

HIGH STAKES PRESENTATIONS

Vol. 7, No. 8 — Resources for High Stakes Presenters — and those who hire them

The price of talking too fast

No one likes to listen to a speaker with a monotonous voice because it's hard work to pay attention. But, are there similar disadvantages for those who speak very quickly? Read on, and find out the pros and cons of FAST TALK!

For 2,500 years philosophers, statesmen, and scientists have been asking what is it that makes one person more persuasive and influential than another?

Is it a set of personal characteristics, or are there skills that anyone can acquire to become more effective?

CASE STUDY

Meet Sheila, a fast talker

Sheila is a young woman who works for a prestigious consulting firm. She is small, bright, and fiery. And she speaks incredibly fast—*"incredibly fast like the guy who broke his spacebar."*

In our meeting, her words come out as if chasing her mind as it races off to the emergency room. She doesn't pause between thoughts or sentences. Instead, she takes quick bird-like sips of air in order to go on speaking.

As a result, she doesn't have breath to support her sound, so it lacks resonance

and appeal. She talks on her throat and does not vary her pitch.

Furthermore, when she speaks her gestures are quick and fleeting. Someone watching her from a distance might think she's swatting flies. In other words, she "gesticulates"; she does not gesture.

The question is: Are these habits limiting to Sheila, and if so, what can she do about them?

ISSUES

Audience impressions

The most obvious complication for Sheila is that people may not understand her. In her race to get through her words, she leaves out vowels and consonants. What's worse, she may be annoying them.

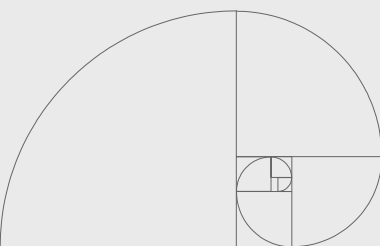
Rapid speech can also be interpreted as insecurity. It can be read as, "Don't

I got an email from a guy whose said his spacebar was n't working cause he dropped his bag in the airport and his computer broke

- S. Wyeth

Talking too fast is like typing without a spacebar!

(see quote above)



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The ability to speak well is a consultant's ticket to success

The ability to present effectively in high-stake situations is a hard asset masquerading as a soft skill.



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really listen to me. I'm not that important."

Furthermore, most of her clients are older men. Many of them have natural hearing loss. They move at a non-hummingbird pace

As a consultant, her career depends on how she speaks, writes, and thinks—in that order. Nobody knows what she thinks until she writes or speaks, and most people are not eager to read detailed consulting reports. Her ability to speak well is her ticket to success.

RESEARCH

What do experts say?

In a study done in 1983, and published in [Journal of Nonverbal Behavior](#), Woodall and Burgoon sought to measure and compare listeners' ratings of fast talkers vs. normal rate talkers who were making an argument opposed by the listener.

The normal rate of American speech is about 120 – 180 wpm (words per minute). The rates used in the study were 154 wpm for normal and 181 wpm for fast.

Rapid speech does not harm a speaker on all ratings (see chart on page 3.) Normal speakers rated higher on character and composure, while fast talkers rated higher on extroversion and likelihood that they would be derogated (criticized or attacked) by their listeners.

Being rated higher on extroversion may very well be a positive for fast talkers, because both intraverts and extroverts prefer the company of extroverts by a significant margin, according to a study done by Sims Wyeth & Co..

However, the fact that listeners rate normal talkers higher in character and composure could suggest that fast talkers do not easily earn the trust of audiences.

What can fast talkers do to slow down?

TOOLS

Just as choir directors tell singers where to breathe, Sheila could teach herself to slow down by learning how to breathe between short phrases, which would cause her to pause.

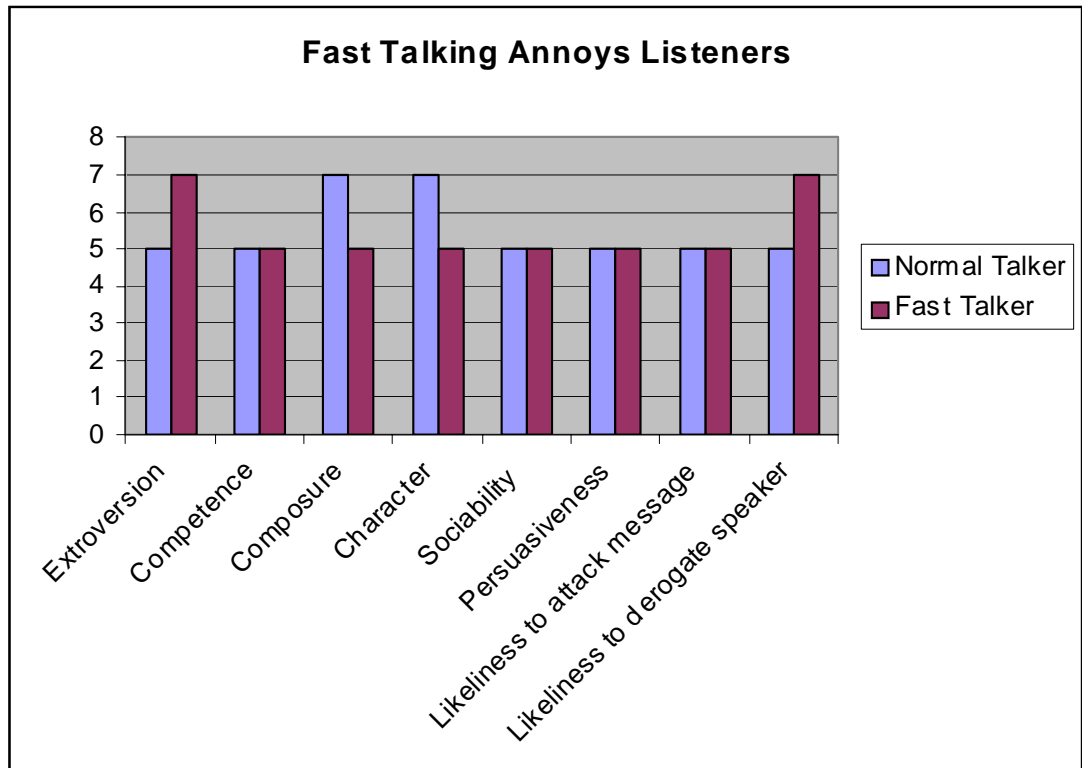
Here is an exercise to help fast-talkers slow down.

Mark a paragraph / in this manner / into the shortest possible phrases. / First, / whisper it, / with energetic lips, / breathing / at all the breath marks. / Then, / speak it / in the same way. / Do this / with a different paragraph / every-day. / Keep your hand / on your abdomen / to make sure / it moves out / when you breathe in, / and moves in / when you speak

Then try it on the Gettysburg Address / or another of your favorite speeches or poems, / and see how much more power the words have / when you pause to take a breath / at the right places.

Speaking speed and audience perceptions

Results of previously-cited research on the relationship between speaking speed and audience perceptions of the speaker. Woodall and Burgeon, *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 1983.



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