

5 Common Mistakes You Make in a Conversation

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Here's how to fix your bad speaking habits that can make or break your career success

Do you show up to work every day, work to the best of your ability and always strive to be better? Great! But that might not be enough. Because your speaking habits can compromise your potential for career success, even if your performance is impeccable.

Let's say you have an extremely impressive résumé and you're interviewing at a new firm for a potential promotion. On paper you're the ideal candidate and you're objectively more skilled and more experienced than your competitors. But, during the interview, your conversation gives the interviewer a bad impression and he is forced to go with a more impressive candidate.

Whether you're interviewing for a new job, trying to land a new client, motivating your employees or making a pitch to land funding for your business, how you speak and hold conversations can make or break you, regardless of how skilled or talented you are in other areas.

Eliminate these five speaking habits before they destroy you:

1. Using Filler Words

Filler words have become so common in our colloquial speech patterns that we scarcely notice we're even saying them. We start our sentences with the word "so," never consciously realizing it. We inject our sentences with the word "like," never thinking about the literal ramifications of its use, and fill every pause with an "um" or an "uh" as an almost involuntary reflex. These filler words seem innocent enough, but if they take over the bulk of your speech, they become distracting and reflect poorly on you as the speaker.

Fortunately you can train yourself to avoid them by making yourself conscious of their use and correcting yourself every time one slips out until your natural speech pattern is free of them.

2. Using Repetitive Vocal Inflections

The inflections in our voice say just as much as the words that are shaped by them. Imagine the sentence "I didn't steal that car" with an emphasis on each different word within the sentence. "I didn't steal that car" means something very different than "I didn't steal that car."

Too often our inflection becomes repetitive, distorting the meaning and power of our sentences and leaving our listeners uninterested. For example, some people draw into a near-constant monotone, never inflecting any syllable more than any other. Others fall into uptalking, the extraordinarily bad habit of ending every sentence with an upward inflection, like a question.

Add variance and significance to your intonation and inflections.

3. Talking Too Fast

When you get excited, or when you're nervous, it's ridiculously easy to speak too quickly. You have a lot to say and you're trying to get it all out, so the words naturally come to you in a constant stream. Some people subconsciously fear silence and use rapid speaking to cover up any brief pauses that may otherwise result.

It's far better to speak slowly. You'll have more time to think about your choice of words; you can use pauses to add impact to your sentences; and most importantly, you'll come across as a much more confident, in-control person.

It's highly unlikely that you'll speak too slowly for your audience, so no matter how fast you think you're talking, try talking just a little bit slower.

4. Neglecting Your Mannerisms

Everybody has small ticks and mannerisms that go unnoticed and remain insignificant in daily conversations, but these small mannerisms can add up to real annoyance in the context of a professional or public speaking event. For example, if you tend to gesticulate wildly in repetitive motions or if you unconsciously smack your lips at the end of each sentence, your listeners could view you as unpracticed, or worse—unprofessional.

Work with a friend or record yourself speaking to uncover some of the mannerisms you might be neglecting. Breaking these unconscious habits can and will be tough, but once they're gone, they'll stay gone.

5. Rambling

Rambling is an indication of nervousness, and it's especially dangerous in a one-on-one context.

Generally, if you've prepared a speech, you won't have to worry about rambling because you'll have a specific, dedicated talk track. In a more improvised setting, which demands a back-and-forth between two parties, rambling is a much more dangerous threat. For example, in a job interview, if an interviewer asks a simple question expecting a simple answer and you respond with an extended monologue, your credibility could suffer some damage.

If you aren't concise, your message will lose impact.

Don't let any of these bad habits get the better of you. The best way to avoid them is through ongoing practice. So speak in front of a mirror or with a friend you trust, and actively work to suppress these all-too-common tendencies. In time you'll be naturally free from any of them, and you won't have to worry about your next conversation compromising your otherwise great chances at professional success.