

# 8 Common Pitfalls to Avoid When You Speak

By Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

---



Whether your audience is one person or a thousand, whenever you open your mouth, you want to get a specific message across. Perhaps you are leading a training session, delivering a formal presentation, or want your opinions heard at meetings. Possibly your sales team needs to improve its customer communication, or you're in a position to help your CEO design an important speech.

Anyone who sets out to present, persuade, and propel with the spoken word faces eight major pitfalls.

- 1. UNCLEAR THINKING** - If you can't describe what you are talking about in one sentence, you may be guilty of fuzzy focus or of trying to cover too many topics. Your listeners will probably be confused, too, and their attention will soon wander. Whether you are improving your own skills or helping someone else create a presentation, the biggest (and most difficult) challenge is to start with a one-sentence premise or objective.
- 2. NO CLEAR STRUCTURE** - Make it easy for people to follow what you are saying. They'll remember it better, and you will, too, as you deliver your information and ideas. If you waffle, ramble, or never get to the point, your listeners will tune out. Start with a strong opening related to your premise; state your premise or central theme; list the rationales *or points of wisdom* that support your premise, illustrating each with examples: stories, statistics, and case histories. Review what you've covered, take questions if appropriate, and then use a strong close.
- 3. NO MEMORABLE STORIES** - People rarely remember your exact words. Instead, they remember the mental images that your words inspire. Support your key points with vivid, relevant stories. Help your listeners see your message by using memorable characters, engaging situations, dialogue, suspense, drama, and natural humor that is within your example. A good example can simplify the complex, get your audience emotionally involved, and transport them to another time and place.

- 4. NO EMOTIONAL CONNECTION** - The most powerful communication combines both intellectual and emotional connections. Intellectual means appealing to the rational self-interest with data and reasoned arguments. Emotional connection comes from engaging the listeners' imaginations, involving them in your illustrative stories, and by answering their unspoken question, "What's in this for me?" Use what I call a high *you/I balance*. Not "I'm going to talk to you about . . .," but "You're going to learn the latest trends in . . ." Not "I want to tell you about Bobby Lewis," but "Come with me to Oklahoma City. Let me introduce you to my friend, proud father Bobby Lewis." You've pulled the listener into the story.
  
- 5. WRONG LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION** - Are you providing the big picture and generalities, when your listeners are actually hungry for details, facts, and specific how-tos? Or are you drowning them in data when they need to position themselves with an overview and find out why they should care? Get on the same wave length as your listeners. My colleague, Dr. David Palmer, a Silicon Valley negotiations expert, refers to *fat* and *skinny* words and phrases. Fat words describe the big picture, goals, ideals, outcomes. Skinny words are minute details and specific who, what, when, and how. In general, senior management needs a high level overview, or *fat* words. Middle management requires medium words. Technical staff and consumer hot line users are hungry for skinny words. Feed them all according to their appetites.
  
- 6. NO PAUSES** - Good music and good communication both contain changes of pace, pauses, and full rests. As counterintuitive as it may seem, your listeners connect to you more in the silence as they digest what they have heard. When you give your audience time to consider how your message applies to them, they are more likely to remember and repeat your key ideas and message. If you rush on at full speed to crowd in as much information as possible, chances are the audience will tune out. It's okay to talk quickly if you pause whenever you say something profound or proactive or rhetorical. This gives the audience a chance to think about what you've said and to internalize it.
  
- 7. IRRITATING NON-WORDS** - *Hmm, ah, er, you know what I mean*. How often have you been irritated by speakers who begin each new thought with now or so? Those might be okay occasionally but not every 30 seconds. The constant use of *right* at the end of your sentences kills the impact and lowers your credibility; it sounds as if you are looking for agreement. Record yourself to check for similar bad verbal habits. Then keep recording your side of conversations, rehearsals, and actual presentations. Be sure to listen, become aware, and rescript your phrases until such audience-aggravators have vanished. You will not improve what you are not aware of.

**8. NOT HAVING A STRONG OPENING AND CLOSING** - Engage your audience immediately with a powerful, relevant opening that immediately engages them. It can be dramatic, thought-provoking, or amusing. Your goal is to break the distraction and hook your audience immediately with a taste of what is to follow. You have many options: a rhetorical question, interesting statistic, powerful quotation, personal story, critical explanation, or the tactic of transporting the audience to a different time or place by starting the sentence with the word "Imagine . . ." or the phrase "I wish you could have been there."

Before you close, review your key ideas. If appropriate, ask for short specific questions, challenge the audience to take action based on the content of your presentation, and close on a high. Preferably, your close will tie back into your opening theme in a circular way. Remember, your last words linger.

When you can avoid these 8 common pitfalls, you're free to focus on your message and your audience, making you a more dynamic, powerful, and persuasive communicator.

---

**Companies that want a competitive edge hire Patricia Fripp. She is a Hall of Fame keynote speaker, executive speech coach, sales presentation skills and on-line training expert. Patricia is also a subject matter expert for Continuing Education at XTRACredits. When your message must be memorable, your presentation powerful, and your sales successful in-person or online, Patricia Fripp can help.**

**To become a great speaker easily, conveniently, and quickly, sign up for [www.FrippVT](http://www.FrippVT). Why not sign up for your trial today?**

**FRIPP VT**

**Patricia FRIPP**  
Presentation Skills Expert

