaneously evaluating the messages sent by your facial expressions, eye behavior, gestures, and general body movements. Audiences do not so much listen to a speaker’s words as they “read” the speaker who delivers them.<sup>5</sup>

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### ANIMATE YOUR FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

From our facial expressions, audiences can gauge whether we are excited about, disenchanted by, or indifferent to our speech—and the people to whom we are presenting it. Facial expressions are an asset to public speakers, but only if they make use of them.

Few behaviors are more effective for building rapport with an audience than *smiling*. A smile is a sign of mutual welcome at the start of a speech, of mutual comfort and interest during the speech, and of mutual goodwill at the close of a speech. In addition, smiling when you feel nervous or otherwise uncomfortable can help you relax and gain heightened composure. Of course, facial expressions need to correspond to the tenor of the speech. Doing what is natural and normal for the occasion should be the rule.



### CHECKLIST

#### Tips for Using Effective Facial Expressions

- ☐ 1. Avoid a deadpan expression.
- ☐ 2. Use animated expressions that feel natural and express your meaning.
- ☐ 3. Never use expressions that are out of character for you or inappropriate for the speech occasion.
- ☐ 4. In practice sessions, loosen your facial features with exercises such as widening the eyes and moving the mouth.
- ☐ 5. Align your facial expressions with your feelings.
- ☐ 6. Establish rapport with the audience by smiling naturally when appropriate.

### MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT

If smiling is an effective way to build rapport, maintaining eye contact is mandatory in establishing a positive relationship with your listeners. Eye contact with the audience is one of the most, if not *the* most, important physical actions in public speaking. Eye contact maintains the quality of directness in speech

delivery. It lets people know they are recognized, indicates acknowledgment and respect, and signals to audience members that the speaker sees them as unique human beings.

With an audience of a hundred to more than a thousand members, it's impossible to look at every listener. But in most speaking situations you are likely to experience, you should be able to look at most people in the audience by using a technique called **scanning**. When you scan an audience, you move your gaze from one listener to another and from one section to another, pausing as you do so to gaze briefly at each individual. One speaking professional suggests following the "rule of three": Pick three audience members to focus on—one in the middle, one on the right, and one on the left of the room; these audience members will be your anchors as you scan the room.<sup>6</sup> Initially, this may be difficult. But with just a little experience you will find yourself doing it naturally.

### USE GESTURES THAT FEEL NATURAL

Friend 1 to Friend 2: "How was the fishing trip?"

Friend 2: "Great! The best I've had in years."

Friend 1: "Caught a monster, eh? How big was it?"

Friend 2 [*extending two hands, palms facing each other*]: "About this big!"

Words alone seldom suffice to convey what we want to express. Head, arm, hand, and even leg gestures are often critical in helping to clarify the meanings we try to convey in words. Physical gestures fill in the gaps, as in illustrating the size or shape of an object (e.g., showing the size of a fish by extending two hands, palms facing each other), expressing the depth of an emotion (pounding a fist on a podium), or emphasizing a certain word (using one's index finger to "write" the word in the air while saying it).

To achieve a natural, relaxed quality in delivery, use gestures to fill in gaps in meaning, as you would in everyday conversation. Gestures should arise from genuine emotions and should conform to your personality.<sup>7</sup>

### ✓ CHECKLIST

#### Tips for Effective Gesturing

- \_\_\_ 1. Use natural, spontaneous gestures.
- \_\_\_ 2. Use gestures to generate interest and clarify your message.
- \_\_\_ 3. Use gestures that are appropriate to the topic and to the occasion.
- \_\_\_ 4. Avoid exaggerated gestures, but use gestures that are broad enough to be seen by each member of the audience.
- \_\_\_ 5. In practice sessions, analyze your gestures for effectiveness.
- \_\_\_ 6. Practice movements that feel natural to you.

### BE AWARE OF GENERAL BODY MOVEMENT

General body movement is also important in maintaining audience attention and processing of your message. Audience members soon tire of listening to a **talking head** who remains steadily positioned in one place behind a microphone or a podium. When this position is unavoidable, either because there is a fixed microphone at the podium or because there is too little space to allow unrestricted movement, gestures and facial expressiveness become all the more important. But as space and time allow, try to get out from behind the podium and stand with the audience. As you do, move around at a comfortable, natural pace.

A speaker's posture sends a definite message to the audience. Listeners perceive speakers who slouch as being sloppy, unfocused, and even weak. Strive to stand erect, but not ramrod straight. The goal is to appear authoritative, not rigid.

### DRESS APPROPRIATELY

As superficial as it may sound, the first thing an audience is likely to notice as you approach the speaker's position is your clothing. How you dress when delivering a speech is therefore important. The critical criteria in determining appropriate dress for a speech are audience expectations and the nature of the speech occasion. If you are speaking as a representative of your business, for example, you will want to complement your company's image.<sup>8</sup> Many jobs and many speaking occasions permit casual dress; but take care not to confuse casual with sloppy or unkempt.<sup>9</sup> Even casual business attire should be professional in the sense that it conveys a responsible, credible, and confident image. Consider Bono, the celebrity activist and front man of the rock group U2, who regularly delivers speeches to international organizations, political gatherings, and universities about the critical economic and health conditions in Africa and developing nations.<sup>10</sup> When speaking Bono tends to choose an outfit that is sensibly casual but appropriate—a dress jacket over dress shirt, with no necktie and with an open collar—attire that reflects his rock star image while respecting the official nature of each occasion.

### ✓ CHECKLIST

#### Broad Dress Code Guidelines

- \_\_\_ 1. Dress well and appropriately for each speech occasion.
- \_\_\_ 2. For a "power" look, wear a dark-colored suit.
- \_\_\_ 3. Medium-blue or navy suits, slacks, or skirts paired with white shirts or blouses will enhance your credibility.
- \_\_\_ 4. When selecting accessories (ties, scarves, kerchiefs, and the like), consider that the color yellow conveys friendliness and the color red focuses attention on you.
- \_\_\_ 5. Flashy jewelry distracts listeners.