

'Now You're Talking'

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Fast or slow?

How to Pace your Words for Maximum Effectiveness

Speaking fast may be fun and exciting to listen to for a while but too much speed is dangerous. It can kill your speech. And you are in danger of losing crisp diction and clarity. The people listening get tired. When your speech stops being stimulating and starts being uncomfortable, ears switch off.

The same thing can happen if you speak too slowly. Speaking word-by-very-slow-word turns ears off just as fast. They are waiting (and waiting) for you to get on with it. Your lack of pace causes them to lose interest.

If you are too fast -

- * Your listeners may interpret your speed as saying: 'I haven't got time for you.'

- * Or they may think you are thinking: 'This speech is a chore and I'll do it as fast as I can to get it over.'

- * Or they might think: 'If you can't keep up it's your problem not mine. If you focused more you wouldn't have any difficulty.'

- * Or perhaps they interpret it as: 'I'm feeling so anxious about speaking to you. I'm afraid you won't be interested in what I've got to say, so I'll say it as fast as possible.'

The answer is to acknowledge your fear, deal with it appropriately and keep on speaking. (See article on overcoming nervousness).

If you are too slow:

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* You may insult your listeners. It may make them feel you think they're so dull they will not be able to understand if you go any faster.

* Your listeners may think you are boring. Slow often comes across as lack of passion. Maybe you're not interested in them or your topic.

* Your audience might feel you don't really know what you are talking about. They may think you are speaking slowly because you are struggling to work out what to say.

The answer to the fast-slow problem is to vary our speaking rate in direct response to the needs of the audience and the to the content.

Think about the structure of your speech - an introduction, followed by a series of main ideas with supporting examples or illustrations. To finish, there'll be a conclusion. You are taking your audience on a journey and your mouth is the driver.

If you whirl them through too fast the scenery blurs. One by one your listeners get dizzy and they switch off.

Or if you speak too slowly they want to get out and walk.

If you were a responsive driver you would be continually adjusting your speed to conditions. There would be places to slow down, perhaps even stop, to allow the audience to catch their breath. There would also be places where a quick burst of acceleration would give an exciting thrill.

Practice with the following tips to get your mix of fast-slow just right.

Quick, Easy and Effective Tips for Speaking Pace

Generally a FASTER speaking speed signals urgency, excitement, passion or raw emotion. It can lead the audience to expect something thrilling is going to happen.

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In contrast, a SLOWER speaking rate is used to emphasise - it signals importance, serious ideas. It says: 'LISTEN! YOU NEED TO KNOW THIS.' A new concept or complex information may need to be delivered slowly so the audience has time to grasp all of the ideas before moving on. 'Slow' is also useful for summarizing.

The combination of slow, fast, medium speed adds interest to your speech, making it easier to listen to.

Practice:

- * Read or recite part of a text you know and love quickly. Ask yourself where was the speed effective? Where was it detrimental? Mark those places on your script.

(Use a highlighter: red for fast, blue for go slower) Read again incorporating your changes.

- * Read a children's story silently several times to familiarise yourself with the flow. Go through it again noting which passages would suit taking more quickly and which should be slower. Read aloud making those changes and listen carefully.

- * Pick a report from a newspaper or magazine. Go through it to familiarise yourself with the flow of material and then read aloud. Make a note of which passages need careful or slow reading and which can be taken at a faster rate. Re-read aloud until you feel you have the mix of speeds right.

- * Practice with a partner. Go through any of the exercises above. Explain what you doing and ask them to listen for effectiveness. Get them to note examples where you did well and where you needed to alter your rate and why.

- * Listen to speakers you admire. Note the different rates of speech they use over the course of their presentation and the effectiveness of them. And remember! Changing speaking rate is challenging. Altering pace is not impossible but it does require awareness, effort and PRACTICE!

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Public Speaking Coach: Jane Thoma-John
Web site: <http://www.nowyouretalking.info>
Phone: +64 9 378 7733
Email: nowyouretalking@orcon.net.nz