

How Are You Using Filler Words?

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You know when you're talking to someone and they, like, tell you they totally think something? Then, they go on to explain how they, umm, sort of love this other thing and well, whatever? There is a term for all those extra words: filler. Linguists actually study filler words in an effort to understand why we use them, what they mean, and whether they serve any beneficial purpose.



The most recent study published in *The Journal of Language and Social Psychology* divides filler words into two categories: discourse markers (I mean, you know), and filled pauses (um, err). Those filled pauses occur at fairly similar rates across genders and ages. They are used most frequently to buy time to formulate thoughts or to keep the spotlight. The research suggests you're just as likely to hear a male CEO use filled pauses as a college-aged woman.

Discourse markers, however, are used more frequently by women, the young, and those considered to be particularly conscientious. The research suggests that the higher usage of discourse markers among those groups indicates a strong interest in creating understanding in verbal communication. Potentially, that's a win for women. But in practice, those with power (older, established, well-educated men) aren't likely to change their current perception of filler words based on a single, academic study.

Society still regards filler words as extra fluff used by those who aren't quite confident about their messages. Those who use filler words are, to some degree, asking their audiences to please listen, please wait a minute while they figure out what they are saying next, and please provide some indication that their message is being received. Compelling speakers don't ask for permission. They invite, yes. They entice, of course! They cajole, demand, incite, rally, engage, entertain, and confide. But they do so from a place of power without asking permission.

How can you join the ranks of the well-spoken? As you continue to polish your communication skills and move forward along your career path, take stock of the way you use filler words. Where are you using filler words to ask for permission, to make your case, stake your claim, or have your say? Listen to the way you use so, umm, err, like, whatever, you know, I mean, and sort of. Do you use them more often in a particular setting? Do they show up in your conversation when you are the junior speaker? How are you unintentionally signaling your youth or femininity in your day-to-day language? Does it serve you to do so? Consciously decide if that is in your best interest and if it's not, take a look at this piece for some tips on getting started with some language changes. Wonder what those filler words may be saying about you? Check out this funny piece from *The American Reader*.

You can always look to the women of power you admire for inspiration. Listen to their language. Assess their use of filler words. Observe how those around them respond. Borrow the language tools they use that increase power, respect, and influence. And remember that building excellent communication skills is a lifelong endeavor.

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