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Be Quiet When You Talk

Anyone who speaks in front of an audience should learn to stand still, to hold still, and to be still.

Pausing is to public speaking what white space is to a written presentation: It allows the audience to rest, as well as to process what they just heard (or read); and it emphasizes the information around it. A speech without adequate pauses is like a graphic overly cluttered with information or a document that is just one long paragraph.

Pausing is also something speakers should do for themselves, not just for the audience. It allows you to take a deep breath and remain in control of your voice and your energy.

Unfortunately, it can be hard to stop talking, or fidgeting, especially when you're nervous. Indeed, unless you stop and take a deep breath every now and then, you may seem even more nervous than you are. Consequently, anyone who needs to speak in front of an audience should learn to stand still (stop moving around), hold still (stop gesturing), and be still (stop talking).

Stand Still

Key to effective pausing when speaking in public is having a rest position, a relaxed stance where everything stops for a few seconds. It should be a stable position, a stance that tells the audience (and reminds you) that you are solid, both literally and figuratively. When you cross your legs or shift all your weight to one foot, you look less stable. So stand on both feet, keeping them a little separated (about shoulder width, or whatever is comfortable), and flat on the floor.

Remember that this is your rest position—that is, how you will stand when you begin to talk and when you are being quiet—not how you should stand all the time. Indeed, walking around, especially to get closer to different parts of the audience, can be an important part of your performance. You should stop walking around for the same reasons you pause when you speak (or create white space on a page or graphic). If you pace from side to side and never stop, your presentation feels like one long paragraph.

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When you stop moving, go to your rest position, and look at your audience to make contact with them. Then, when you start to move, you should know where you're going to stop; when you get there, get back in your rest position and make contact with the audience again. You will then look, and feel, more like you are in control of your presentation.

Hold Still

When you are in your rest position, let your gestures take a break too. By holding still, you let the audience know you are comfortable and in control. You also give greater emphasis to the gestures, and the words, before and after you pause.

Because one goal of holding still is to look comfortable, choose a rest position that is comfortable for you: hands at your sides; one hand in your pocket; hands on the podium; or even hands together in front of or behind you (but be careful not to twiddle your thumbs or play with your jewelry).

You can even vary the position you use during your rests. Just remember to rest every now and then.

Be Still

When you stand still and hold still, you give the audience a break, but only if you also stop talking. Unfortunately, when speakers get nervous, they tend to fill the spaces between their thoughts with words like “um” or “y’know.”

This tendency is as understandable as it is common: We want to keep the audience's attention, and we worry that if we stop talking we will lose them. But audiences are not as uncomfortable with silence as speakers are; on the contrary, they appreciate the break, just as readers appreciate white space.

Practice pausing for three or four seconds between thoughts. It will seem like a long time to you, but not to your audience. Similarly, you should resist the temptation to fill

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the truly silent spots in your presentation—such as when you’re waiting for a slide to appear on the screen at the front of the room, or even when you’re looking for a sheet of paper that you want to read from. If the audience is interested in what you have to say, they will wait patiently; if they aren’t interested, no amount of hemming and hawing is going to help.

I often work with individuals whose natural speech pattern is fast. If I can’t get them to talk more slowly, which would require changing habits that have taken a lifetime to develop, I teach them to pause more. This allows the audience to absorb information in discrete segments. More important, it communicates to the audience that you care that they are able to do that.

Look at it this way: You may naturally talk a mile a minute (or 60 miles an hour), but if you pause for four seconds every “quarter mile” or so, you’ll be talking only 40 miles an hour.

They say still waters run deep. Presenters can use stillness to allow their ideas to continue to flow in the audience-members’ minds. If you learn to give yourself and your audience a break by being still for three or four seconds at a time, you will appear confident and in control; you may even feel that way.