

12 Ways to Make the Most of Your Voice

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Your phone rings. You answer, and the caller says hello, without identifying herself. Yet immediately you recognize her voice—even though you haven't spoken with her in more than ten years. How are you able to do that? There's no mystery here, for voices are highly distinct and distinguishable, sort of our "signature in sound." Your voice is you.

That being the case, you'll want to make the most of your voice, especially when you speak to audiences. Here are a dozen steps for putting your best voice forward.

1. Before your speech, *be kind to your vocal chords by avoiding cold water*, which constricts your speaking mechanism. To quench your thirst, go with a warm or lukewarm liquid. And stay away from liquids for the last two or three minutes prior to your speech, to avoid getting choked temporarily by swallowing the wrong way. On that point, swallowing your liquid is safer than sipping.

2. *Be fluent*. Let your words display a continuing flow, without too many awkward gaps when you appear to be searching for the next word. That mannerism distracts listeners, who might think you have forgotten something.

3. *Speak in your regular conversational tone*. No need to sound like a broadcaster, because you aren't one. Your audience wants to think that a real person is speaking with them personally, as individuals. Decades ago, President Franklin Roosevelt accomplished this personal touch in his popular "Fireside Chats" on radio.

4. *Consider speaking with a faster rate*. Listeners can understand you when you speak rapidly, because our minds can absorb words two or three times faster than the normal speaking rate. Also, think about the speakers you consider the most dynamic ones. Aren't they rapid-fire? Usually, yes. A word of caution: You don't have to exaggerate as much as the used car salesmen on TV. Work toward achieving a revved up pace that doesn't smack of artificiality.

5. *At the same time, give your listeners a change of pace by altering your rate*. To emphasize your most meaningful points, especially during your conclusion, put on your vocal brakes.



6. *Enunciate clearly.* We lose listeners when they wonder, “What was that she just said?” Pronounce your words so people understand them immediately. Here again, though, avoid extremes. Speak clearly, yes—but not like a perfect robot.

7. *Maintain a pleasant volume level.* The ideal volume allows everyone in the audience to hear you plainly, without blasting anyone’s ear drums. Just as you vary your rate occasionally, vary your volume to give your audience a change.

8. *To understand vocal pitch, think of a music scale.* As you know, there are high notes, middle range notes, and low notes. In speaking, the term “monotone” implies that the speaker hovers around one narrow range. Monotones put audiences to sleep, which you don’t want to do. Move up and down the speaking scale without slipping into a “singsong” pattern.

9. *Speak from well within yourself.* You produce highly attractive vocal tones when you breathe regularly, generating sounds from your diaphragm. Shallow sounds that emerge from the throat can sound tinny and weak.

10. *Pause occasionally.* My college speech professor advised students to “leave out everything but the pauses.” Remember that a pause never seems as long to the audience as it does to you, assuming the speaker still looks like he is in control. Pauses help you emphasize certain points, give your audience a few seconds of mental rest, and bring in the variety we have called for with rate and volume.

11. *Analyze your vocal quality with every opportunity you can create.* Record your speeches and listen to them afterward. You don’t have to use expensive, bulky equipment. For a very modest price, you can purchase a small device that fits inconspicuously in your coat or jacket pocket. Your audience won’t even know it’s there.

Of course, the most effective way to analyze your vocal quality is to enlist the services of a speech coach. Your speech coach will give you objective feedback, telling you what needs attention, and offering specific steps for improvement. Through the magic of the Internet, you can work with a speech coach many miles away when you can’t find one locally.

12. *Use your own voice, without imitating anyone else.* As a highly respected speech coach advised: “Nobody can play you as well as you can.”

Our voices are as individual as our fingerprints. Accept yours, and then cultivate your vocal skills by using the guidelines offered in this article. Before long, you will even look forward to facing audiences. And before long, your audiences will be giving you the level of attention during your speech—and the supportive comments afterward—that you have fantasized about for years.

Bill Lampton, Ph.D.--the "Biz Communication Guy"--has provided Speech Coaching for leaders for more than 20 years, a skill he honed as a Speech Communication faculty member at the University of Georgia and later as a professional speaker. His clients--including executives at Gillette, Duracell, Procter and Gamble, Sage, and other leading corporations--learn to speak confidently, clearly, and convincingly, so they will generate the attention, agreement, and action they want. Call him today to discover how you will benefit from his Speech Coaching: 678-316-430

