**Filler Words, Friend or Foe?**

By MeL Konrad, Secretary, Noon Toastmasters

Our club loves guests. I’ve seen so many guests visit us over the 8 years I’ve been in Noon Toastmasters. There’s a recurring statement most guests make at their first meetings. While they are speaking, they become their own Ah Counter, in real time. …saying: “Oh, there’s another ah.” Or using an aside: “Um, I want to stop saying um.”

I’ve come to think that many people eschew Toastmasters merely because they Fear Folks Finding their Filler Phrases.

On the other side of that coin, I’ve heard new and seasoned Toastmasters with nary a filler word in any presentation.

Of course, we all use these words during day to day conversations

An appropriate placed ‘um’ or ‘ah’ lets the listener know we need a moment to gather our thoughts. As if saying “I need time to prepare what I want to say, so expect a brief delay; and I’m not ready to yield the floor yet.” WOW – ‘um’ or ‘ah’ is so much more succinct.

The following is from the website FleluentU. It sheds light on the probable reasons we use the filler words we do – most likely unconsciously.

“Filler Words You’ll Thank Yourself for Learning” (an excerpt)

By Yuliya Geikhman

Filler words are used for a number of reasons:

To show that you’re thinking. Use filler words when you need to think about your answer or statement. For example:

“I have basically… ten more years of college.”

To make a statement less harsh. When your friend has some broccoli stuck between his teeth, you could just tell him, “You have something in your teeth,” but that might make him embarrassed. It might be nicer to say something more like:

“Well, you have, um, you have a little something in your teeth.”

To make your statement weaker or stronger. While filler words don’t add anything to sentences, they can be used to change the sentence tone—the attitude of the sentence. See how different these three statements sound:

“I think pugs are cute” is just a regular statement.

“Actually, I think pugs are cute” shows contrast—that someone else doesn’t agree.

“At the end of the day, I think pugs are cute” is something you might say as a conclusion to a discussion about pugs and their ugly (or cute!) wrinkles.

To stall for time. To stall for time means to do something to try and gain more time. Filler words are an excellent way to stall when you don’t know how to answer a question, or when you don’t want to. For example, if your teacher asks you “Where’s your homework?” your response might sound a bit like this:

“Uhh. Umm. Well, you see.. My dog ate it.”

To include the listener in the conversation without ending your sentence. A conversation takes at least two people. Some filler words and phrases can include the other person in the conversation. It’s a bit like reaching out to them as you’re speaking to keep their attention. For example:

“It was a really big bear, you know?”

This sentence includes the listener without ending your speaking turn. Your listener might nod in agreement, allowing you to continue telling him about your pet bear.

As you can see, filler words seem useless at first, but they can be really important!

Back to Toastmasters…

With all the guests I’ve met over the years, the ones who became members showed me how having the opportunity to speak at each meeting knocks down that Filler Word virus quickly. I’m sure my fellow members saw that in me when I was a new Toastmaster. Now I am realizing that 100% perfection in anything is impossible, unnatural and just plain not fun. Keep the goal of improvement in the forefront; even if it comes in fits and starts.

To see members grow their communication skills is one of my favorite part of being a Toastmaster.