

## 4.9.1: How You Speak

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies to effectively use vocal variety to emphasize your message
- Identify types of language to avoid in your speech

### Vocal Variety

Just as gestures and body language affect how you are perceived, vocal variety effects how you are heard. As presentation skills training consultant Gavin Meikle notes, “A carefully crafted speech can be ruined by a dull vocal delivery.”<sup>[1]</sup> In a series of posts on vocal variety, Meikle identifies six key elements, common errors, and good practices to develop greater vocal impact.<sup>[2]</sup>

- Volume. Develop your range and vary your volume. To help put this in perspective, consider the saying, “A good speech needs light and shade.”
- Pitch and Resonance. Research suggests a general preference for lower vocal pitch, with participants ascribing more positive personality traits to lower pitched voices. For example, Margaret Thatcher was considered to have a voice of leadership.
- Pace and Pause. Be aware of and manage your speaking speed and practice your pauses. It’s been found that people who slow down their pace when speaking to groups are thought to have greater gravitas, credibility, and authority.
- Intonation. This describes changes in vocal tone within a sentence. In order to achieve the desired effect, use the three common intonation patterns appropriately.
  - Ending a spoken sentence with a rising tone indicates a question or suggestion.
  - Ending a spoken sentence with a descending tone is generally interpreted as an order.
  - A flat intonation is used to indicate a statement.

As legendary advertising creative director William Bernbach noted, “It’s not just what you say that stirs people. It’s the way that you say it.”

### Language Choices

Whether we speak to inform, persuade, or inspire, the common denominator is a desire to communicate and to arrive at a shared understanding of an idea or situation. To quote author and TED Conference curator Chris Anderson, “Your number one task as a speaker is to transfer into your listeners’ minds an extraordinary gift—a strange and beautiful object that we call an idea.”<sup>[3]</sup> And yet, the very expertise that makes us the right person to deliver a speech on a particular topic can make us incapable of achieving that objective. An in-depth understanding can lead us to oversimplify or over complicate the explanation of a concept foreign to our audience.

One of the most common barriers to communication is jargon, or the terminology associated with a particular profession. As the French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac observed, “Every science requires a special language because every science has its own ideas.” For perspective on this challenge, and how to overcome it, watch Communications teacher [Melissa Marshall’s “Talk Nerdy to Me” TED Talk](#). Directed at scientists, but with broad applicability to communicators, Marshall describes her “Alice in Wonderland” experience teaching communication skills to engineering students. Extrapolating on her point, if we don’t know about or don’t understand the work of those who are trying to solve the grand challenges of our times, then we can’t support it. Marshall notes that jargon in particular, is a barrier to communication. For example, “you can say ‘spatial and temporal,’ but why not just say ‘space and time,’ which is so much more accessible to us?”<sup>[4]</sup> A few specific recommendations:

- Eliminate bullet points (use a powerful visual instead).
  - Because you’re giving a speech, rather than a business presentation as discussed in Module 6: Reports and Module 8: Developing and Delivering Business Presentations, you shouldn’t need bullet points to keep you or your audience on track.
- Use stories and analogies to scaffold your important points
- Display images and diagrams to illustrate what’s being described.

A related point, covered in detail in Module 13: Social Diversity in the Workplace, is to be sensitive to socio-cultural variations in language and interpretation. As the French proverb notes, “The spoken word belongs half to him who speaks and half to him who listens.”

The following video is a great talk about the mistakes and cornerstones of speech, which help you encourage your audience to listen and care about your points:

A link to an interactive elements can be found at the bottom of this page.

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1. Meikle, Gavin. "[Six Elements of Vocal Variety and How to Master Them](#)." *Inter-Activ*. 18 Jun 2017. Web. 25 Jun 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. Anderson, Chris. "[TED's secret to great public speaking](#)." *TED*. Mar 2016. Web. 25 Jun 2018
4. Marshall, Melissa. "[Talk Nerdy to Me](#)." *TED*. Jun 2012. Web. 25 Jun 2018

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