<http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speecheval.htm>

**Speech Skill:** Clarity

Welcome to the Speak for Success communication course. This speech lesson, like all the speech lessons in the course, follows a format that explains the speech problem and presents several speech exercises so you can work on the problem. Each speech lesson closes with a homework assignment designed to provide further practice eliminating or correcting the speech problem that you’re working with that particular week. To get the most out of this course, you need to follow the program, working on only one lesson each week and completing all the exercises and homework assignments.

Ready? Of course you are! The speech problem of sloppy enunciation is the topic for this week.

**The Speech Problem**

For listeners, one of the most irritating speech habits is a speaker that doesn’t enunciate clearly. When you don’t bother to pronounce each syllable of each word properly and words get slurred together, you sound uneducated. Worse, your listener has a hard time hearing you – especially if there’s other noise around you or when you’re speaking on the phone.

Dropping “g”s is one of the most common examples of poor enunciation. Say this list of words out loud:

* Going
* Walking
* Jogging
* Thinking
* Striking
* Selling

Did you say “go-ing” or did you say “go-in”? If you said “go-in” (or “walk-in”, “jog-gin”, etc.), you’re a G-dropper.

Be warned; this was not a fair test. Pronouncing words in isolation is very different than what we normally do when we speak.

Say these sentences out loud:

* I’m going to have to rethink that bid.
* Waiting to hear back from the bank is very nerve-wracking and stressful.
* Before starting my business, I looked at a lot of different business opportunities.
* There’s more to learning than just reading, writing and arithmetic.

Did you drop any Gs? Did you enunciate each syllable of each word?

**Speech Exercise: The Mirror Face Test**

A mirror is a great aid when you’re working on your enunciation. I call this the face test. When you’re enunciating properly, your mouth, tongue, lips and jaw move.

Stand in front of a mirror and watch yourself while you say, “I’m going to have to rethink that bid”. See how your lips purse and retract when you say “go-ing”? See how your lips jut out to pronouce the “b” in “bid”? This one sentence is a real face workout.

Say the rest of the sentences out loud, watching yourself speak in the mirror. Now say them all again, slowing down your rate of speech and exaggerating the facial movements.

This week, you should have a mirror session of five minutes every day. You’ll immediately notice that this practice will carry over into your “normal” speaking life, causing you to be more conscious of the way you speak and speak more clearly.

**Tongue Twisters**

Say each of the following sentences out loud three times each, as quickly as you can while fully enunciating each word.

1) Keeping customers content creates kingly profits.

2) Success seeds success.

3) Bigger business isn’t better business but better business brings bigger rewards.

4) Wanting won’t win; winning ways are active ways.

5) Seventeen sales slips slithered slowly southwards.

6) Don’t go deep into debt.

7) Ensuring excellence isn’t easy.

8) Time takes a terrible toll on intentions.

Repeat this exercise as many times as you like.

**Speech Exercise: Enlist a Speech Monitor**

Because it’s so hard to perform naturally when we’re focusing on speaking well, the best way to determine whether or not we’re enunciating properly when we speak and stop slurring and mumbling is to enlist a speech monitor.

It’s a lot easier for someone else to pick up on our sloppy speech habits than to hear ourselves. For convenience, choose someone that lives with you (spouse, child, or roommate), explain that you’re working on your enunciation, and ask him or her to tell you whenever you drop a G or don’t speak clearly. Keep track of how often your speech monitor tells you you’ve committed this speech offense.

What you should see, as you continue to practice speaking clearly, is the number of times your speech monitor hears you speaking sloppily decrease.

Ready for the pressure situation? Ask someone who works with you regularly to be a speech monitor.

**The Benefits of Enunciation**

As your enunciation improves, your listeners will:

* Form a better impression of you as you speak, thinking of you as an educated, knowledgeable person, more worthy of trust.
* Be better able to focus on the message you’re communicating, rather than being distracted by the way you’re expressing yourself.

**Speech Lesson 1 Homework Assignment**

To get the most out of this course, as I said, it’s important that you do the exercises. Your speech won’t improve unless you work at it regularly.

This week, you have two tasks;

1. set aside five minutes a day where you can work with a mirror in a quiet place and practice the enunciation exercises above;
2. enlist at least one speech monitor to help you catch your speech errors.

**The Speech Problem**

If sloppy enunciation is one of the most irritating speech habits, using excessive fillers while you speak is **the** most irritating speech habit. Fillers range from repetitious sounds, such as “uh”, “um” and the dreaded Canadian “eh”, through favourite catch words and phrases, such as “you know”, “anyway”, “all right” and “like”. I won’t even attempt to give a full list of them here, because new fillers such as “whatever” are continuously creeping into people’s speech.

The problem with using fillers such as these when you speak is that they distract your listener – often to the point that he doesn’t hear anything you say. Your message is entirely lost, obscured by the thicket of fillers surrounding it. Think about the last time you listened to someone with the filler habit. Chances are good you spent the time he spoke either being annoyed or counting the number of times he said the filler phrase.

And with some people, that number can be amazingly high. Some people tack fillers onto the end of every sentence, and sandwich them between every phrase. It becomes, you know, really difficult for them to say anything without adding these empty additional phrases, you know?

And speech fillers are insidious. If you’re a person that uses fillers, you may not even be aware of the speech problem yourself. Fillers tend to become so embedded into our speech patterns that even once you’re aware that you’re using them, you’ll have a very hard time trying not to say them.

**Guard Against Stock Responses**

Even if you don’t usually stud your speech with fillers, you may find yourself falling back on stock responses that irritate your listeners. Stock responses are phrases that we develop over time to particular communication situations, such as statements that call for acknowledgement and nothing else. For instance, I once knew a person that responded, “Okey-dokey” whenever he was asked to do something. Now picture yourself as this person’s boss – and repeatedly having to ask him to do things. (Shudder.)

Try to vary your response to these standard situations, rather than falling back on whatever your stock response is every time. Avoid slang and “cute” phrases as you would avoid the plague. If you’re having trouble varying your responses, pick several neutral, formal phrases, such as “Right away”, “I will” and/or “Yes, certainly”, and stick to those.

**Speech Exercise: The Tell-Me Game**

This exercise is designed to test your speech to see if you use fillers and to identify your favourite filler words and phrases. You will need a partner, such as the person who agreed to be your speech monitor in Speak For Success Speech Lesson 1, to listen to you.

Tell your partner the purpose of the game. His task is to identify and list all fillers as you speak. Set a timer for one minute. Your task is to speak for one minute on this topic:

* Your business’s products and/or services.

Do NOT allow yourself any time to think about the topic. Just speak. Speaking impromptu will more closely reproduce your “usual” speech habits.

How did you do? Are you a filler user? If you are, there’s work to do to fix your sloppy speech habit.

Continue to use the Tell-Me Game to try and cut down on the number of fillers you use in spontaneous speech. Increase the time of the exercise to two minutes.

[**Speech Exercise: Additional Speech Topics For The Tell-Me Game**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechtopics.htm)

You will need a partner for this exercise. As the listener, your partner’s role is to listen for the particular speech problem being worked on and record all instances of the speech problem.

As the speaker, your role is to speak impromptu on one of the following speech topics for two minutes.

Do NOT spend time thinking about the topic before you speak.

1. Your favourite hobby and why it’s your favourite.
2. What you would do if you won five million dollars on the lottery?
3. If you had unlimited resources, what would you do to improve your life?
4. What do you like best about what you do? Why?
5. Which of the five senses is most important? Why?
6. What skill or talent would you most like to have? Why?
7. Why is the current federal government doing such a bad job?
8. What should your town do to create a better climate for business?
9. What are the best places to eat in your town or city? Why?
10. What are the best things to do to relax? Why?
11. What’s the worst fault a person can have? Why?
12. If you could be young again, would you? Why?
13. What are the four things you least like to do? Why?
14. Who do you most admire? Why?
15. If you could visit any place in the world, where would you go? Why?
16. What are your three best personality traits? Why?
17. What do you like most about living where you live? Why?
18. What was the worst job you ever had? Why?
19. What was the best workshop or conference you’ve ever attended? Why?

Increase the difficulty of this speech exercise by speaking impromptu on one of the topics above for three minutes - or even five minutes, if you dare.

**Speech Exercise: Have Your Fillers Monitored**

As the only way you’re going to eliminate fillers from your speech is through constant diligence, the help of your speech monitor (or monitors) will be invaluable. Once again, explain the speech problem you are working on, and have him tell you every time you commit this speech offence in his presence. If you’re serious about breaking this sloppy speech habit, having one monitor at home and one in your work environment is ideal.

**The Benefits of Eliminating Fillers**

As was the case with the first sloppy speech habit you tackled, as your speech fillers decrease, your listeners will:

* Form a better impression of you as you speak, thinking of you as an educated, knowledgeable person, more worthy of trust;
* Be better able to focus on the message you’re communicating, rather than being distracted by the way you’re expressing yourself.

**Speech Lesson 2 Homework Assignment**

Your first task this week is simple: use the Tell-Me Game at least once to identify your favourite filler words and phrases.

The second task is much harder; work to eliminate the extraneous fillers in your speech. Continue working with a partner and playing the Tell-Me-Game throughout the week. Get your speech monitor or monitors involved to help catch the fillers you use.

As you become more conscious of the way you speak and practice speaking without fillers, you’ll find your filler use decrease.

In the next speech lesson, you’ll work on the skill of expression.

**Clarity** – speaking clearly so as to be understood. Clarity is composed of several different related speech skills: (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 1](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson1.htm), [Speech Lesson 2](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson2.htm) and [Speech Lesson 5](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson5.htm)).

**Projection** – speaking loudly enough so that every member of the audience can hear what is said.

**Enunciation** – fully pronouncing each syllable of each word with the proper emphasis (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 1](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson1.htm)).

**Pronunciation** – correctly pronouncing each word.

**Expression** – speaking with vocal variety and vitality so that the audience remains interested (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 3](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson3.htm)).

**Pace** – speaking at a rate that is comfortable for the audience to hear and comprehend (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 4](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson4.htm)).

**Fillers** – Using meaningless words or sounds that distract the audience (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 2](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson2.htm)).

**Slang** – Informal language that is specific to a particular group (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 5](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson5.htm)).

**Buzzwords** – Words or phrases that sound important but have become meaningless through endless repetition (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 5](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson5.htm)).

**Acronyms** – Sets of initials used as shorthand to refer to particular phrases (such as C.E.O. for Chief Executive Officer) (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 5](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson5.htm)).

**Active Listening** – Participating in the act of communication by paying attention and letting the speaker know that you’re paying attention (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 6](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson6.htm)).

**Stance** – Presenting and maintaining an appropriate posture to facilitate communication (covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 6](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson6.htm)).

**Eye-contact** – Just what you think it is. When speaking to an audience of more than one, it’s important to make eye contact with as many individual members of the audience as possible ((covered in [Speak for Success Speech Lesson 6](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson6.htm)).

Say each of the following sentences out loud three times each, as quickly as you can while fully enunciating each word.

1) Keeping customers content creates kingly profits.

2) Success seeds success.

3) Bigger business isn’t better business but better business brings bigger rewards.

4) Wanting won’t win; winning ways are active ways.

5) Seventeen sales slips slithered slowly southwards.

6) Don’t go deep into debt.

7) Ensuring excellence isn’t easy.

8) Time takes a terrible toll on intentions.

Repeat this exercise as many times as you like.

**(This speech exercise is part of the Speak For Success Course. While you can use this exercise to work on your speech skills at any time, it’s designed to work on a particular speech skill that you can find out more about at** [**Speak for Success Speech Lesson 3**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson3.htm)**.)**

Picture yourself as a star of a long-running soap opera or TV show. What do stars do? They emote. This role-playing speech exercise will help you develop a more expressive voice by exaggerating your normal pitch and rhythm.

Put as much expression into your role as you can, following the stage directions. It’s best if you work with a partner, as the script is written for two people – although trying to play both roles can be fun, too!

**Speech Exercise Script**

Daphne: (horribly upset) It’s all over, Rodney.

Rodney: (anxiously) What do you mean?

Daphne: I mean I just can’t go on like this. The sneaking around, the hiding, trying to make sure that no one sees us...

Rodney: (compassionately) It hasn’t been easy for me, either, you know.

Daphne: I know... I know...

Rodney: I mean, it’s just not what we’re used to, is it? I know that you understand, but other people... What if they found out? I can’t stop thinking about it.

Daphne: (brutally) We’d never be able to hold up our heads again. We’d be outcasts.

Rodney: (firmly) If we just stick together, we can get through it. Where’s your famous will power?

Daphne: But it’s driving me mad. How much worse than this could it be? I just can’t stop thinking about it.

Rodney: So that’s it, then? You’re just going to throw in the towel?

Daphne: I have to, Rodney. Don’t you understand? I thought you of all people...

Rodney: (bitterly) Oh, I understand, all right. Go ahead then. You always do just what you want to do anyhow.

Daphne: (outraged) That’s not true! How dare you accuse me of being selfish after all the sacrifices I’ve made!

Rodney: See? All you can talk about is your sacrifices. As if I haven’t made any. And now you’re being selfish again. How do you think I’m going to be able to carry on by myself?

Daphne: (snidely) Well you were the one that was talking about will power.

Rodney: Yeah, right. As if I’m going to be able to stick to this protein only diet once you start filling the cupboards with bread and doughnuts again!

**End Speech Exercise Script**

Like any star, you may rerun these lines any number of times. For more variety, change the stage directions. In the opening lines, have Daphne speak calmly and Rodney curiously, for instance.

Reading the lines of published plays and scripts out loud is another great way to practice increasing the expression in your voice – and of course, to continue polishing your clarity speech skills.

**Speech Skill:** Pace

[See a full list of speech skills and definitions](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechterms.htm).

**The Speech Problem**

Speaking too quickly is one of the most common speech problems – perhaps because almost all of us tend to speed up our speech when we’re stressed or excited. And when are we not stressed when we’re working? Making a cold call, meeting a new contact, working on a project with a deadline – all of these situations are stressful and cause all kinds of physiological responses, including speeding up our speech.

Some people, however, are genuine “motormouths” – people who always speak rapidly.

Speaking too slowly is much less common, but believe it or not, there are people who tend to speak naturally with a rate of speed that leaves gaps between words and drawls out syllables to extremes.

The trick to speaking at an appropriate pace is remembering that you need to speak at a rate that allows your listener to understand what you’re saying. Listening is not a one-step process; we have to physically hear what is said and then translate language into meaning. If we speak too quickly, this vital second step of the process is lost.

Like expression, the natural rate at which you speak is part of your speech signature. The problem with speaking at a pace that’s either too fast or too slow is that it interferes with communication. When you speak too quickly, you literally “blow away” your listener. He can’t mentally keep up with you and will quickly stop trying. While a small part of your message may get through, most won’t. When you speak too slowly, your listener has too much time for processing, and the mind either locks on how irritatingly slowly you’re speaking or wanders off to more interesting things.

If you hear phrases such as “Could you repeat that?” often, or often encounter glazed looks, you’re probably a person who usually speaks too quickly or too slowly.

**Slowing Your Speech Down**

Focusing on our enunciation when we speak is one good way to slow down our speech. When we focus on enunciating clearly, (as you did in Speech Lesson 1), we force ourselves to stop slurring and eliding syllables when we speak.

Another way to slow down our speech is to concentrate on phrasing. Oral speech, just like written speech, is composed of phrases and sentences. In fact, the punctuation of written speech is simply a set of sign posts to tell us how the written information should be phrased. For instance, when I wrote:

“If you hear phrases such as “Could you repeat that?” often, or often encounter glazed looks, you’re probably a person who usually speaks too quickly or too slowly,” the punctuation dictates that when you read or say this sentence, you are going to pause briefly after the question mark, pause again after the word ‘often’ because of the comma, and again after ‘looks’. The sentence should be read the same way, whether you read it silently or read it out loud.

But people who speak too quickly tend to ignore phrasing entirely. They don’t pause for commas, hyphens, question marks or even periods, jamming all the phrases together. Therefore, concentrating on the phrasing can really help slow down speedy speakers.

**Speech Exercise: Practicing Phrasing**

Go back to the start of this speech lesson and read it out loud, using the punctuation to guide your phrasing. Think of a period or semi-colon as a pause twice as long as a comma.

**Speech Skill:** Clarity

[See a full list of speech skills and definitions](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechterms.htm).

**The Speech Problem**

We live in a world littered with acronyms, buzzwords and slang. Right now, for instance, I’m tired of people leveraging everything all over the place. A friend recently told me that she’d leveraged her portfolio. I thought she was talking about stocks, but she meant that she had a job interview. This was just a personal, minor misunderstanding. But acronyms, buzzwords and slang can cause misunderstandings that cost time and money when we’re trying to do business.

As business people and professionals, we need to be sure that we’re speaking the right language to the right people at the right time. Both slang and buzzwords are types of informal, trendy language; both obscure meaning.

Slang is “informal language consisting of words and expressions that are not considered appropriate for formal occasions; often vituperative or vulgar” or “the characteristic language of a particular group” (HyperDictionary). So on the one hand, your listener may not understand what’s said because he isn’t a member of the selective group that knows that lingo; on the other, he may understand it very well but be offended by it.

Another problem with using slang to attempt to communicate is that many of us tend to get trapped in slang time warps. Unless you live in a house with teenagers or are currently attending a post-secondary educational institute, the slang you’re trying to use is probably hopelessly out of date. (Remember the phrase, “far out”? Or “lame”? If you do, don’t admit it to anyone!)

Buzzwords are “stock phrases that have become nonsense through endless repetition” (HyperDictionary), or, if you prefer, “important-sounding words or phrases used primarily to impress laypersons” (BuzzWhack.com). Currently, for example, every business under the sun is including the word “solutions” in their marketing copy and conversations, to the point that the word is just a meaningless filler.

[**Speech Exercise: Business Buzzwords To Avoid**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/buzzwords.htm)

**Shorthand Can Shortchange Your Listeners**

Acronyms are abbreviations formed from the first letters of each word of a phrase that are sometimes used as words in themselves. They’re popular because basically we’re a lazy bunch and using a set of initials rather than writing or saying several words saves effort. Some common ones are:

* ASP - Application Service Provider
* B2B - Business to Business
* BAU - Business As Usual
* BAFO - Best And Final Offer
* RFP - Request for Proposal
* ROI - Return on Investment

What works as shorthand in the office doesn’t necessarily translate when you’re speaking with customers or clients. Perfectly appropriate acronyms you use in-house may just be gobbledygook to clients.

I’m not saying that acronyms should never be used; just that you should use them selectively. To make it easier on yourself, set up and follow a rule never to use acronyms when communicating with customers and/or clients, no matter what form the communication takes. Clarity is worth the price of convenience.

**Speech Exercise: Adding Acronyms**

Return to the list of acronyms above and add at least five different acronyms – preferably ones that you are in the habit of using. As the purpose of this exercise is to start focusing on the acronyms in your speech, you may find it easier to add to the list throughout the week as acronyms crop up when you’re communicating.

**The Benefits of Cutting Slang, Buzzwords and Acronyms**

When you cut these from your speech, your listeners will:

* Be less likely to feel alienated or offended;
* Be more likely to comprehend the message you’re communicating.

**Speech Lesson 5 Homework Assignment**

First, complete the exercises on and linked to this page. Just by doing this, you’ll become more aware of the kind of empty, informal language that you want to eliminate from your speech.

To help you cut slang, buzzwords and acronyms from your speech, I want you to keep a Speech Diary. Each day, as you communicate with others, be aware of what you’re saying and write down any instances of slang, buzzwords, or acronyms that you use.

If you do this conscientiously, by the end of the week, two things will happen; you’ll have a list of the empty language that you personally use, and the number of times you use particular instances of the slang, buzzwords and acronyms that are weakening your communication will decrease.

Enlist the aid of your speech monitor again this week, asking him or her to tell you whenever you use slang, buzzwords or acronyms instead of real, meaningful words.

And just for fun, if you’re curious about what new buzzwords are being bandied about, or hear one that you don’t know the meaning of, [BuzzWhack.com](http://www.buzzwhack.com/) has an ever-growing “buzzword-compliant” dictionary, offering definitions of everything from “alpha pups” through “zombience”.

In the next speech skills lesson, you’ll learn why what you don’t say is just as important as what you do say, as you work on Active Listening.

**(This speech exercise is part of the Speak For Success Course. While you can use this exercise to work on your speech skills at any time, it’s designed to work on a particular speech skill that you can find out more about at** [**Speak for Success Speech Lesson 4**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson4.htm)**.)**

Because the pace of speech and comprehension are so closely linked, this exercise focuses on speaking at the optimum pace for making your message understood.

You will need a partner to work through this speech exercise. His or her task is to comprehend what you’re saying and give you feedback about your speech pace.

As the speaker, your task is to tell him or her how to do something in five steps. You may jot down the five steps you’re going to use as speaking points on a piece of paper before you begin, if you wish. Choose one of the following speech topics and think of five steps describing how to do it. Then tell your partner how to go about it.

**Speech Topics:**

1. How to perfectly boil an egg
2. How to plant a tree
3. How to send an email
4. How to handle a customer complaint
5. How to send a fax
6. How to evaluate an employee
7. How to replace a printer cartridge
8. How to impress a client
9. How to give a good speech
10. How to make the perfect cup of coffee or tea

When you’ve finished speaking, ask your partner to repeat the five steps you spoke of. Did he or she get all of them?

If not, why? Did you speak too quickly or too slowly or was there some other speech problem that interfered with communication?

Rerun the exercise with a different topic as many times as you like.

**Speech Skill:** Pace

[See a full list of speech skills and definitions](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechterms.htm).

[**Speech Exercise: Five Step How-Tos**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/howtospeeches.htm)

**The Benefits of Improving Your Speech Pace**

When you speak at an appropriate pace, your listeners will:

* Be more interested in what you’re saying and more attentive;
* Be more likely to comprehend the message you’re communicating.

**Speech Lesson 4 Homework Assignment**

Set aside a minimum of 15 minutes a day this week to work on your voice pace.

Once you’ve worked through the exercises on and linked to this page, I want you to continue your oral reading program throughout the week. Fiction or non-fiction will work, as long as the piece is properly punctuated. As you read out loud, concentrate on your enunciation and following the phrasing as directed by the punctuation. Those of you who enjoy a challenge will benefit from dipping into some literary classics, such as novels by Austen, Hardy, Dickens and Thackeray. The sentence structure will provide a great phrasing workout.

The next step is much harder, but I want you to start working on it right away, too. Start visualizing the punctuation before you speak. Whether you’re on the phone or talking to someone in person, before you say what you’re going to say, “see” the sentences, complete with their periods and commas, and then say it. If you can master this, the pace at which you speak will slow down considerably – even if you’re stressed.

And once again, tell your speech monitor what speech skill you’re working on this week, and get him or her to warn you when you’re speaking too quickly or too slowly.

In the next speech lesson, you’ll be taking a look at buzzwords and slang and how they can destroy communication.

**Speech Skill:** Listening

[See a full list of speech skills and definitions](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechterms.htm).

**The Speech Problem**

Assuming that you truly want to communicate with others, listening is the most important speech skill of all. Unfortunately, it’s also the speech skill that is practiced the least.

Remember the joke about the psychiatrist? There he is, in his office, with a patient on the couch. While the patient pours his heart out, the psychiatrist is thinking about his upcoming dinner.

That’s the way it is with most of us, much of the time. We’re thinking about other things instead of listening to whoever is speaking to us. There’s a grain of truth to the adage, “in one ear and out the other”, except that often the information doesn’t even enter the one ear in the first place.

It will sound strange to refer to this as a sloppy speech habit, but it is. We’re wired to listen; we just don’t bother doing it all the time.

Because we can get away with it. most of the time, the speaker won’t know we’re not listening. As long as we continue to face him, keep a suitable expression on our face, and don’t do something blatant such as belt out a show tune, how will he know that we’re actually somewhere else entirely? He won’t.

But you do. And you’re the one that has to make a commitment to truly listening. In other words, I want you to become an active listener. To listen actively, you need to change from being a passive target to being a contributor to the communication. Make this one change, and you’ll improve your communication skills a thousand fold.

**Three Techniques For Active Listening**

**1) Setting The Stage For Listening** – Stop whatever else you are doing. Turn to face the speaker and make eye contact. If you’re standing, your arms should be held loosely at your sides. If you’re sitting, place your hands in your lap or loosely along each arm of the chair. Whether standing or sitting, do not cross your arms, which sends out a negative message. If you’re sitting, your legs should also be uncrossed. Lean slightly towards the speaker. You want your body language to send the message that you are receptive to the speaker’s message.

**2) Appropriate Advancement** – As the speaker speaks, make appropriate comments that advance the conversation. Just saying “um” or “ah” here and there won’t do it. You need to show the speaker that you’re actively listening to what he’s saying by making statements or asking questions that show that you’ve been paying attention. Like the next technique, summarizing, this active listening technique works well in both face-to-face and communication situations where the speaker can’t see you.

**3) Summarizing** - This is a particularly powerful technique for showing the speaker you’ve been paying attention whether you’re in a face-to-face situation or listening over the phone. You can use it during conversation by saying something such as, “You were saying that...” and simply restating the speaker’s last point. Its most powerful use is at the end of the conversation, when it’s “officially” your turn to respond. Start by saying, “You said that...” and then summarize the speaker’s key points, closing by adding an action statement, something you will do as a result of what the speaker has said.

For example, “You said that you don’t feel that I’ve been listening to you because I keep facing my computer screen when you’re talking, and don’t seem to have anything to add to the conversation. From now on, I’ll give you my full attention when you speak to me.”

**Speech Exercise: Practice Active Listening**

You will need a partner for this exercise. [Return to the list of topics we used for the Tell-Me Game](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechtopics.htm) in Speech Lesson 2.

This time, you are going to be the listener instead of the speaker. Have your partner choose one of the speech topics and speak impromptu for two minutes. Your task is to be an active listener, and apply the three active listening techniques above. (Don’t forget to set the stage properly!)

Perform this exercise at least three times, using different speech topics and working up to a speech time of three minutes.

**The Benefits of Active Listening**

When you listen actively, people communicating with you will:

* Feel more confident that they’ve actually communicated a message to you.
* Feel more positive about you and the message you’re communicating.

**Speech Lesson 6 Homework Assignment**

After you’ve practiced the exercise on and linked to this page, you need to continue practice being an active listener.

Concentrate on this speech skill this week by trying to apply the three techniques of active listening to every conversation you have.

Set up a session with your Speech Monitor or with the partner that you first did your Active Listening practice with for the end of the week and go through the Active Listening exercise on this page one more time. Ask him or her to evaluate how you are performing each of the three active listening techniques explained in this lesson.

You’ve now worked through six lessons designed to shape up your speech. If I’ve succeeded in my goal for this course, you’re now able to speak more confidently and better able to communicate with your listeners - and this improved ability to communicate is already translating into more success for you in your business, job or profession.

However, you know how easy it is to fall back into sloppy speech habits. We have a lot of things going on, and other things to pay attention to. If you need or want to go back and review a particular speech problem, this list of skills covered by each speech lesson will help you find the speech problem you want to go back and work on.

[Speak For Success Lesson 1](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson1.htm) - Stop Dropping Your Gs; Enunciation Matters (Speech Skill: Clarity)

[Speak For Success Lesson 2](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson2.htm) – Axe Those Fillers (Speech Skill: Clarity)

[Speak For Success Lesson 3](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson3.htm) – Enthusiasm and Monotones Don’t Mix (Speech Skill: Expression)

[Speak For Success Lesson 4](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson4.htm) – Motormouths Don’t Make Sales (Speech Skill: Pace)

[Speak For Success Lesson 5](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson5.htm) – Buzzwords and Slang Bury Your Message (Speech Skill: Clarity)

[Speak For Success Lesson 6](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson6.htm) – Active Listening Is The Most Important Thing You Say (Speech Skill: Listening)

[**Speech Exercise: Self-Evaluation**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speecheval.htm)

Think back over the course and use the self-evaluation chart in the linked exercise to evaluate your progress. (I’ve put this on a separate page to make to easier to print out.)

**Speech Lesson 7 Homework Assignment**

Meet with your Speech Monitor or Monitors. Thank him or her for helping you work through the various speech exercises. Have him or her read through your self-evaluation and agree or disagree with how you’ve evaluated your progress. Then sit back and relax. You’ve completed the Speak For Success Course!

It’s my earnest hope that you’ll continue to apply the techniques and materials presented in this course. If you do, I know your speech skills will continue to improve – and you’ll reap even more benefits from being able to communicate well with those around you.

**(This exercise is part of the Speak For Success Course. While you can use this exercise to evaluate your speech skills at any time, it’s designed to be specific to this course. Visit** [**the starting page of the Speak for Success course**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/c/ec/32.htm) **to find out more.)**

**Speak For Success Course Self-Evaluation**

**Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

For each of the following speech skills **listed in the table below**, rate your proficiency, using the following scale:

1 – extremely poor

2 – below satisfactory

3- satisfactory

4 – good

5 – excellent.

Finish this sentence:

I feel that I have made the best progress on the speech skill of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

And this one:  
The speech skill I still most need to work on is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

[**Return to Speak For Success Speech Lesson 7**](http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/speakforsuccesscourse/a/speechlesson6.htm)**.**

**Speech Skills To Evaluate**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Enunciation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Lack of Fillers | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Expression | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Pace | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Lack of Slang | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Lack of Buzzwords | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Lack of Acronyms | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Active Listening | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |