

DON'T SAY UM

*HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY
TO LIVE A BETTER LIFE*

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CHAPTER 9

VOCAL VARIETY

How to Speak Expressively (and Avoid Monotone)

Welcome to the longest chapter in *Don't Say Um*. Be not dismayed! Long does not equal boring in this case; long equals important.

This chapter is the remedy for all the ridiculous pablum you have probably encountered on this topic before. The subject is often brushed over with such an inadequate, dismissive, and anti-productive brush that it is distilled into one word—*tone*—and speakers are given utterly useless advice like “drop into your authenticity” or “be more passionate” or “give me some positivity.”

In this chapter, we are not going to do any of this: ~~drop into your authenticity or be more passionate or give me some positivity.~~

We are going to take a practical, rigorous, and comprehensive approach to unlocking one essential aspect of speaking, because it warrants it.

To start, I want to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest with me (and yourself). *Have you been doing the exercises in this book?* Did you do the filming exercise I suggested in Chapter 5, the multiple paper-tearing or folding activities, the talking out loud when prompted, and more?

First, if you have been doing the activities, *rock on!* Good job!

If not, reflect for a moment: Why haven't you done the activities yet?

I'm not asking to make you feel guilty. I have no interest in creating guilt—there is enough of that in the world! Let's skip the guilt and just get straight to examining one of the obstacles that prevents people from embracing the activities and exercises. (And thereby hopefully remove that obstacle.)

There are many causes for inaction or procrastination, but I want to focus on a particular one in this chapter. To do that, please fill in the following sentence. You can write on the page or just say it out loud:

When I hear my own voice played back to me it's _____

Typically, when I do this exercise with clients, the things I hear are relentlessly self-critical: "like nails on a chalkboard," "annoying," "abrasive," "too nasal," "alien," "like a foghorn." You may have written something similarly harsh.

Many, many, many of us report not liking the sound of our own voice. This is a difficult state of affairs. One's voice is a very personal thing. It has to do with

- where you grew up (Do you have an accent? Depends on where you are in the world... and who's evaluating.)
- how you use your body (Remember Chapter 2? Spoken communication is physical, and it changes depending on how you use your diaphragm, lungs, torso, throat, mouth, lips, and more.)
- how much you open your mouth (Afraid of letting something slip that you shouldn't?)
- how your family and friends speak (Have family issues? Welcome to the club.)
- your culture (Always over-the-top? Or, alternatively, have a hard time speaking up?)
- how you breathe (Or don't.)

- what you have said—and have been punished or praised for (Both can create challenges.)
- what you haven't said (Regret much?)

Given all that, it's no wonder it can feel vulnerable to hear and examine one's voice.

But before you retreat into a fixed mindset that has confined and condemned your voice, let me gently question your assumptions about what a voice is. It may not be the common noun you think. People speak about their voice as though it were an object—and a static object at that. "I have a [squeaky, shrill, monotone, boring, scratchy] voice," the lament goes. In truth, you don't have a [squeaky, shrill, monotone, boring, scratchy] voice; you have an endlessly flexible voice. And if you don't like your voice, there's a very high likelihood it's not actually your voice!

What the heck do I mean by that? Modern society conspires to compromise our ability to create sound freely and healthfully. If you recall the thought experiment from Chapter 3, which of these two people would still have a voice left after screaming from ten at night to six in the morning?

(Hint: it's not the person with the bullhorn.)



We adjust and corrupt our voices for a variety of reasons as we move through life. So, if you don't like your voice, never fear! It's not your real voice anyway.

I don't say that to sound glib but rather to create a little space in your consciousness to be nicer to yourself as you examine expanding the way in which you speak.

You can get a hint of this even by considering the title of one of the most legendary vocal training books of the last century, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, by Kristin Linkletter. Note that the title isn't "Taming the Natural Voice" or "Strengthening the Natural Voice."

So instead of fixating on how bad you think you sound on *video* or in a *voice mail* or in your voicemail *greeting*, instead think about how different your voice sometimes sounds

- after you've had a good cry
- upon waking from a long, relaxing nap
- after a couple of glasses of wine
- on a late-night phone call with a long-distance romantic partner

The sound of your voice can change—and change dramatically. In fact, it does change, and—like most every other example in this book—it changes organically and instinctually when you are solely focused on reaching the other person.

How specifically does it change? It's what I call *vocal variety*. That term might be new to you, but the topic isn't, because people talk about it all the time, just in different terms. If you have heard people speak about "tone of voice," "monotone," "shrill," or any number of other descriptions or critiques of voices, they're talking about vocal variety.

In working with speakers for fifteen years, I have developed an alliterative system of Five Ps to help clients understand, remember, and eventually unlock greater vocal variety. The Five Ps are as follows:

- Pace (fast and slow)
- Pitch (high and low)
- Pause (musical rest)
- Power (loud and soft)
- Placement (where the sound amplifies in the body)

Looking at those five, you probably intuitively recognize the categories and glimpse the interconnectedness. The only one you may have a bit of confusion about is *placement*. If you know a friend who has a very nasal

voice, technically what's happening is the sound of their voice is amplifying primarily in the nasal cavities of their head and face rather than throughout the rest of their body. That's called placement—the sound is “placed” in the nasal “mask” area of the face.

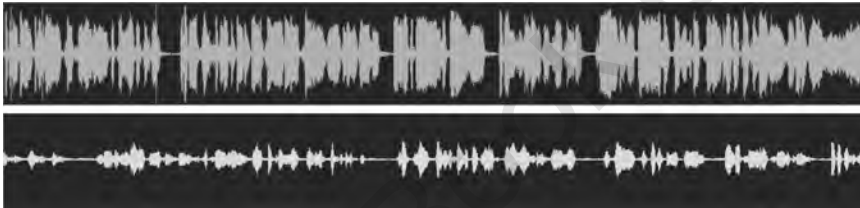
For musicians, these five dynamics will be instantly recognizable—they're what they know well as dynamics in musical composition. Power (volume) in musical scoring is indicated, of course, by the term *pianoforte* (loud) and *pianissimo* (soft). The other Ps all map neatly as well. Pitch is as it sounds—the musical note high or low on the scale. Pace is tempo and rhythm. Pause is the frequency, pattern, and length of the various rests. And when a performer puts a mute in their trumpet or closes the lid on the harp of their piano, they have altered placement, when the manipulation of the instrument's architecture affects where the sound amplifies.

Just learning about this system can be a revelation for people who struggle with vocal variety—musicians and nonmusicians alike. Consider those who have been told they have a monotone voice (or even more reductively, “you're monotone”—as though monotone were a nationality or race). These people have often endured decades of being told “you sound bored,” “just speak with more passion,” and “you don't seem enthusiastic,” or (worst of all) of being deprived of speaking opportunities because—as one of my clients was told—“you put the audience to sleep.” When they learn this system of Five Ps, people who are tremendous achievers but who have never been able to communicate about those achievements with energy and enthusiasm realize that there are specific measurements to evaluate against and then improve.

But as powerful as that revelation is, it's nothing compared to the aha moment they experience when they actually learn how to unleash the Ps. Working with other academics around the country—social scientists and management professors at Ivy League institutions and large research universities—we used this framework of Five Ps to examine politicians' speeches. This analysis enabled us to offer some key findings in distilled form to political figures, the names of whom you would recognize. I give you that slightly obnoxious, anonymized,

name-dropping context for an important reason: the most seasoned, powerful political communicators in the world need this kind of help too. If you know that you could use more vocal variety and/or convey more enthusiasm, drama, or passion, it's not that something is wrong with you. Many people have room for improvement, just like those brand-name politicians.

We used my system of Five Ps to examine a specific politician's patterns and identified that this person was particularly challenged in varying power and pitch. I even documented the pattern visually, because the WAV files of the voice look entirely different when the speaker is using vocal variety effectively versus when not.



Notice how in the first illustration each time the speaker says a word it shows up as a “blob” of sound, and all the blobs appear at repetitive intervals and at the same amplitude. Compare it to the second illustration, in which the amount of space in between blobs is varied, some blobs are thin and tall, some are short and long, some are barely a ripple, some look like a sunfish.

What you're looking at is the visual representation of the variety in the speaker's voice. The first illustration is taken from a particularly ineffective speech when the candidate blared loudly and repetitively most of the time. The second is from an event in which the candidate spoke with much more variety, nuance, and subtlety. Shocker—the audience responded more positively at the second event.

Put as simply as possible, what our examination of vocal variety using my Five Ps dynamic framework revealed is this: speakers who use vocal variety come across better than those who don't. They are assigned a variety of positive attributes by their audience: trustworthy, credible,

thoughtful, persuasive, and more.¹⁻⁷ Hopefully, that snapshot of the research is intriguing for you, but there is a good chance you already possess this insight. The cliché of the droning, monotonous politician is so engrained in our traditions of comedy and parody that it's almost become a stock character. Look no further than the long-running TV show *The Simpsons* and its monotone Mayor Quimby of Springfield character. The inauthenticity is the point.

VOCAL VARIETY—ESSENTIAL AND INNATE

I showed you some science to intrigue your brain, I've made them all Ps to activate your appetite for alliteration, and I shared a story to engage your empathy. So, hopefully, you'll remember these Five Ps.

But the great news is this: you don't have to remember them. In fact, you never have to even think about them again, because you already know

- 1 M. K. Surawski and E. P. Ossoff, "The Effects of Physical and Vocal Attractiveness on Impression Formation of Politicians," *Current Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2006): 15–27.
- 2 M. G. Boltz, "Temporal Dimensions of Conversational Interaction: The Role of Response Latencies and Pauses in Social Impression Formation," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 24, no. 2 (2005): 103–138.
- 3 J. Schroeder and N. Epley, "The Sound of Intellect," *Psychological Science* 26 (2015): 877–891; and J. Schroeder and N. Epley, "Mistaking Minds and Machines: How Speech Affects Dehumanization and Anthropomorphism," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 145, no. 11 (2016): 1427–1437.
- 4 J. T. Cheng, J. L. Tracy, S. Ho, and J. Henrich, "Listen, Follow Me: Dynamic Vocal Signals of Dominance Predict Emergent Social Rank in Humans," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 145, no. 5 (2016): 536.
- 5 S. W. Gregory and T. J. Gallagher, "Spectral Analysis of Candidates' Nonverbal Vocal Communication: Predicting U.S. Presidential Election Outcomes," *Sociology and Psychology Quarterly* 65 (2002): 298–308.
- 6 C. Gelinias-Chebat and J. C. Chebat, "Effects of Two Voice Characteristics on the Attitudes Towards Advertising Messages," *Journal of Social Psychology* 132 (1992): 447–459; and C. Gelinias-Chebat, J. C. Chebat, and A. Vaninsky, "Voice and Advertising: Effects of Intonation and Intensity of Voice on Source Credibility, Attitudes Toward the Advertised Service and the Intent to Buy," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 104 (1996): 419–437.
- 7 M. Zuckerman and K. Miyake, "The Attractive Voice: What Makes It So?" *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 17, no. 2 (1993): 119–135; and M. Zuckerman, H. Hodgins, and K. Miyake, "The Vocal Attractiveness Stereotype: Replication and Elaboration," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 14, no. 2 (1990): 97–112.

them, and you know them in your bones. To prove this to you, I want you to imagine saying these eight words to a three-year-old while trying to do a time-tested switcheroo trick:

DO YOU WANT THIS THING OR *THIS THING*?

Let's imagine the three-year-old has picked up some stranger's cell phone, and you're trying to get it back. All you have to trade is a ball. How might you use vocal variety to make the ball sound like much more fun than the cell phone? Hear yourself saying those words. Do you change pace? Probably, likely slowing down to feature the ball. Do you change pitch? You probably emphasize the ball over the phone by raising or lowering your pitch. Do you use power? I bet you do. For the object you're trying to engender interest in, you probably speak a bit louder. Do you use pause? Yep. You probably pause to create some suspense in unveiling the ball. And I bet you would even shift placement. Indicating the phone, you might resonate more nasally or alternatively in the back of the throat to communicate disregard. Relating to the ball, you might resonate sound throughout your entire body to communicate wonder. You know all these Five Ps unthinkingly. We all do.

These Ps are so ingrained in us, in fact, that all of them are quite interconnected. More, it's very challenging to change only one of them in isolation from the others. If you don't believe me, just try it!

But the benefit of a single aspect of vocal variety being difficult to change in isolation is that it gives you an easy way to begin the journey of embracing more. If you know that you tend to speak in a monotonous voice—which technically is a lack of variety in pitch—how great is it that if you just practice using louder and softer power, faster and slower pace, and longer and shorter pausing, pitch will automatically begin to modulate too, simply because they're all deeply interconnected?

Lack of vocal variety can also be seen not only within a sentence but also as a pattern that affects *each* sentence. Perhaps you repetitively inflect up at the end of each sentence, or alternatively, you trail off (habits we will examine in greater depth next chapter). The result of these patterns is that each thought sounds equivalent to all the others. Your

speech therefore sounds less other-focused and more self-focused, slightly autopilot, and definitely repetitive.

Consider written language for a moment. In English, there are eight ways to indicate an end or pause. They are the following:

1. Period (.)
2. Comma (,)
3. Colon (:)
4. Semicolon (;)
5. Ellipsis (...)
6. Exclamation point (!)
7. Question mark (?)
8. Dash (—)

If you repetitively end a sentence in the same way, it is the equivalent of doing the following to your speaking:

To be, or not to be? That is the question? Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die? To sleep? No more?¹

Alternatively, if you trail off relentlessly, that might be the equivalent of doing this:

To be, or not to be.... That is the question.... Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.... Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them.... To die.... To sleep.... No more....²

When humans are at their other-focused best, they tend to use a wide variety of intonations and rhythms throughout thoughts to make sounds

1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act III, Sc. 1.

2 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act III, Sc. 1.

distinct from each other. Once again, imagine talking to your friend in crisis. You can imagine the punctuation of that dialogue looking like the following (I've bolded each of those eight punctuation marks so you can note their usage):

It's going to be okay! You think I'm going to let you talk to yourself this way? The first thing we're going to do is start a list; we're going to write down the very best outcome that can happen—and the very worst. You can go into as much detail as you want: every little terrifying thing you're worried about, or just the giant worst-case scenarios...

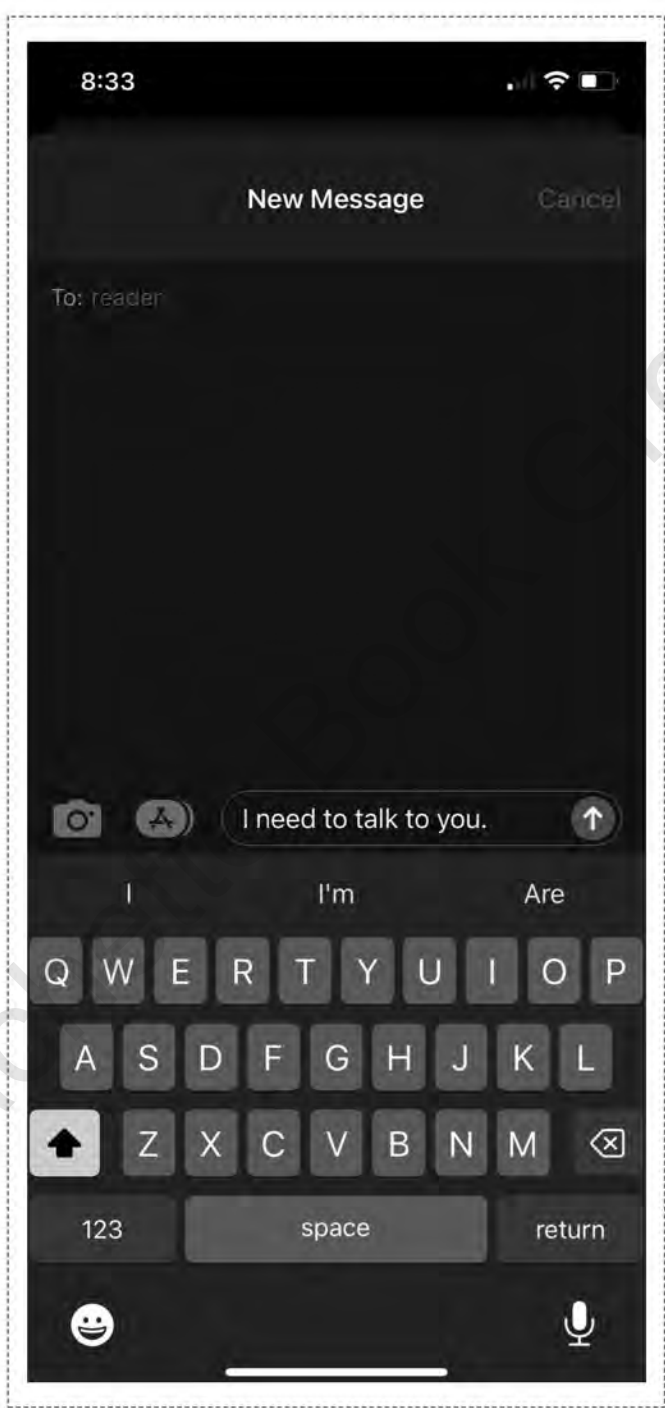
Notice how each of those punctuation marks suggests a different use of vocal variety to let the listener know your tone and intention and maybe even preview where you're going next.

THE PURPOSES OF VOCAL VARIETY

Vocal variety is not accidental. It is not just “nice to have.” It is essential and has multiple purposes. Vocal variety: (1) indicates emotion; (2) conveys meaning; (3) orients the listener; and (4) surprises the audience.

Indicate Emotion

Indicating emotion is the purpose of vocal variety with which you're already very familiar. We've all learned this lesson about emotion the hard way. If you need an instant, vivid demonstration, just look at the following figure.



With what vocal variety did you just hear my voice in your head? Was I mad at you? Ashamed by you? Abhorred by your behavior? Excited to share more information with you about vocal variety? Interested in making lunch plans next week? In dire need of some tax documents from you?

If you've ever misread the intention of a text message, you have been the victim of inaccurate vocal variety as you played that person's voice in your head. Perhaps you thought they were furious with you, and it turns out they were just trying to get confirmation about something.

You're already so familiar with this purpose that you probably even have some insight into how the Ps change depending on the emotional tone of the speaker (that is, power is often louder when angry or pace is faster when excited).

You may not be as familiar with the other purposes, though.

Convey Meaning

Vocal variety also communicates meaning. Consider this old emphasis game, using the phrase "I did not steal your red pen."

If you say, "I did not steal your *red* pen," the implication, of course, is that you stole the other-colored pen (maybe blue). But if you say, "I did not steal your red *pen*," the implication might be that you stole the red pencil. Or if you say, "I did not *steal* your red pen," the implication is that you just borrowed it.

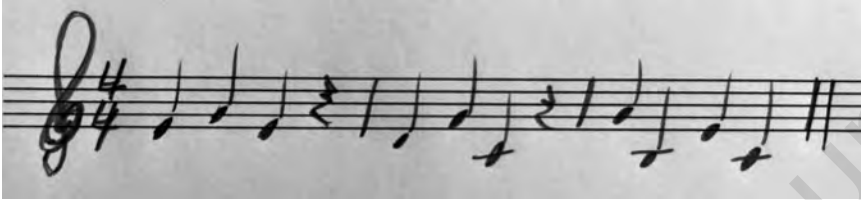
For a slightly absurd example, consider one of the cliché archetypes of modern speech: the often-ridiculed Valley Girl pattern of speech, in which everything is personification and single-syllable words. Imagine trying to make sense of the following sentence if the speaker wasn't using vocal variety to communicate both tone and meaning.

"She was like 'no way!' and I was all like 'way.' And then they were all 'what?' and she was like 'I know...'"

Orient the Listener

To understand how vocal variety orients a listener, let's consider a series of ordered sounds that doesn't even feature words: speaking a telephone number.

When I tell someone my phone number, I say it in a musical pattern, something like this:



What's going on here?

It would be understandable to think that humans speak a phone number in a monotone—slowly, clearly, and evenly, with each digit being identical in terms of pace, pitch, pause, power, and placement. You're just saying numbers, right? The different identity of each of the digits should be sufficient for comprehension. That might look like this.



But this is not how we generally speak phone numbers—or Social Security numbers or our birthdays in eight-digit form or postal codes or all manner of number series. Humans tend to inflect the numbers up and down on a musical scale, anchoring our ears to the similar and different notes. By “playing the same note,” you are indicating to your audience the identical value of the digit. Think of the musical passage of my phone number as something akin to this (with each of the repeated words representing the same number): **identical**, *same*, **identical**—DIFFERENT, *same*, **novel**—*same*, **fresh**, *distinct*, unique. In that passage, you might imagine a number like this: 646-247-4803 (sincere apologies if I have just shockingly guessed your phone number. Readers—please don't dial that number! I just made it up, but some poor soul somewhere is probably the possessor of that phone number. Though the sheer curiosity may be excruciating to resist, don't phone them! None of us need more random, unnecessary phone calls!)

Let's examine that same musical representation of that phone number again.



Notice a few things. Notice how the identical numbers tend to map to the same note: in this case the 6s and 4s. Pitching the same number identically helps your listener instantly recognize that those numbers repeat, thereby helping the listener digest and retain the number. Notice how digits that are unique get pitched apart from others; an 8 doesn't get the same pitch as a 2. Notice how there are two musical rests—pauses, in other words. Note that they coincide precisely with the typical gaps in the written representation of a phone number, typically indicated either with hyphens or parentheses, like (646) 247-4803. We pause there to help people digest the series in brief groupings—two groupings of three numbers and one of four. Those pauses aid our retention. It also prompts our recognition that we are being offered something quite familiar—a phone number—and we can categorize it in the same way as every other ten-digit phone number we have ever received. My transcription is a faithful if not flawless representation of how I tend to say that number series. I could be even more rigorous and add additional nuance. On the third and sixth note I tend to do the slightest inflection up in pitch to preview that more notes are to come. I tend to adjust power as well, to increase the emphasis on the numbers that don't repeat. I haven't indicated those micro-variations here, because I'm not scoring a symphony, just illustrating a point.

If we use vocal variety with this much subtlety and sophistication in speaking something as pedestrian as a phone number, imagine how sophisticated our use of it must be when saying actual words.

Surprise the Audience

In addition to orienting and conveying meaning and emotion, humans also use vocal variety to continually surprise each other. Whether you're aware of it or not, your brain is wired to look for surprises. It burns an outsized amount of your total calories given its fairly minor weight (approximately three pounds); therefore, your body is always looking for moments to power it down and conserve calories. When is it safe to power down? When all observable surroundings are predictable and orderly. The moment your brain recognizes a pattern, it can dedicate less and less attention to it, until eventually you may not even register it at all. Think of an electric fan whirring in the background—eventually, the sound becomes white noise, and our brains don't even note it.

This adaptation is important from an evolutionary standpoint; it conserves energy for the sprint away from the inevitable, lurking saber-toothed tiger. A surprise can signal danger—in the case of the prehistoric predator—or delight. It is something unexpected and our brains have to focus on it very quickly to determine its implications. To examine this, try this thought experiment:

- You open the door of your home. SURPRISE! It's a birthday party for you! All your nearest and dearest are there.
- You open the door of your home. SURPRISE! You left the burner on and there is a fire on your stovetop!

In both those opposing situations of delight and danger, reflect on how much your brain attends to the situation.

Or compare an expected event to a surprising one. To make this experiential, in a moment I want you to consider the expected event of the next two pages. Notice which of the two pages grabs your attention more. Ready? Turn the page.

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VOCAL VARIETY

Which of the two pages did you notice more? The totally unexpected pileup of letters, of course, because that graphic is different from every other page in this book. Your eyes and brain have become accustomed to seeing uniformly laid out letters and words on these pages (and indeed countless pages from countless other books), and it no longer takes much brain power to recognize what you're seeing. The image of the pileup, on the other hand, is totally new and therefore demands your brain's attention. If I inserted that same visual on every third page for the rest of the book, though, not only would you get used to seeing it and attend to it less, but in a few chapters you would also get so good at skipping over that page that soon you would barely notice that visual.

Vocal variety is the human communication animal consistently and frequently changing the sound of the voice so the listener will attend to what is being said... and then attend again... and again... and again. It's how we take advantage of our audience's need for novelty.

If you don't use vocal variety in high-stakes situations, you're fighting your audience's DNA.

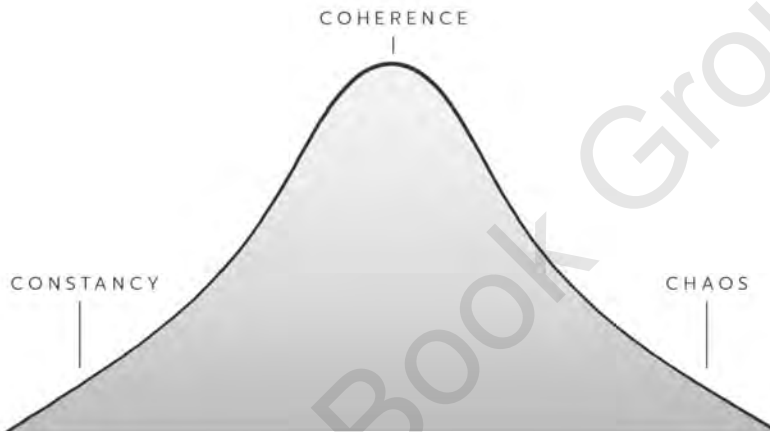
WHAT IS IDEAL?

Disclaimer: All this is not to say that more vocal variety is always better. Taken too far, extreme vocal variety turns into chaos and makes comprehension difficult, even impossible. Early AI voice software sounded unnatural to listeners because the vocal variety seemed haphazard and extreme. If one put a five-minute pause in between words, one's listener would likely leave the room and probably the building. If you made the loudest sound you're capable of on one word and then the softest possible on the very next word, people wouldn't think you're a scintillating speaker, just a silly one.

There is in fact a sweet spot—an ideal range, if you will. You can't speak in a constant way that puts people to sleep; you also can't speak in a chaotic way that scares them. You must achieve coherence.

To help you understand that range of vocal variety, consider a bell curve with those three C words. If sounds are constant—enduring and

unchanging—they become incoherent because eventually they don't even register to our awareness. Too much vocal variety, on the other hand, turns into chaos, and if taken to an absurd degree could even indicate that the speaker would be a safety risk. So a communicator must avoid the extremes of chaos and constancy at the two opposite ends of the curve and instead use vocal variety that achieves coherence.



That is a deeeeeeeep dive into vocal variety. But I wanted to give you a rigorous understanding of why using vocal variety is so important. Now here's the rub. When you get into higher-stakes communication situations, it is very likely that you shift to the left on the bell curve, coming perilously close to or even entering the constancy extreme. Why? Under stress, we cope by resorting to the classic three *F* strategies: fight, flight, or freeze. In a communication situation, fighting or flying are generally frowned upon, so the only option becomes freezing. No one wants to stand in front of an audience or meeting room and say absolutely nothing, so we do the second-best option: we freeze as much as we can. Think of a bunny rabbit freezing in front of the headlights of an oncoming car—the animal tries to make its visual profile small and still in hopes that it won't be noticed. Humans do a version of this—we try to make ourselves smaller, to contract as much as we can. But to speak is to move; we move our tongue and lips, our ribcage and diaphragm, our brow and face. So if

speaking necessitates moving, we try to move less so we are noticed less. But this adaptation—though potentially effective with lions, tigers, and bears—doesn't help for speaking.

When I observe clients shrink their posture, restrain their gestures, limit their facial expressions, and—yes—reduce their vocal variety, I coach them with a simple phrase. “What you think is keeping you safe is actually putting you in danger.” They are in more danger of bombing the interview, blowing the presentation, or messing up the meeting because they are contracting their communication instrument.

The goal is not to have unlimited vocal variety but rather to employ the same amount and range of vocal variety you would when at your most other-focused.

To unlock that same range, let's now get to the drills.

PRIMARY EXERCISE

The first point to make is that you have already built some skill in terms of vocal variety from using the last chapter's lesson. As I mentioned in its final paragraph, the cork exercise helps slow pace. And—because you just learned in this chapter that the Five Ps are interconnected—there is a very high likelihood the cork affected all your other Ps as well. So when it comes to vocal variety, you are already in a better position than before you read the last chapter! But let's supercharge that development.

As you do these exercises, don't worry about which words to emphasize. Concern yourself with *having* vocal variety, not where to use it.

To understand why I say this, consider an actor-training tool that pitches a parenthetical phrase differently from the rest of the thought. First it shifts it high; the second time, low. Actors study this technique so they can make long arcs of text clear to an audience. Try it quickly if you want. Say this sentence twice. The first time shift the parenthetical (the phrase inside the parentheses) to a significantly higher pitch than the first and last portions of the sentence. The second time do the opposite.

I'll show you what I mean by how I position the text on the page:

(which is more physical than you might think)

Spoken communication	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		is important.
Spoken communication	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓		is important.

(which is more physical than you might think)

See how the meaning of the sentence is perfectly clear regardless of whether the parenthetical is set apart either high or low? The essential thing is that it is set apart and therefore indicates difference from the other parts of the sentence. In the case of parentheticals, that difference typically implies that the information, although additive, is not essential. But it doesn't matter if the shift goes high-low-high or low-high-low. It just matters that there is a shift. So don't overanalyze for which words or phrases you should most vary your voice; just vary your voice. Let's get to work doing just that now.

Silent Storytelling

Although it can be effortless to use vocal variety when you're not self-focused, the trick is to do so when you are. And that brings me to the primary kinesthetic activity for this chapter. Interestingly, the fastest way I've found to help someone vary their Ps is actually with a kinesthetic drill that at first appears to have nothing to do with your voice. It's called Silent Storytelling.

First Step: Record (Again, Please!)

In a moment, I want you to speak on any professional topic and use your smartphone to video record yourself. You need a topic you can speak about for at least five to ten minutes because we'll be starting and stopping within it multiple times.

Once you have a topic chosen, please video record yourself talking on the topic for roughly two minutes. When you've finished recording, please don't watch the video yet. And please don't delete the footage either. In fact, we're going to reference this footage again in future chapters, so if

you can, please keep it. I promise the reveal will be worth it. Ready? Go record yourself, and then come right back.

Next, try Silent Storytelling.

In this drill, you are allowed to communicate to an audience using all of yourself *except* your voice. The idea is to use all of your communication instrument as expressively as needed to help an audience understand precisely what you're saying, even without the benefit of the sound of your voice. Essentially, the activity is like very expressive lip-synching. You could also think of it like watching a very animated speaker on TV with the sound muted. To clarify, this is not charades; you do not need to "act out" the words. You are simply using more of your physical communication instrument—your face, lips, mouth, and hands—to ensure your message is received, even without audible sound. That means you will need to: (1) silently enunciate (in effect, lip-synch) your words so expressively that a listener might be able to read your lips; (2) gesture with sufficient expressiveness and specificity that a listener might understand where/when/who/how by watching the story your hands are telling; and (3) allow your facial expressions to vary and reflect the ups/downs, ins/outs, and lefts/rights of your content. Just think of this as turning up the volume on every aspect of your communication because you can't turn up the volume on the sound. Ready? I thought so! Try Silent Storytelling on the same topic now, either continuing from where you left off or repeating the same section, and record yourself as you do. Say your stuff, but with no sound.

(Please don't watch the video yet!)

* * *

View the Evidence: Now Watch Your Handiwork

Well done! Now you get to review the footage. First, quickly glance at the two clips. Were you doing the drill? If the footage from both looks identical—the same range of hand gestures, facial expressions, and enunciation, even though one has sound and one doesn't—that means you didn't go far enough with the drill. If that's the case, do the Silent Storytelling portion again, but this time push yourself to actually do the drill! In the words of Spinal Tap, "Turn it up to eleven"—but an eleven of

physical expressiveness, not sound. Once you've done that, watch again. If the two clips are still identical, do it again, but go further with expressiveness. You're not done until the two clips look quite different.

* * *

Now comes the fun part—you get a reprieve! You get to add sound back into the mix, but not all at once...

In a moment, you'll get an opportunity to practice Silent Storytelling again, but this time with an imaginary remote control. As you continue speaking on your content and recording yourself, every so often you get to allow sound back into the equation. Roughly every fifteen to thirty seconds, I want you to alternate between using sound and not. Imagine you are a character in a television show, and a trigger-happy little kid is pressing the mute button on and off in a maddening manner. Allow yourself to do this exercise long enough to alternate between the two modes multiple times. Your job is devastatingly simple: you must keep the full range and expressivity of your facial expressions, gestures, and enunciation, whether you're allowing sound or not. Once completed, you should be able to watch the full clip on mute and not have any sense of when you were speaking silently. Ready? Do that final round of practice and recording now. (Please wait to watch the footage.)

* * *

And now the magic trick's great unveiling: watch the footage of the final clip and compare it to the first in this series. Notice the dramatic changes in terms of vocal variety—pace, pitch, pause, power, placement—between your speaking in the final clip and your speaking in the first. Voilà!

What's going on here? Remember the phrase Ralph Zito taught me (Chapter 4, for those of you who like to read back): your voice is your body. If you alter the physical communication instrument that is your body, the sound that instrument makes will change. If you're more physically expressive, you'll tend to be more vocally expressive too.

Surprisingly, this exercise for vocal variety takes the focus off your voice entirely, which, as your coach, is precisely what I'm trying to do to short-circuit some of the negative self-talk and thought-suppression traps I highlighted at the start of the chapter. But how can a drill with no focus on the voice yield vocal changes? The increased space in the back of the

throat from having to mouth the words so specifically modifies the shape and size of the inside of the mouth and throat so your voice is more resonant (*placement*); the exaggerated time it takes to shape each word specifically forces you to slow down at times (*pace*); it takes time to think of what to say next because it feels terrible to silently mouth the word *um*, and that focus on linguistic precision increases thinking time between words or thoughts (*pause*); more physicality and gestures tend to lead to freer and fuller breathing, providing more fuel for melodic range (*pitch*); and all these changes—more space in the mouth, more enunciation, more time, more breath—contribute to an expanded range in volume (*power*).

Am I suggesting that you need to be more expressive with your face, mouth, and hands in your communication life? Perhaps. We'll explore that question in myriad ways throughout this book, and you will certainly come to some conclusion on that question by the end (if not much sooner). But regardless of whether you determine that you should be more expressive overall, what I can safely say right now is that if you know that monotone or lack of vocal variety is a challenge, the drill you just learned is one of the quickest ways to change your habit.

Silent Storytelling can be both a practice and a performance drill. Regarding the former, you just practiced it. Do so again—early and often. But you can also use this as a performance drill. Just challenge yourself to use more of your face, mouth, and hands while speaking, secure in knowing that if you do those things, your vocal variety will come along for the ride. Want a sly trick to remind yourself to do so? Start off video calls on mute; begin speaking in a physically expressive manner; soon would-be altruists on your call will remind you to unmute; at which point, do so, apologize, but go right on speaking for the remainder of your call with that heightened level of physical expressivity.

SECONDARY EXERCISES

Play Your Horn Hand

This next drill will give you the chance to channel your inner jazz musician and imitate the musical stylings of a New Orleans street performer

improvising on their clarinet, trombone, or trumpet. I call it Play Your Horn Hand. It's simple.

In a moment I want you to use your hand like the mouthpiece of a horn or woodwind instrument. First, close your fingers into a fist with your thumb out to make a thumbs-up gesture. Next, put the tip of your thumb to your lips, and imagine your hand has become that clarinet, trombone, or trumpet. The next part is easy: hum. Without opening your lips, "play" your horn hand and see how much musical range you can use. Challenge yourself to hum through various runs of notes from high to low (pitch variation), loud to soft (power), short and long pauses (pause—which is a great time to breathe!), and fast and slow (pace). We'll not concern ourselves with placement for this exercise; it's partly dictated by the act of humming, so relieve yourself from having to account for it. In this exercise (and in life), breathe as much as you need to play your music with abandon.

For the musical selection, you can just improvise, à la a great jazz street performer. Make up a melody that encompasses a huge musical range. If that feels too amorphous, you can also use a melody you know. To get the juices flowing, consider any of the following or any other piece in the whole wide world that covers a large pitch range. (Note: My native language is English, so most of the following song references are US-centric English songs, but this exercise will work with any song in any language, so long as the song covers a large pitch range.)

- "In the Mood" by the Glenn Miller Orchestra
- "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Francis Scott Key
- "Cancan" by Jacques Offenbach
- "Don't Stop Me Now" by Queen
- "Seven Nation Army" by the White Stripes
- "Blues in the Night" by Harold Arlen
- "Sir Duke" by Stevie Wonder
- "Do Right Woman" by Aretha Franklin
- "The Greatest Love of All" by Whitney Houston
- "Roar" by Katy Perry

When you're ready and have made your musical choice, play! Use a bounteous amount of air and breathe in generously through the nose after extended phrases to gather your breath for the next run of notes. Make the tune ambitious and rangy—use that full scale! Can you encompass an octave and a half, or even two? Two and a half?

If you've not already tried it, do so now.

* * *

Good job!

Now that you've played your hand a bit, in a moment I want you to transition into speech. This time around, hum some more music into your hand, but then as soon as you've finished that chorus or sixteen bars or that verse, shift and try to match the range and rhythm you just did playing your "instrument" but while speaking the words of your content. If you'd like to give yourself a break from your professional subject matter, here are a couple additional topics (or you can just make up your own):

- ♦ What is your favorite kind of music and why?
- ♦ How does kinesthetic learning help you remember things?
- ♦ What will be the future of reading?

When you speak, your job is to use as much variety as when you were playing the instrument. Ready? Go!

* * *

This drill is obviously for practice, not performance. It's also an excellent rapid-fire exercise you can use to warm up your vocal variety before going into communication situations.

Lego Drill for Vocal Variety

Did you achieve mastery yet with the Lego drill you learned in Chapter 6? I hope so, because you're going to do it again but this time to unlock vocal variety. If you have your Lego blocks handy, note whether they are different colors. Ideally, you have five or six different colored Lego blocks (red, blue, yellow—you get the drift). Now do the Lego drill again, but this time make each thought sound quite different from the others by

unreservedly changing your vocal variety from thought to thought. So, if *thought one sounds like this*, **thought two might sound like this**, and thought three could sound like this, and so on. The different colored Lego blocks are your visual cue that each thought is unique and needs unique vocal variety, different from the previous and the following.

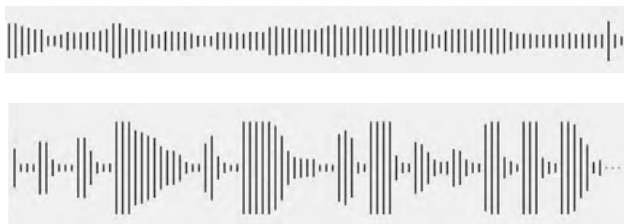
Please be mindful that blocks number one and number two are very frequently quite different, but blocks three, four, and five can tend to fall into the same pattern. Push yourself to go as far as possible through the entire series. You may feel like you have “run out” of options by the third or fourth sentence. That’s okay. Persevere. I promise ingenuity will strike and you will find new options if you keep pushing yourself.

Substitutions for Colored Blocks

If you don’t have different colored Lego blocks, you can modify the drill in two ways. One, if you have Lego blocks that are all the same color, stack them in a unique way each time—attached and shifted to the left, then shifted right, then fully overlapping on all the points of contact, and so forth. In this incarnation, the varied attachment is your reminder that each thought is unique, needs unique vocal variety, and needs to be different from the previous and the following thoughts. Two, if you are using single-color sticky notes, tear some into six different-sized pieces. Make one the full-sized untouched note; make another about two-thirds the size by ripping off a third of the paper; perhaps another can be a tiny fraction of an actual note—like one-twelfth of a sticky note. In this incarnation, the variously sized notes are your reminders that each thought is unique and needs unique vocal variety.

PRO TIP

If you want an instant way to see what your vocal variety “looks like,” use the same tool I offered that politician and record yourself in the voice recorder app on your smartphone and try to do a “good” and “bad” version; then look at the visual representation of the sound. It will look something like this:



Play around with what it looks like when using more or less; tell a thrilling story versus a dry elevator pitch; see what “going too far” looks like; then listen back to “too far” and evaluate by what percentage too far it is (likely not as far as you thought when creating it). Please note that this exercise can only really give you data on pace, pause, and power. Technically, the visual representation can’t indicate pitch or placement, but it’s safe to assume that if you’re varying the other three, pitch and placement will come along for the ride.

PRACTICE OR PERFORMANCE?

As I’ve mentioned for each, most of the drills in this chapter are for practice only. But you can use these drills for performance unaltered or slightly altered when...

WHAT ABOUT VIRTUAL?

...you’re on video calls! Just as you can stack Lego blocks for conciseness, so can you stack variously colored Lego blocks for vocal variety under the boundary of the camera’s frame. Additionally, just as you can watch for your enunciation by observing your own video box and watching real time to see if there is space between your top and bottom teeth, you can also observe your physical presence. Are you moving your brow, lips, and hands freely and expressively? It’s safe to assume your vocal variety is also expressive. Are you restrained in all those behaviors? Then it’s also safe to assume your vocal variety is restrained. So you can’t silently tell stories, but you can watch for the same behaviors that Silent Storytelling unleashes and use the video to hold yourself accountable.

WRAPPING UP

I recognize I've offered a lot of drills for this topic. I did so for two purposes. First, I want you to have multiple ways to unlock this topic. Now you have that! But my second purpose is a bit sneakier: I want to desensitize you to the activity of listening to your voice. Did you notice yourself becoming at least 1 percent more of a scientist in this chapter? Perhaps you began to listen to the sounds you were making dispassionately, noticing the Five Ps more and your self-critique less?

Ideally, the answers to those questions are a resounding yes. Because giving your inner critic a rest is essential when we're talking about vocal variety.

It's particularly important because there are plenty of outer critics to contend with too. Let's talk about those critics in the next chapter.