

vocal tools

Fine-tuning your voice

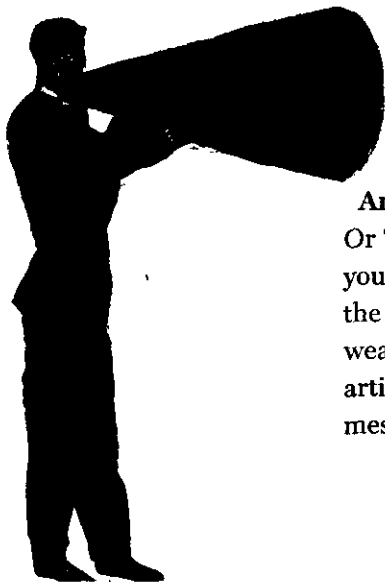
There are four basic characteristics to a voice:

Pitch The pitch of your voice is how high or low it is. The cartoon character Minnie Mouse has a high-pitched voice. The actor James Earl Jones has a low-pitched voice. Most people speak in a mid-range of pitch. While you can't change the pitch of your voice, you can vary it to add a little color and spice to your presentation.

Tone The overall character of your voice's pitch and volume (as you vary them during your speech), determines the tone of your talk. If you sound somber while you're announcing an employee's promotion, you need to work on infusing your voice with enthusiasm and energy to acquire a more appropriate tone.

Inflection To inflect something means to alter or bend its course or alignment. Your inflection is measured by how often you change the pitch or volume of a word. When Minnie Pearl, of the Grand Ole Opry fame, shouted her "How-DEE!", she literally bent the word into a trademark greeting. Inflection can lend color and interest to your voice.

Articulation Do you "aks" for something rather than "ask" for it? Or "reckanize" your friend instead of "recognize" her? Do you think you "shoulde" called home instead of "should have"? Or support the ban on "um, like, nucular" weapons instead of "nuclear" weapons? How well and how clearly you pronounce words (or articulate) determines your ability to effectively communicate your message.



fixing common speech faults

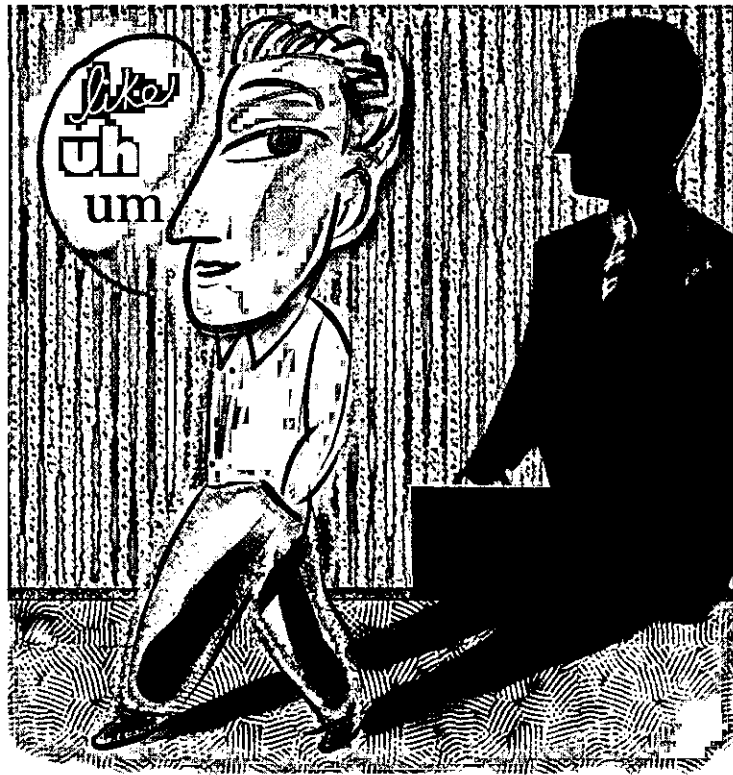
Overcoming bad habits

Some years ago, a Gallup poll surveyed what annoys people most about other people's voices. Mumbling and talking too softly topped the list, followed by yelling, speaking in a monotone, using "um," "like," and "uh," a nasal voice, talking too fast, bad grammar, and a high-pitched voice.

Though you may think you fall into one of these categories, don't panic just yet. First, assess the situation. Get a tape recorder and record your voice. How you sound on tape is not exactly how you sound to an audience, but it will most likely reveal a few common speech flaws:

Mumbling The best way to knock speech fillers (such as the ever-popular "um" or "ah") out of your talk is to tape yourself and study how often, and especially where, you use these fillers. Look for pat-

terns. If you find you use them before you pronounce an unfamiliar word or prior to introducing each key point, you may want to adjust your vocabulary or transitions to help you glide through your talk filler-free. Another technique is to pause when you feel a filler coming on. Pausing will help you replace the speech filler with a breath. It also offers the benefit of commanding your audience's attention.



Upward inflection When you ask a question. To correct this, *record yourself with the aim of listening and practicing till you get rid of that invisible question mark.* Another tip: Cue your script with a symbol in the margin (a downward arrow, for example) to remind yourself not to inflect skyward at the end of each sentence.

Nasal voice A voice sounds “nasally” when the sound waves traveling up from your chest have more resonance in the nose and not enough in the mouth. It could be caused by a tightening of the lower jaw, which tenses the throat muscles. Or you may be bunching your tongue at the back of your mouth so it blocks the passage of sound into your mouth and forces it into your nose.

High pitch A high-pitched voice. To fix it, remember to do your deep-breathing exercises (stomach out, chest in). The deeper you breathe (which helps your diaphragm massage your lungs), the more relaxed you’ll feel, and your voice will become richer and fuller.

Poor articulation Not pronouncing words clearly and succinctly makes an audience work much harder than they need to or want to. Plus, you leave the impression that you don’t really care if you are being understood. By slowing down and really thinking about each word and point you are making, you stand a much better chance of communicating clearly.

Inappropriate gestures Nervous tics such as finger drumming, lip biting, and coin jingling can drive an audience mad. To limit such fidgety behaviors, you need to be aware of them. Record yourself on videotape to isolate your fidgets, and practice your talk as you consciously try to rid yourself of these tics. A cue in the margin (i.e., “DON’T FIDGET”) can’t hurt, either.