

You're going too fast; don't slow down!



Many presenters rush through their content. Friends with good intentions suggest they slow down...

The title of my article is a Paraprosdokian, let's get that out of the way now, shall we? It's one of our favourites from our list of Rhetorical Tools. It's not what I really want to write about, so to learn more about these mysterious creatures, go to the Research section of our website.

No, what I want to write about is a common problem, rushing. I first started rushing when I was at school: As a Monitor (aka Prefect) I was required to read the lesson from the Bible in school assembly once a week, to over 700 fellow pupils plus teachers. I hated it, and figured the best way to get off stage quickly was to talk fast and not pause, even where the good book made it clear that I should. My Head of Religious Studies would often encourage me to slow down, and castigate me after the many times that I didn't take his advice, but there was no slowing me!

To his astonishment, I told him much later that I had built a career in public speaking. I then had to make it clearer that I meant that I was coaching others, not actually doing much of it myself. "Ah, that's a relief" he said. I didn't have to ask him why...

Now I hope none of you rush through Christmas, because it's just too good a festival for that, whatever religion (or not) you may hold.

Returning to rushing, this can happen to anyone anywhere, not just in a presentation or speech, but in any event where there's pressure; media interviews being another example area, despite it's more conversational Q&A style. Friends and colleagues try to help, but the advice to 'slow down' is not the best way to deal with this.

Our key advice here is instead to ***'pause more often and for longer, especially if you're feeling nervous at the start of a presentation or***

speech.' Let me explain why:

It is actually uncommon to find someone who literally 'talks too fast', using syllables per second (s/s) as the true measure of pace. The general research finding is that an ideal pace is 4.5 - 5.5 s/s. That's about 2 words/second on average. Most people go at that speed or slower. Going even slower does not help; you just lose dynamism, without fixing the pace problem.

Instead what 'rushers' do is fail to pause where they should, or fail to pause for long enough, or both, even though some of them will think their pauses were if anything too long.

Information Output Rate (IOR)

This is the rate at which ***useful*** information is delivered. If the delivery is disfluent, this rate is slowed even though the pace (in s/s) has not changed. The ideal combination is the right pace (see above) and IOR.

Rushers often include disfluencies such as 'um' and 'err', or repetition, or filler words such as 'y'know', 'kind of', 'like' and 'well' to fill in hesitation pauses that either result from (bad) habits, or from being unsure about what they are saying at the point. It's not intuitive, but these actually slow the IOR, as useful information takes longer to be delivered, thus also reducing *information density*.

Chunking

How can you get pace and IOR to be optimal? The answer is to 'chunk'. There is a bizarre term used by voice scientists when analysing a speaker's speed of delivery, which is 'chunking'. This most simply put describes how much a speaker's content is divided up into 'chunks' of words, using # words/chunk and therefore #seconds/chunk. The words in a chunk may constitute a sentence, but they don't have to. For example, "Hello" and "Good morning" are chunks, but not



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Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts





You're going too fast; don't slow down! (cont.)

sentences. We're often asked how long a chunk should be. It's a hard question as there is such a big range: Anything from one word/syllable up to something around 20-25 words would be fine (subject to the Information Unit caveats below), so long as the chunk does not include many sub-clauses or continuations. Chunking therefore includes control of how fast the words are spoken *and* how many words are spoken between pauses.

Continuation

Instead of pausing where they should, many people use joining words like 'and', 'but', 'if', and 'so'. These are 'continuation' words, that can easily make each chunk much too long. This in turn makes the information almost indigestible to the audience.

It's OK to have a short list of items (e.g. a shopping list style), but not anything much longer. Each chunk should ideally be one information unit.

Information Units

No, here I don't mean a 'bit' from the computing world, or 'Prosody' from Linguistics. Here it is related to the concept of chunking, as it measures the number of words in a 'unit' of information. The ideal unit differs in size depending on factors such as the complexity of the words used, the degree of abstraction, medical conditions such as aphasia, and whether the language is a 'mother tongue' or second language. An ideal unit size in a mother tongue is a relatively simple concept (e.g. a subject or object noun with adjectives) within spoken sentence, which averages out at (say) 18 words or about 40 syllables. This chunk could on average be said in under 10 seconds. But there should also be quite a variation in the length of a unit, to avoid a speech pattern that sounds too uniform.

Thinking Pauses

One thing that 'rushers' do is that they don't think for long enough about what they're going to say before starting. This can have disastrous results for the speaker and their audience. One infamous example was the comment

made by Hank Paulson when CEO of Goldman Sachs in 2003 when he said in a shareholder presentation¹: *"I don't want to sound heartless, but in almost every one of our businesses, there are 15 or 20 percent of the people that really add 80 percent of the value."* and *"we will take more people out"* and *"I think we can cut a fair amount and not get into muscle and still be very well positioned for the upturn."* Five days later, on Sunday evening, 4th Feb 2003, in a firmwide apology email Mr. Paulson said that he had given a *"glib and insensitive response"* when he had discussed the possibility of more layoffs at Goldman.

Digestion Pauses

You may want a few of these over Christmas! After that, the term takes on a metaphorical meaning - to allow an audience to 'digest' properly what was said in the previous chunk before the speaker continues. Counterintuitively, the more a member of the audience knows, the longer they need. Put most simply this is because they have bigger thoughts. Without these, the audience will be unlikely to remember what you said, which would be a shame, especially if what you said was a key point or a key message.

My key point is that pauses are what prevent a speaker from going too fast, not word speed.

I wish you the best of the season's greetings and look forward to seeing a good number of you, our readers, in 2023.

By Ewan Pearson

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/04/business/markets-market-place-chief-goldman-sachs-apologizes-for-remarks-firm-s.html>

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