



THE POWER OF THE PAUSE

“MR. GORBACHEV ... [PAUSE FOR DRAMATIC EFFECT] ...TEAR DOWN THIS WALL.”

Say the above phrase aloud, making sure to stick that pause. Now repeat the phrase without a pause. Do you hear the difference?

With my clients, I try not only to help them develop useful techniques but also to explain why they can be effective in practice. In terms of pause power, there are three primary reasons why strategically placed moments of silence are essential for all speakers to add to their repertoire.

1. **Pauses allow the speaker to concentrate his or her energies on their call to action.** Pauses provide listeners with the opportunity to reflect on what has come before and what they expect will follow. They are designed to call attention to themselves—to stand out and help listeners realize that something important is about to be said.
2. **They create suspense.** Great movies know how to keep an audience engaged and uncertain as to what will come next. Think about a Hitchcock movie—any Hitchcock movie. In *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock shows you an airplane flying toward Cary Grant. There's a pause. And then it keeps getting closer and closer. Grant runs and finally ducks under the plane's propeller. When tension is built into a scene, we're anxious to see and hear what's coming next. We stay on the edge of our seat waiting for (pause for dramatic effect) the outcome! The unskilled speaker, by contrast, rushes through his words, communicating neither pauses nor suspense. As a result, their punch lines fall flat as a pancake. Just remember: No emphasis, no power! As Alan Alda says about acting and the power of the pause, "It's the stuff between the lines that makes it a great performance."
3. **They control the overall pace of delivery.** The audience has cognitive limitations and can only absorb a certain amount of information at one time. Pausing slows your rate of delivery down to match the listening capacity of your audience. It buys time to engage the audience and lets them absorb the words you have emphasized. "Luke, I am [pause] your father!"

Take your time. You have more of it than you think. Audiences will be patient if you have something that's thought provoking and memorable to say. They know that a good line or idea is worth the wait.

POWER PAUSE TECHNIQUES

Not sure where to begin with leveraging the pause technique? Let's take a look. The following are some "power of the pause" techniques to practice as you rehearse your speeches:

- **Clause Pause:** Use short pauses where there is normally a comma that separates two clauses or particular items in a long list. "Wanting to impress my girlfriend, [pause] I brought flowers, [pause] wine, [pause] and dessert."
- **Sentence Pause:** Use medium pauses wherever a period, question mark, or exclamation point normally appears in order to separate two sentences. "After six days of climbing, we summited Mount Kilimanjaro. [pause] I can't believe I actually did it!"
- **Paragraph Pause:** Use long pauses when you transition from one idea to the next. In written language, we always indent when starting a new paragraph. The same is true with speaking. The pause sends a signal preparing the listener that something important or unique is about to happen.
- **Emphasis Pause:** While creating emphasis is a result of using strategic pauses, sometimes you may want to draw attention to one or two key words. Pause immediately before and after that word or phrase, thus signaling the listener that what you are about to say is important. [pause] And the Oscar goes to [pause] Tom Hanks!
- **Rhetorical Question Pause:** It's gratifying to watch heads nod in an audience when you pose a rhetorical question. This motivates your audience to stay engaged as they contemplate the answer to your question. Overall, your aim is to provoke a thought that lends credence to your message. On the other hand, failure to pause after posing a rhetorical question often frustrates your audience.

- **Power Pause:** I often open my speeches this way. Before I utter a word, I lock my eyes on to my audience. Each second I wait serves two purposes: It allows me to center myself as I silently assess the dynamic of the room. Second, it strengthens the impact of my opening words. This has to be done with tremendous confidence, or else the silence may seem forced and awkward. Opening with a pause can be a valuable asset to speakers. How often have you seen a speaker stand up and immediately launch into his speech? One word follows another; the listener has a hard time separating what should be stressed and what should not. No one remembers the opening, because it doesn't stand out.
- **Punch Line:** We can learn a great deal from comedians in speech communication. Their livelihoods depend on perfect timing. When telling jokes, which are often stories, their objective is to create a heightened sense of anticipation. They are signaling to the audience that (wait for it) a payoff is about to come. They pause immediately before a punch line to create tension—and then immediately after to allow the audience to release their laughter. Remember to extend the pause for as long as there is laughter.
- **"Glass of Water" Pause/"Let Me Think about This" Pause:** When giving longer presentations, you're prone to getting thirsty. I've seen speakers avoid taking time to drink some water only to diminish their ability to close a speech with power, because they were parched. Many people I coach are hesitant to do this, as they worry it looks unnatural. That's not the case. Audiences are so accustomed to the sight of speakers drinking water that they often don't even notice. The glass-of-water pause is an effective tactic that should be used more often. While you're taking a sip, use that time to gather your thoughts, refresh, and continue where you left off.
- **Check My Notes:** I often take audience questions that require time for me to contemplate and fully answer. The last thing you want is to offer an audience a knee-jerk reaction to an important question. In their quest to please and look responsive, many presenters blurt out half-formed answers at lightning speed, only to regret it later.

TAKE GOLDILOCKS APPROACH

We're all familiar with Goldilocks's intrusion into The Three Bears' home, wherein she tried everyone's porridge, chairs, and beds. She found things to be too hot or big, too cold or small, but she did ultimately find the options that were just right. That's just how the use of pause in speech communication can be, which can make the application of this technique frustrating and a bit ambiguous when trying to practice your speech or presentation.

Here's the thing: There are no hard-and-fast rules. Pauses can last a fraction of a second to several seconds. The length of your pause depends on your tone, message, and style. Also factor in your audience, their patience, and level of engagement.

In general, however, it's best to vary the length of your pauses consistently throughout a speech. Don't get into a pattern where the listener can predict how long your pause will last. Experiment with varying lengths. Comma pauses for words tend to be briefer than sentence pauses, which are a bit shorter than your paragraph pauses.

I videotape many of my clients and, like a movie director, do several takes to see which one works best. It will seem awkward at first; most pauses do. However, once you master this technique, all other aspects of your delivery are bound to significantly improve. Take care not to overwork the pause, lest you sound rehearsed and stilted. Also, like many techniques that can help improve, it can be overdone as well. Don't fall into that trap. Use them judiciously. Sometimes less is more.