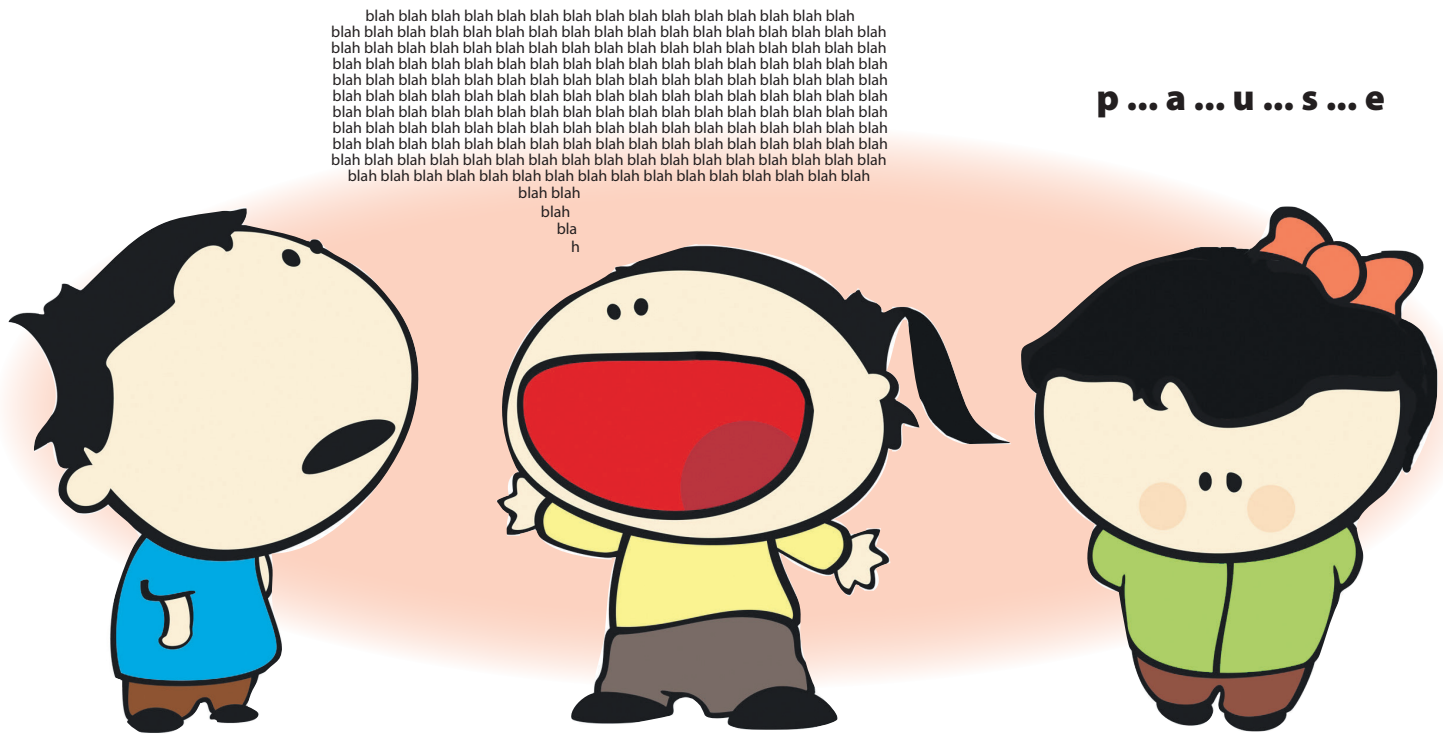
Say what you mean, mean what you say.



Many people treat all conversations like oral exams. When someone asks them a question, they think they have to answer as quickly as possible. So much so, in their hurry to speak, they may blurt out things they later wish they had not said. They may even use hurtful words without meaning to or say foolish things that make them look silly. That is why it is usually better to pause, think and only then speak.

What happens in your head if you go into oral-exam mode for ordinary conversations? You won't allow yourself to pause while speaking. Whenever it is your turn to speak, your brain says "Quick, quick, say something!" rather than "Hush, wait. What do I really want to say?"

Pauses can work wonders for you when you speak. So far in this series, we have been looking at how using the right words can help you to say what you mean. Now, we focus on purposely using pauses before, after and even in the middle of your sentences.

SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH MOVEMENT

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When you need time to think

Sometimes, people are stumped by something and then they don't know what to say. They may be speechless for a few seconds out of embarrassment, fear or any number of other reasons. Then, they struggle – even rush – to say the right words. And, in their hurry, their words may come out all wrong.

Feeling at a loss for words is not such a bad thing. When that happens, not saying anything is usually better than saying the wrong thing. In fact, purposely not saying anything is sometimes the best.

When you don't know what to say, pause to think and choose your words. If the pause makes you feel awkward, then use fillers like "Let me think…", "Good question!" or "Hmm, that is so interesting…". Saying such words gives your brain a little more time to think, and the other person knows to wait for you to speak.

When silence says it better

There are times when saying less is more effective than saying more. The following is a conversation amongst three friends, Mervin, Sue and Tessa. Read it out loud to hear the difference in the two responses to Mervin's statement.

"My cat died," said Mervin sadly.

"Oh dear… (pause). I'm so sorry (sigh)," responded Sue. She was silent for a while.

"Oh no! That is so sad. Why? Didn't you take care of it? They say cats have nine lives – ahaha, looks like yours didn't! Never mind, you can always buy a new kitten. Or, I know what… better still, adopt a cat. Yeah, adopt a cat. Adopt a cat! Then you won't miss your dead cat anymore," chimed in Tessa.

If you were Mervin, whose response would you prefer? Sue said so little but she communicated what she meant. Tessa's words were clear enough and, maybe, she too meant what she said. However, being as sad as he was, Tessa's speech might have sounded more like "blah-blah-blah-blah" to Mervin. Sue's pause and sigh did more to make Mervin feel better than Tessa's verbal diarrhoea. You might have also noticed that Tessa's choice of words did not help.

Eloquence is not about saying a lot as quickly as you can. Eloquence is about knowing how much (or how little) to say and using your words as well as pauses to say what you mean in the best way possible.

When a touch of drama helps

"The right word may be effective, but no word was ever more effective than a rightly timed pause," said the poet and playwright Mark Twain. He lived a long time ago but his words still apply today. Pauses can be used as a way to make your speech more dramatic. And, for the best effect, timing matters.

You can create suspense by pausing at strategic points. Pause before you start to get everyone's attention. Pause in the middle of a sentence to add mystery. Pause in between sentences to let your words sink in. To see how pauses make a difference, first read the following without stopping to pause. Then, read the passage again but with the pauses this time.

"Hi! (Pause.) Guess what happened in class today? (Pause.) A huge moth flew in and landed on my teacher's shoulder! He shrieked. (Pause.) He froze. (Pause.) And then, (Pause.) he took a selfie with the moth sitting on his shoulder! Imagine that. (Pause.)"

Can you see how the pauses help you to tell your story more dramatically? It is, of course, up to you to decide when you want to pause. Listen to yourself as you speak and have some fun experimenting with your pauses. There are many ways to say the same thing. Speak the way you enjoy and there is a higher chance that people will, in turn, like listening to you. Be comfortable pausing and let a few seconds of silence speak for you.

– By MARY GEORGE

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VOCABULARY eloquence (say "**el**leh-kwens", noun) = the art of speaking or writing fluently and with grace.