BECOME A MASTER COMMUNICATOR

59 quick and easy tips you can use—today—to become a ***standout*** *writer, speaker, presenter, and listener*

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INTRODUCTION

Any of these scenarios sound familiar?

- You're asked to give a status update at your company's all-hands meeting—*and you're terrified of public speaking*.
- You need to write a document for senior management—*and you just can't get started*.
- You just had a conference call with co-workers to discuss a project—*and now you're more confused than you were before the call*.
- You're in a meeting and you've just been asked for your opinion—*and you haven't been paying attention for several minutes.*

Imagine how much more productive and creative you could be if you were able to:

- Speak powerfully in any setting
- Write clear and persuasive business documents that get results
- Learn the powerful skill of reading and understanding body language
- Earn a reputation at work as a charismatic presenter
- Become the type of listener people seek out and want to confide in
- Be a great one-on-one conversationalist
- Communicate your thoughts, ideas and needs clearly

About you
A few assumptions: You're reading a communication-skills ebook rather than a book by Stephen King, so you're motivated. You're intelligent. And you're busy.

About me
I'm Robbie Hyman. Hi. Been writing professionally for 15 years. Teaching communication skills for almost that long, mostly to busy professionals like you.

About this ebook
This book distills the finest communication-skills wisdom into simple practices you can use today. Turn just a few of these tips into habits, and your communication skills will dramatically improve. Use them all, and you'll become a standout communicator. I've cut out the fluff, but I hope you'll permit me some humor and stories to make my points more memorable for you.

Enjoy!

BECOME A MASTER WRITER

Tip 1

Tell stories

In the 1990s, Volvo found itself with excess inventory of green cars. People just didn't want them. So the Sales and Marketing departments came up with all sorts of great deals just for green Volvos—and they started selling.

Problem is, no one in Sales or Marketing told the rest of the organization what they were up to. So when the Manufacturing and Planning teams learned green Volvos were flying off the lots, they took it as a sign of the color's popularity. And they ramped up production of green cars!

Now, consider how much more likely you are to remember that story than if I had simply written, "*Increase interdepartmental communication to improve organizational effectiveness*."

Stories engage our emotions. They motivate us. They make us laugh. They make us remember. And they often make us want to repeat them to everyone we know.

The best way to communicate an important point or insight is to put it into story form. If you want your written documents to compel your staff or colleagues or prospects or other constituents to take action, wrap your points and insights into great stories.

Tip 2

Write with smaller words

The English language contains roughly a million words. But the average adult knows only about 10,000 of them. Simple words work best.

Many people think their written work will appear more professional with academic or legal words—"hereinafter," "utilize," "ascertain." But stuffy words like these only cloud your writing. Even if your reader understands every word, writing with stilted jargon slows your reader down, makes reading your words less enjoyable, and distracts from your core message.

You're writing to communicate information and get your readers to act. Make it easy for them.

Don't write it this way:
After endeavoring to ascertain the origins of the problems in the customer service department, I am of the opinion that these issues necessitate more training, and, as per your request for suggestions, I recommend that new programs be implemented forthwith.

Write it this way:
After searching for the source of the problems in our customer service department, I think the issue is poor training. The solution, I believe, is a better training program.

Stuffy:	Replace with:
Endeavor	Try
Ascertain	Find out
Signify	Mean
Utilize	Use
Presently	Now
Forthwith	Now, Soon
Facilitate	Help
Within the current timeframe	Now
A substantial majority of	Many, Most
Due to the fact that, On the grounds that	Because
Possesses the ability to	Can
It is incumbent upon	Must, Should
Concerning the matter of	About

Contrary to a commonly held belief, no one will think you're not smart because you write using small, easy-to-follow words and phrases. They'll think you're *clear*.

Tip 3

Write short paragraphs

Imagine: You return to your office and find two letters on your desk. One is a series of short, two- and three-line paragraphs. The other is written as one long paragraph, single-spaced, covering almost the entire page. Which will you read first?

Use short paragraphs.

Big, uninterrupted blocks of text are such a turnoff visually that we often simply avoid reading them altogether.

In business writing, your goal is to communicate your message clearly and persuasively—and you won't accomplish that if your document looks like such a chore that your readers ignore it.

As a general rule, try to keep your paragraphs to four lines—preferably no more than three.

Tip 4
Write short sentences

Can a piece of writing physically harm its reader? Yes, if it fails what master copywriter Bob Bly calls "the breath test."

Have a look below at the first sentence of a December 2009 column by *CNBC* host Larry Kudlow. (Yes, that's one sentence.) Can you read it straight through without stopping to breathe?

> *"Despite the historic expansion of the federal government's involvement in, intervention in, and control of the economy — including Bailout Nation; takeovers of banks, car companies, insurance firms, Fannie, Freddie, AIG, GM, Chrysler, and GMAC; large-scale tax threats; overregulation; an attempted takeover of the health-care sector; ultra-easy money; a declining dollar; and unprecedented spending and debt creation — despite all the things that would be expected to destroy the economy — all this socialism lite and the degrading of incentives and rewards for success — despite all this, the U.S. economy has not been destroyed."*

Often when we're passionate about our topic, we write too much in each sentence. But our readers need to receive information at a reasonable pace. More important, they need oxygen.

As you review your writing, read it aloud and give every sentence the breath test. Your readers can't take whatever action you want them to take if they've fallen unconscious.

Tip 5

Lead with the bottom line

The recipients of your business documents are busy. So the first statement of any document you send—a report, proposal, status update, even an email—should summarize the document's purpose and content. This shows clarity of thought—and respect for your readers' time.

An example:

> *This report outlines the results of Customer Service's survey of first-time customers on their experience with the company.*

Or:

> *Dan:*
> *I am not impressed with the new marketing campaign. Here are my reasons:*

Many professionals miss this easy opportunity to make their documents more readable and compelling. Instead, they write linearly—starting with an introduction, building their case with fact upon fact, and finally explaining at the end the document's conclusion and purpose.

Give away the punch line up front. Start with your conclusions and then go into your facts. This not only shows your readers you respect their time, it enables them to read your document with much more context, and with an understanding of why you are including each point.

Leading with the bottom line also gives you more of an opportunity throughout the document to persuade your reader of your argument, if that's what you're trying to do.

Tip 6
Use lists

Wherever possible, break your business documents into lists. Why? Several reasons (which I've broken into the following list):

1. A list makes your document easier to read, and it helps your readers organize your key points in their minds.

2. Lists break up the text. Whereas long, blocky paragraphs are a visual turnoff, lists are inviting—readers' eyes tend to be drawn to lists when they see them in a document. They make reading your documents a more pleasant experience.

3. Making lists in your documents actually helps you better organize your points and make those points clearer to your readers.

Here's an example of how organized and readable your ideas can be in list form:

> *The Sales and Marketing Customer Task Force has identified the following problems with our current customer-service process:*
>
> -
> -
> -

That sentence, and a quick glance at the bullets below it (assuming they contained text), would give the reader an immediate understanding of what to expect from this document.

Tip 7

Don't write unnecessary words

Your business document should be exactly as long as necessary to clearly and persuasively make your case—and not a word longer.

Probably due to our training in school—"Your paper must be five pages to receive credit"—many professionals believe that the longer a document is, the more important it will appear. There's even a positive phrase for this: "Thud factor."

But remember, your readers' time is important to them, and keeping your document to the minimum length possible to communicate your information shows you respect their time.

Also, the longer your document is, the more of a chore it will seem to read. You don't want your readers opening up your document already disliking it.

The most famous speech in American history, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, lasted two minutes. President Lincoln wasn't even the event's featured speaker. That was Congressman Edward Everett, and he spoke for two hours. Remember learning about his speech? Neither do I.

In your first draft, include every point and idea that seems relevant. Then, in your review, ruthlessly cut every word that doesn't strengthen your case or otherwise justify its space.

A brief document, one with no fat, packs a lot more punch than one that's bloated with unnecessary words. Make your point and get out. And that's all I have to say about this.

Tip 8

Sum it all up

The key to effective written communication is clarity. At the end of any business document (including an email), you should summarize the main points you've made.

Like writing in short, easy-to-read paragraphs, providing a summary makes your writing clearer, shows respect for your readers' time and increases the likelihood your readers will act on your ideas.

A good rule, especially in longer documents such as reports or proposals, is to include a section called Summary or Conclusion, and in that section clearly and briefly restate the document's main points (ideally in list form).

For shorter documents, you should include a short wrap-up statement that restates your case.

Note: This end-of-document summary should be *in addition to* the summary you include right at the top of your document.

Tip 9

Give your readers clear next steps

Have you ever read a proposal, sales letter or email and thought, What am I supposed to do now?

Don't assume that, after they've read your document, your readers will know what if any actions you want them to take. Include clear actions steps. Some examples:

- *Please respond to this email with your thoughts on the new campaign.*
- *Send me a few days and specific times next week that work for you to have a follow-up discussion; I'll pick one and send you a meeting invitation.*
- *Please email Terry and ask her for an electronic copy of the report.*
- *Call me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx to discuss how our agencies can work together.*

Tip 10

Include some appropriate humor

As a young writer looking for clients, I sent out a letter that ended with: “Want samples of my writing? Let me know. I can send you a few, a bunch, or enough to prop open your office door.”

Not the funniest thing you’ve ever read. Not even laugh-out-loud funny. But it served an important purpose: It humanized me for prospective clients. Many hired me from this pitch letter alone. And many told me that they enjoyed this last line. People don’t expect to find anything even remotely amusing in a document they read at work. It’s a nice surprise.

We’ve learned in our careers to think of a well-written document as stilted, formal. And we’ve learned to write that way. But who says we should equate being professional with being boring?

Writing with a little humor reminds your readers that there’s a real person on the other end of the document. That can make a huge difference in how your readers judge both your written work and you.

Of course, when adding humor to a professional document of any type (email, report, etc.), you need to keep in mind some important rules:

- Don’t use profanity.

- Don’t use offensive or off-color humor.

- Don’t make the reader or anyone else (except yourself) the butt of your joke.

- Use humor sparingly. You’re writing a professional document, not a comedian’s monologue.

- Start seriously. You earn the right to be amusing only after you’ve demonstrated your document’s seriousness.

Not sure whether a line you want to use is actually funny enough, or even appropriate, for the document you’re writing? Ask a friend or colleague. Then use your own best judgment.

And remember: You can be professional—and funny. Put yourself in your reader’s shoes. Would you prefer to read a document at work that nearly put you to sleep, or one that gave you the same information but also made you smile a few times?

Tip 11

Single-task your writing

A friend told me a near-horror story about an email he almost sent to an administrator at the City University of New York. As he was wrapping up his email draft, his phone rang. So while on the call, my friend typed his subject line, “Attn: CUNY admin.”

At least, that’s what he meant to type.

He was ready to hit “Send” when his call ended, and my friend luckily had a chance to give his draft a quick review. Turns out, he missed the Y key in CUNY and instead typed another letter.

The lesson: Writing is a single-task activity. Study after study has shown that the multi-tasking strategy is a myth. Our brains can be devoted to only so many mental tasks at once. Try singing a song while adding a couple of three-digit numbers in your head. Or better yet, notice how a man turns down the car stereo while he’s looking for an address.

When someone is multi-tasking, they’re likely doing many things badly at the same time. And because writing requires so much of your brainpower, it’s safe to say that almost any distraction while you’re writing can derail the whole process. So when it’s time to write, write.

Tip 12

Triple-check your work

Here's an unintentionally funny tagline from a company that sold data about computer chips:

> *If you find a component in our database, it probably doesn't exist.*

Two things are missing here:

1. A well placed "don't" or "can't."
2. Proofreading!

This could have been a very powerful selling message for this company's component database—if the writer had spent just a minute or two proofreading it.

The lesson: When you're finished writing, put your document away for a while—at least a day, if possible—and then proofread it slowly. Better yet, have a trusted friend or colleague proof it for you.

Spend more time than you think is necessary to review any written work before sending it out to the world. It's always better to overdo your proofreading.

Tip 13

Think like your reader

My wife works for a small software company. At one point, the business struggled to stay afloat, and the staff knew that without new investment the company would dissolve.

So imagine what the average worker thought when they read this subject line in an email that the CEO sent to the whole company:

> ***From:*** *CEO*
> ***To:*** *All Employees*
> ***Subject:*** *Closed*

Looks like bad news, right? Nope. The CEO was enthusiastically announcing an investor had acquired the company. It was this company-saving deal that "closed." Not the company. Phew!

The lesson: That subject line could have given someone in the company a cardiac event. Had he stepped back to consider how his nervous staff might read his words, from their point of view—the CEO might have used a different subject line. Maybe, "Great news on the financing front!"

Always try to think like your reader when you write. You're writing for them, after all, and the more you can see things from their point of view, the more effective your writing will be.

Tip 14

Limit your text's visual enhancements

If you want to call attention to a point in a written document, write your point more strongly. Don't dress it up with capitalization, italics, bold, underline, different fonts or colors, larger type or other visual enhancements.

This creates what I call the "ransom note" effect.

You've probably seen documents like this, with **all** ***sorts*** of eye-catching *fonts* and TEXT ENHANCEMENTS. Distracting, isn't it? You're not sure what's important or what to focus on.

Here's a good rule of thumb for your text in a document:

- Use at most two fonts for the entire document (perhaps a different font for headers)
- Use only a few type sizes (one for headers, the other for body copy)
- Use at most two text enhancements (for example, bold or italics)

A few tips for email

Tip 15

If you want a response, send it to one person at a time

When you send a single email to six recipients and ask for help, you're almost guaranteed not to receive any.

Each colleague who receives your email is busy and probably distracted by other issues at the moment they open your message. So if you're asking for help in your email, and your recipients see five other names in the "To:" field, they'll likely assume someone else will step up.

Instead, send your request to a single colleague at a time. Your recipient is much more likely to respond to a person-to-person communication than to a mini mass email.

If you need to do this a few times to find someone who will help you, so be it.

Tip 16

Limit each email to one idea or topic

Have you ever received an email asking for a copy of the new expense form, and also asking what you think of HR's updated vacation policy, and ending with a question about whether you're going to the Task Force meeting Monday?

When I read an email like this, I mark it unread, close it, and avoid it as long as I can.

These emails are annoying because they force you to figure out how to answer all of the totally unrelated points and questions in your response.

Give each email you write a single thing to accomplish. Your emails will get answered much more quickly, and your professional reputation will increase too.

Tip 17

Change the subject!

Sometimes in a long back-and-forth email chain, you and your recipient will change topics. When that happens, it's time to change the subject line—especially if you're the one who introduced the new topic.

This simple practice keeps the email conversation clear and will ensure the message makes sense in case one of you forwards the chain to a third party.

Changing the subject line when it's appropriate will also help you and your email pen pal find the message in the future. If you've written a clear and logical new subject line—"New vacation policy"—you might be able to find it a year later. But not if you left the email subject as "re: re: re: birthday cake in the conference room!"

Tip 18

If you wouldn't say it in a staff meeting, don't put it in email

Email, like any document you write and share with even one colleague, is public and permanent.

It's public because as soon as you send it, it's no longer yours. It could go anywhere, to anybody, at anytime.

It's permanent because the email's recipients—and the people they forward it to, and the people *they* forward it to—own it forever.

Thinking of including a funny insult about your supervisor or customer in an email to a friendly colleague? Rethink that.

Tip 19

Easy on the LOL!

It takes so little effort to send an email that we tend to think of it as less important, more disposable, than other forms of business writing.

But remember: Your work email is a professional document that reflects on your reputation—and it can end up anywhere.

What if you include a great idea in an email and a colleague prints it out and puts it on the desk of someone whose opinion you care about? Do you want that person to see that you've written "wut dew u thk of this craaaazy idea?!?" or "OMG" or "☺"?

Still think you can put less thought and effort into your professional emails than into your other documents? LOL!

A few tips to conquer writer's block

Tip 20

Stop waiting for perfection

Stephen J. Cannell is one of the most successful producers in television history. He's created dozens of hit shows (*The Rockford Files*, *Wiseguy*, *The A-Team*), and he's written hundreds of TV scripts. The secret to his success will surprise you.

Cannel is dyslexic. He can barely read. But as an up-and-coming writer, he saw this as an advantage. Why?

For most of us, writer's block comes from a fear of putting anything on paper because it might not be good enough. But Cannell's learning disability meant he *knew* that whatever he wrote wouldn't be good enough—at least not without serious editing.

So he never worried. He just wrote.

Accept that your first draft won't be perfect. When you do, you can just start writing. And the sooner you start writing, the sooner you'll complete your first draft and can then start editing it into a second draft, which will be better.

Tip 21

Talk it through

If you can't start typing, start talking. Your document should be written in a conversational tone anyway, so speaking about it is a good place to start.

Invite a colleague into your office to listen, and start explaining what you want to write. To get the words flowing, use an opening like this: "This document needs to…."

Using casual language, explain what you want to communicate with the document. As you hear yourself, you'll probably grab your keyboard several times and say, "Hey, that's good. I should use that."

You'll need your colleague to stay and listen for at least a few minutes so you can build your rhythm. This is why, no matter what the doctors say, it's a good idea to keep a huge jar of candy on your desk.

Tip 22

Add something—anything—to the blank page

Staring at a blank page can set off writer's block because it triggers those self-defeating thoughts that can paralyze us when we try to start writing: *It won't be good enough*. *I haven't written a single word*. *I have no idea how to start*.

When you fire up a new document, immediately start typing something, anything, about the subject—who the document's readers will be, when it's due, a working title, a couple of ideas for sections, anything you can think of.

You're actually tricking the part of your mind that's afraid to start. Instead of staring at a blank page, now you see a screen full of disorganized content. You'll want to edit, cut, rephrase, and rearrange. You'll say, "I should move this up… slide that to the left… bold the title… turn these three points into a list." Suddenly, you're writing! And, trust me, now the ideas will start flowing.

Movie critic Roger Ebert says, "The muse visits during the act of creation, not before." That's his clever way of saying that the words, the ideas, and your enthusiasm for what you're writing—they all start coming to you only after you've started writing.

(And if you think *that's* profound, you should read Ebert's review of *Die Hard with a Vengeance*.)

Tip 23

Get away from your desk

Ever notice that sometimes your best ideas come to you when you're in the shower, or lying in bed, or driving?

When you don't have many distractions, your creative ideas can come to the surface. So sometimes the best way to start writing is to figure out what your document needs to communicate, then leave your desk and give your mind a break to let your creativity do its job.

Go for a walk. Talk to a colleague in the break room. And hey, if you have a shower in the office, use it!

This is a good reason to build in more time to write your work-related documents. If you're not facing a short deadline, you can walk away from the writing, stop thinking about it consciously, and give the creative centers of your brain a chance to work their magic.

Often you'll leave your office, do something else for just a few minutes and… inspiration will strike. When this happens, drop everything and run back to your office immediately.

Unless you were taking a shower.

BECOME A MASTER PRESENTER

The first time I had to give a speech, I was so terrified that, during my drive to the meeting hall, I considered slamming my car into a tree so I had a good excuse to miss the event. And after they sat through that speech, my audience probably wished I had.

A successful presentation is an extremely tricky task. Here are a few tips to help you make your presentations successful and memorable—and deliver the results you want.

Tip 24

Greet attendees as they arrive

Your presentation actually begins before the meeting starts, when the first attendee enters the room. So get there early and greet people as they walk in. You'll feel more relaxed during your talk if you've had a nice exchange with each person in the room.

Also, if the meeting turns hostile but your attendees have talked with you beforehand, they're less likely to throw food at you. (But just in case, bring boomerang-shaped pastries.)

Note: For conference-call presentations, this means greeting each new attendee as they dial in, before you begin the presentation.

Tip 25

Don't use PowerPoint

This tip is hard to follow, I know. We're expected to use PowerPoint. The problem is, PowerPoint drains the life out of a presentation. The presenter advances from one slide to the next, reading what's on the screen—usually a title and a list of bulleted phrases.

And the audience leaps to its feet and cheers! No, wait—that never happens.

If you're presenting your managers an idea for a new program, talk to them. Move around the room and let them see your enthusiasm for the topic. Show them images, tell them stories, play a video clip. Get them engaged emotionally—that's how you make a presentation memorable and get results.

One exception: PowerPoint can be useful as a canvas to display images, short phrases or numbers that tell your story. In other words, use PowerPoint only as a visual backdrop for your talk—not as the talk itself.

If you have no choice but to use PowerPoint, I recommend you read the Garr Reynolds book *Presentation Zen*, which has some great ideas about how to make presentations (even with PowerPoint) powerful and compelling.

Tip 26

Don’t use PowerPoint

I know, but it bears repeating.

Tip 27

Use concrete language

"We're making great progress, and I think we're about to take things to the next level." If you heard this in a meeting, would you have any idea what the speaker meant?

What does "we're making great progress" mean? Are you halfway there? Three-quarters? Just starting but pleased with the early results? And exactly what level is "the next level?"

You'll win your audience over to your side only when they completely understand you. That means you need to speak in concrete language, not abstractions.

Fill your presentation with specifics. Your audience will stay engaged and focused—and you'll have a much better chance of convincing them to see things your way.

(And if you try to sneak vague statements past your audience, don't be surprised if an attendee accidentally hits himself with one of your boomerang croissants.)

Tip 28
Tell stories

I included this tip in the section on writing, but stories are at least as important a component in your presentations. Here's why.

Let's say you're giving a presentation to your team about improving their communication skills. And let's say you want to make a point that they should use smaller words in conversation—especially in a professional setting, and especially if they're considering a word they're not absolutely certain how to use or pronounce.

You could simply tell them your suggestion, as I just did above. Or you could show them a memorable example of what can happen if they don't follow your advice, as in the following story.

In a recent board meeting, a company president mistakenly said that an issue was "tangenital." He meant tangential, but he pronounced the word "tan-genital." This prompted a board member to respond: "Please, don't tell us what color they are!"

Which method do you think your audience is more likely to remember and act on?

To be an effective presenter, you need to engage your audience intellectually, but also emotionally. Stories are often the best way to engage our emotions. Wherever possible, wrap your points in stories that directly target emotions in your audience—make them amusing, fascinating, heartbreaking, shocking, or laugh-out-loud funny.

Tip 29

Make eye contact with as many attendees as you can

A teacher gave my class the following advice before we had to stand up in front of the room and give a presentation: If you're nervous, just imagine the class naked.

That suggestion was totally unnecessary because this was junior high. Everybody was already imagining everybody else naked!

But in addition to being completely redundant, this was actually terrible advice. The same goes for a similar public-speaking myth that it's smart to look past your audience, to find someplace on the back wall, and stare at it while you talk.

The reason these are both bad suggestions is that they force you to avoid truly seeing the people you're speaking to.

When you're giving a presentation, your goal is to connect with the people in your audience. The best way to do that is to look them in the eye.

Make direct eye contact with random members of your audience for a few seconds each. (And do this truly randomly, looking at people in different areas of the room, rather than simply moving from one person to the next in each row.)

This makes your audience feel like you're talking directly to them, and it'll help you feel less like you're presenting to the room and more like you're having a series of one-on-one conversations.

Tip 30

Don't apologize

Apologizing for a mistake during your presentation only breaks up the momentum of your talk and calls more attention to the goof.

So it's best not to say things like, "I'm sorry—looks like I hit the button twice and skipped a slide." "I apologize for that typo I just noticed on the graph." "Excuse me—I've been having some stomach problems."

If you make a mistake—especially one you're certain that your audience will notice—simply point out the mistake without adding an apology to it. In the example above about skipping slides, you can address that problem by simply saying, "Let me move back one slide."

Deal with the mistake, and then move on quickly. Your audience will forget quickly—if they notice at all—and you'll soon regain your rhythm.

Tip 31

Make your statistics pop

When I gave presentations early in my career, I loaded them up with statistics.

I assumed that including all the data that led to the conclusions I was presenting would add credibility to those conclusions. And it probably would have—if anyone in my audience could keep from falling asleep.

If you need to include stats or other figures in your presentation, don't simply list off a series of numbers. That's boring. Find a way to spice them up, to make them more memorable.

Snore:
Current projections for the upcoming year are for a budget deficit of $50 million.

More interesting:
We need to tighten the belt! We're on track next year to be in the hole $140,000 a day.

Tip 32
Pause

Watch Jay Leno's monologue on *The Tonight Show*. And notice this: Leno keeps talking right through his punch lines. He can't pause to wait for the laughter. Why?

This is common among comedians—even wildly successful ones. They're so terrified of audience silence—because that means a joke failed—that they won't risk shutting up after they deliver their punch line to wait that split-second for the laughter to roll in. They just keep talking.

Something similar often happens to professionals when they deliver a presentation. The speaker is either in such a hurry to get through their talk, or they (like standup comics) are so scared of silence in the room, that they talk as quickly as they can and hardly stop to breathe.

But often the most effective and valuable moments in your presentation are those when you are completely silent. Here a few examples of how pauses can add power to your presentations:

- A pause can help you make a point more dramatically, by giving your audience an extra second to let it sink in.

- A pause alerts your audience that you've concluded one point and are moving on to something new.

- A pause gives you a chance to breathe, relax, and prepare your transition into your next subject. This will make your introduction to the new subject more powerful.

Tip 33

Use visual aids, handouts and interaction

People tend to remember:

- 10% of what they read
- 20% of what they hear
- 30% of what they see
- 50% of what they hear and see
- 70% of what they say and write
- **90% of what they say and do**

To deliver an effective and memorable presentation, you'll want to engage your audience on several levels. If people remember only 20% of what they hear, your chances of creating a great presentation aren't high if the gathering consists solely of you talking and the audience listening.

Add some visual aids— for example, a shocking or amusing or otherwise fascinating image on the screen—and now your audience is both hearing and seeing. That more than doubles what your audience will remember, from an average of 20% to 50%.

If you can get them brainstorming, working in groups, making suggestions, writing ideas on the board—now they're hearing, seeing, saying and doing. And now you're giving a productive and memorable presentation!

Tip 34
Start with humor

Economist and author Thomas Sowell often gives speeches. Before one of them, the speaker introduced Dr. Sowell by telling the audience of his many impressive credentials—PhD in economics, author of dozens of books, contributing writer to *Newsweek* and *The Wall Street Journal*, professor at UCLA and Cornell—the list went on and on.

When Dr. Sowell, in his early 70s, took the podium, he started his speech by saying, "*Thank you for that great introduction. It was like getting a sneak preview of my own obituary*." This line worked wonderfully for several reasons:

1. Sowell poked fun at himself—in particular, his age—and let his audience know he was not someone who took himself too seriously.

2. His joke was appropriate to the moment, because it sounded as if it arose spontaneously (although you can bet he rehearsed it).

3. The line was funny. He made his audience feel relaxed and happy because they knew right from this first line that they were in for an entertaining talk.

Just make sure the humor is about you, your audience or your topic (don't use a joke that starts with "Two guys walk into a bar…."), and that you aren't making fun of anyone but yourself.

And if you're not sure it's funny, don't use it. Better to have no joke than a bad one.

Tip 35

Don’t leave the Q&A session for the end

This sounds counterintuitive; we’re used to having a speaker tell us to hold our questions until the end.

But when you hold the questions until after you’ve concluded your talk, you give up control of the room at the end of your presentation—just as your audience is about leave and mentally record their final memories of your talk.

Schedule a Q&A session for a brief period just before the last section of your presentation. This allows everyone in your audience a chance to be heard, but still gives you the chance to deliver the dramatic or inspirational closing you want.

Tip 36

Don't make these common presentation mistakes

According to a Gallup poll, audiences found the following speaker behaviors most annoying:

Cursing	84%
Mumbling, talking too softly	80%
Talking too loudly	73%
Monotonous or boring voice	73%
Filler words like "um," "you know," and "like"	69%
A nasal whine	67%
Talking too fast	66%
Poor grammar, mispronouncing words	63%
A high-pitched voice	61%

A few tips to conquer stage fright

Tip 37
Drink room-temperature water

If you're nervous before giving a public talk, the chances are good that you're going to get thirsty.

For obvious reasons, don't reach for alcohol or coffee. Also, don't have ice water—it can constrict your throat and make it hard to speak.

Try a glass of room-temperature water.

Also, keep that water close and accessible during your presentation. If your mouth gets dry or you just need an excuse to take a two-second break—and your audience will understand if you do—you can always take a sip.

Tip 38
Yawn

Yawning relieves tension by sending the signal that you're tired, which sets the body into action trying to relax you. So before your presentation begins (where no one can see you), have a yawn. (Just don't do it *during* your presentation!)

Tip 39
Smile

Smile before and during your talk. In addition to being a great way to connect with your audience and help them to relax, smiling, like yawning, can change your physiology.

It's hard to feel tension when you're smiling.

Tip 40
Familiarize yourself with the room beforehand

Go early to the room where you'll be presenting. Even if it's just a conference room in your company's offices, it's still a good idea to go in alone, take your position where you'll be giving your talk, and get a sense of the room and the point of view you'll have as you address your attendees. This will make you more comfortable during your talk.

Tip 41
Get strength from the people in the front

The people who sit closest to you are eager to be involved or to learn. Make plenty of eye contact with them, involve them (although not to the exclusion of the rest of the group), and they'll give you the energy and positive feedback that you need.

Tip 42

Remember—you're the expert

If you're nervous about speaking in front of a group, you can always remind yourself of this important fact: Someone thought enough of your knowledge and talent to gather a group of people together to hear what *you* have to say.

You're the expert, and you've earned the time and attention of your attendees.

BECOME A MASTER CONVERSATIONALIST

Tip 43

Focus on the other person

The CEO of a small technology company I worked for often held all-day meetings with his senior staff. One day, hours into a marathon meeting, one of the VPs, who had passed on all of the snacks on the table and hadn't left the room all day, stood up and headed for the door.

> **CEO:** *Where are you going?*
> **VP:** *I'm starving. I'm going to grab a snack and bring it back.*
> **CEO:** *How can you be hungry? I just ate.*

What's the point of this story? Not many of us are as self-centered as that CEO. But in conversation, we are often too "me-focused."

Of course, your listeners think about things from their own points of view. In other words, they're "me-focused" too. So if you're trying to make yourself heard—or just trying to be a better conversationalist—a more effective method than trying to refocus your listeners on you is to join their internal dialogue about themselves.

In other words, try in conversation to be more "you-focused."

This isn't new advice. People have probably suggested you-focused communication since the days of the cave man, to avoid conversations like this:

> **Cave Man 1:** *So there I was, running for my life from this woolly mammoth—*
>
> **Cave Man 2:** *Hey, I just drew a woolly mammoth on our cave wall last night.*
>
> **Cave Man 1:** *Please don't interrupt me.*

But most people still communicate with a me-focused approach, and they often bore or otherwise turn off their listeners.

This creates an opportunity for you to shine. If you're you-focused when speaking with people, they'll notice, they'll appreciate it, and they'll see you as a great communicator.

Tip 44

Avoid clichés… like the plague

In a recent conversation with my wife, I said someone was trying to "pull the rug over our eyes."

"Wool," she said.

I had no idea what she was talking about. "What?"

"Wool. It's 'pull the wool over your eyes' and 'pull the rug out from under you.'" My wife, laughing at this point, continued: "How would someone pull a rug over your eyes, anyway, unless they were talking to you while you were lying on the floor?"

Oh. Good point. Good thing we were alone.

This is just one of several reasons not to use clichés. If you use them incorrectly, they can distract your reader or listener from what you're trying to say. My wife missed my point because she was too busy rolling on the floor laughing—where, ironically, someone actually could have pulled a rug over her eyes.

Another reason not to speak in clichés is that they're not your words. Your listener wants to hear *you*. When you drop in a clichéd phrase, your listener goes from being carried along by your unique ideas to… suddenly hearing some centuries-old thought for the thousandth time.

It's as though you've temporarily left the conversation and told your listener, "Here, talk to my Great Aunt Melba."

There's one more reason to stay away from clichés: they're conversation killers.

Imagine: you and a friend are having a nice talk, and your friend says, "Well, that's the way the ball bounces," or "… cookie crumbles," or whatever. What's left to say? Your friend chose to use someone else's overused phrase rather than say something original. Clearly, your friend has given up on this talk. This is how clichés end conversations. You don't want to be the one who steers a nice chat into a wall.

You are unique, with a unique life and unique insights gleaned from that life. The people you speak with want to hear what you have to say, what no one else *can* say quite the way you can.

So avoid clichés like the plague. Fight them with every fiber of your being. Don't touch them with a 10-foot pole.

Tip 45

Watch your speaking speed

Ever notice how difficult it can be to keep your mind from wandering when someone is talking to you? There's a good reason.

While the average person speaks at 150 words per minute, he can listen at over 600 words per minute. So it's understandable that we have a hard time focusing when other people talk.

You can use this knowledge to your advantage when you're engaged in conversation. Be mindful of the pace at which you're talking. If you speak too slowly, your listener might start thinking, "Milk, diapers, air freshener, oranges…."

At the same time, if you talk so quickly that your listener can't understand your words or follow your train of thought, they might find themselves giving up and thinking, "Milk, diapers…."

Find a talking pace that's comfortable for you—and that isn't so fast your listener can't follow, or so slow your listener loses interest. Try various speaking speeds. Ask a trusted friend or colleague for their opinion on what works and what doesn't. They're among the people who have to listen to you, after all, so it's in their best interest to be candid about it.

Tip 46

Don't finish the other person's thought

Having just made the point that people can hear and process words four times faster than they can speak, I should now point out that one of the most annoying behaviors in conversation is jumping into another person's pause to finish their thought.

If you want to be known as a great conversationalist, you'll never—ever—do this.

When you're in a conversation and the other person pauses to think of a word or phrase, let them finish. No matter how long it takes. Let them finish. Really, let them finish.

The only exception to this rule is if the other person actually asks you for help remembering whatever they can't. Until then, wait.

When you jump in and finish their thought, you're sending a signal to the other person that you're losing patience. You'll also make your fellow conversationalist uneasy for the rest of the discussion—afraid of annoying you again by talking too slowly or pausing for too long.

By contrast, when you're patient and allow the other person as long as they need to complete their point, the other person will come away from your talk having enjoyed it much more. And they're much more likely to find you a great conversationalist.

And if the pause is really long and nothing else works, bite the inside of your lip.

Tip 47

Use precise language

During a live TV report, a cable news correspondent said that a certain candidate in the Illinois Senate race has “a ton of support” from his party.

Interesting. I didn’t realize we could measure political support by the pound.

You’ve probably heard similar statements and seen them in writing many times. Someone writes about using “every ounce of my energy” or about a person trying something “without a drop of experience.” Don’t do this.

Phrases like these undermine the power and even the credibility of your words. That’s because they’re not precise. Most listeners won’t even be aware of it consciously, but when they hear these statements they lose a little respect for the speaker.

We don’t measure experience with a teaspoon. So when you say a person didn’t have “a drop of experience,” you distract your listener from your point—even if for only a nanosecond. You want your listener absorbing and being persuaded by the force of your arguments, not focusing on your choice of words.

So be precise. It’s one way to ensure your words receive *a lot* of support (rather than a ton).

Tip 48

Accept a compliment

"Oh, I'm not the one who deserves the credit." "This old thing?"

Is it so difficult to say, "Thank you"?

I prefer the phrase "offer a compliment," rather than the more common "pay a compliment." The word offer suggests what's really going on—a compliment represents a verbal gift someone is trying to give you. Be gracious enough to accept it.

Rejecting a compliment is, frankly, rude. Doesn't matter what your reason—a sense of modesty, discomfort with being the center of attention, whatever. It puts the person offering it to you in an uncomfortable position. And it makes them feel bad. Why would you want to do that?

Just say thank you. It goes a long way.

Tip 49

Don’t use filler words

You know, when you talk, sometimes the next point you want to, um, make, you know, doesn’t like come to you, uh, right away. So, um, I mean, you know, well, you’ve got to use some filler words.

Ready to strangle me?

In conversation, silence is a valuable tool. A speaker can use a well-placed second of silence to make his points more powerfully. It can give the listener a chance to digest the last point and ready herself to fully focus on the next one.

But even in cases where you’re not trying to underscore a point or add dramatic flair, silence is better than all those filler words I used in that first paragraph above.

If you need a fraction of a second to come up with your next word, take it, quietly. Don’t add a series of ums and uhs and likes and you knows to fill the air.

Now, chances are you don’t even know you’re doing this. So find out. Ask a trusted friend or colleague. Make a tape of yourself speaking. When you’re in conversations, pay attention to whether you use filler words like this—and, if you do, make a conscious effort to stop.

Your listener will thank you.

A few tips for delivering bad news

Tip 50

State bad news candidly

In a great TV moment, a captain on *NYPD Blue* confesses to his detectives, after battling with them, "I made a bad call. You guys bailed me out. Thank you." When the captain walks away, one of the detectives, lead character Andy Sipowicz, says, "This guys shows me something."

That's about as close to a compliment as the nasty Sipowicz character offers anyone in 200 episodes of the series. And how did the captain earn such high praise? Simple: he admitted a mistake—humbly, candidly, without excuses.

When you deliver bad news openly and candidly—especially when taking responsibility for an error—you disarm your listeners. They'll still be upset with the message, but by being candid you can reduce your recipients' anger toward you as the messenger.

It's hard to be angry with someone who honestly owns up to a mistake.

Plus, candidly delivering bad news or an apology can actually raise your credibility and increase the recipient's respect for you.

Tip 51

State bad news clearly

A few months ago, a software firm I'm familiar with realized they weren't going to meet a deadline they had promised to their biggest client.

The CEO, terrified of upsetting the client, wrote them an email to try to explain. But he wrote such a confusing and jargon-filled message that the client read it and thought the software firm *would* meet the deadline.

So the company had to deliver the bad news all over again, and the client was far angrier the second time because they believed the original email was used to mislead them.

There's no point muddying your bad-news message with unclear language. You can't hide from the information you're delivering. Respect you reader and just state it plainly.

Tip 52
Show empathy

Imagine a department head gathering their team together and announcing, "*Our project proposal was denied.*"

Ouch. Wouldn't you love to work with this person?

Hearing a bad-news message that contains no empathy only compounds your listeners' frustration.

By taking just an extra minute to consider how your bad news will affect the people you're deliver it to, and explaining it from a place of empathy, you can take some of the sting out of the message. Imagine gathering your team in a room and telling them:

> *You've all shown real dedication to our new project proposal. So I wish I didn't have to deliver this news—the initiative has been denied.*
>
> *I want to tell each of you that your hard work throughout the process showed me how seriously you took this initiative, and you should be proud of the work you have done.*

Demonstrate to your bad-news recipients that you understand how the news will affect them and that you wish they didn't have to receive it.

Tip 53

End with something positive

A good rule to remember when delivering bad news is this: If you have bad news and good news, give the bad first. That way you can end on a positive note.

Another good rule: If you can, start *and* end a bad-news message with something positive.

Notice that in the previous tip, **Show Empathy**, I actually sandwiched the bad news—*proposal denied*—between two positive messages. I started and ended with a compliment about the team's impressive work.

But even if you can't find a way to start the message positively, you should at least end it with something positive.

> *I'm afraid that, due to department-wide budget cuts, we can't issue any raises this year. Please know that this is in no way a commentary on your performance. I promise to do everything in my power to ensure that next year you receive the additional compensation you deserve.*

BECOME A MASTER LISTENER

Tip 54

Listen with empathy

The key to becoming a master listener is to listen empathically.

Unlike the other two types of listeners—the indifferent listener (he's ignoring you) and the part-time listener (she's trying to listen but gets distracted easily)—the empathic listener is someone people like, respect and want to spend time with. Why?

Because the empathic listener always pays close attention to all aspects of the speaker's message—words, tone of voice, body language. In doing so, the empathic listener sends a constant stream of signals that she's interested in what the speaker is saying.

And isn't it wonderful when you're talking to someone to feel as though that person is truly *listening*!

Listen with empathy. Learning to do so is a huge step toward becoming a master communicator.

Tip 55
Show interest with body language

Staring at the other person while he talks is not enough to show you're engaged in the conversation. Make eye contact, nod appropriately, and use interested-listener phrases like, "Right," "I agree," or, "Really?"

Tip 56
Summarize

State the main thrust of the speaker's statements. "*So, you think you've got to call him back and try again*."

This is yet another way to reinforce to your speaker that you've been paying attention, and at the same time it strengthens your own understanding and memory of the conversation.

Tip 57
Interpret

Offer your own take on what the speaker has said. "*This is really bothering you, isn't it?*"

You'll show you've heard not only the speaker's words but also her thoughts and feelings. This is the essence of empathic listening, and it can really help you connect with someone and enhance the conversation.

Tip 58

Fight off competing thoughts

Remember, for some strange reason we're physiologically predisposed to have our minds wander when someone else is talking—because we can listen and get the gist of the point they're making so much faster than they can actually speak the words.

To be a great conversationalist, though, you need to be completely present in the moment when your fellow conversationalist is talking. That means listening empathically—and blocking out the competing thoughts that will often creep in to your mind (*milk*, *diapers*…).

How can you do this? Two suggestions:

1. **Change your physical position.** You've probably noticed that sometimes in meetings your mind drifts and you lose track of the discussion. (Made far worse if someone asks you your opinion!) If you're leaning back and notice your mind wandering, lean forward. Shake things up physically and you'll be brought back to the present moment mentally.

2. **Ask a clarifying question.** If you start losing track of the discussion, ask the person a question that brings you back into the fold, like, "*Can you explain that a little further?*" People will naturally repeat a lot of that they originally said, and you'll get caught up.

Tip 59

Don't forget their names!

This is one of the most difficult inter-personal skills for most people to develop, especially in business because we meet new people so often.

And the simple skill of remembering an acquaintance's or a colleague's name can dramatically increase your professional reputation.

You store a vast amount of information in your mind: phone numbers, addresses, birthdays, ATM codes. So you can store a single name for a few seconds. And yet, when you're introduced to a new person, you forget their name almost immediately.

What's probably happening is: *You're not listening.* As you go to shake the person's hand, you're noticing his shirt, thinking of what to say next—and you never actually hear a name.

How to remember their names, every time:

1. When you're introduced to someone, shut out all thoughts and listen for the name.

2. Next, make a point of repeating it out loud immediately. You'll hear, "*I'm Joseph*," and as you shake hands, say, "*Nice to meet you, Joseph*."

3. Finally, take a second to concentrate fully on the person's face, and think, "*Joseph*."

You'll never forget it again.