

# PUNCHLINE

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## Speakers Say the Darndest Things

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**W**ith all due respect to Art Linkletter, professional speakers say the darndest things. Perhaps that's not surprising, given the amount of time we're on stage and the pressure we're under to perform. Actually, the combination of pressure, excitement and nerves has been known to result in some amusing faux pas and malapropisms. In point of fact, comic relief provided by these misstatements is often appreciated by our audiences and, at times, turns out to be the part of our performance audiences remember most.

Despite our preparation and rehearsal, sometimes words and phrases just don't come out the way we expect them to. Consider the speaker who was discussing handguns, firebombs and arson. His presentation was serious and his passion evident. He asked the audience to consider "the danger inherent in radicals using molokai cocktails" to inflict damage on property. Sounds like something you'd see on *Hawaii Five-O!* While this misstatement undermined the seriousness of the speaker's argument, it was nevertheless memorable. Audience members turned to each other to confirm that they heard what they thought they had heard. Say what?

Another time, a professional speaker was excited about being interviewed on radio. She was extolling the virtues of daily exercise. The host asked her if it really worked year-round. "Absolutely," she replied. "It works 375 days a year!" The silence that followed seemed an eternity.

The host finally asked, "Did you say 375 days a year?"

To the speaker's credit, she regrouped, asking "Did I say that? That's an indication of how much I believe in it!" They say stretching is good for you, even in conversation!

This same speaker experienced a similar situation in a television interview. She knew what she wanted to say, but in the excitement of the moment, the words didn't flow in the

order they usually did. In the span of one five-minute segment, she spoke of job opportunities for recent college graduates as "level entry" opportunities and of a major task being a "burst of beaden." It kept viewers engaged as they tried to figure out what she meant to say, and hung on every word to hear what else she might jumble. Don't underestimate the laughter engendered by these misstatements.

Humorist and CSP June Cline shared a case of unintended humor she engendered by bungling a standard statement she usually employs at the start of her presentations. With a completely straight face, at the outset of one of her trainings, she asked attendees to "turn their vibrators on page." It's not clear whether her misstatement turned her audience off or on! What is known is that the ensuing laughter did more to facilitate an effective training than any planned or contrived technique she could have employed.

We all know the value of provocative titles and dramatic openings to capture the attention of our audiences. Speaker beware, however, as you may be laying a trap you or your introducer will befall. Roseann Sullivan, past president of NSA/Northern California, periodically delivers a workshop on marketing titled "How to Hook a Booker." One time, her introducer was heard to say, "And here's the booker hooker herself." For speaker and introducer, getting the title right, when it matters most, is the trick.

Openings can be fraught with danger. Consider the experience of Michael J. Herman, known as Mr. Motivation. Herman was invited to speak to a professional society in San Diego on the subject of change. Under the impression he had been hired by the California Natural Society, Michael prepared his presentation, drove down to San Diego and, upon arrival, was met by his introducer and immediately ushered backstage. He was then introduced over the PA, strode triumphantly onstage, where he shook the hand of his introducer, and then turned to the audience giving him a wonderful welcoming ovation. As he turned toward his audi-

ence, his eyes immediately caught sight of the fact that a man in the front row was sans apparel. The man next to him was similarly disrobed. In fact, the whole front row appeared to be naked. Michael thought he might be hallucinating. As he scanned the crowd, he came to realize they were all nude! It turned out the group was the California Naturalist Association, and they indeed were buck naked.

Suddenly Michael felt overdressed. His first laugh of the day occurred when he asked if the audience would mind if he took his coat off. For years, Michael had heard that a way to combat nervousness in public speaking situations involved imagining your audience had no clothes. For once, Michael tried imagining his audience had clothes. Michael confesses this was one time he was ambivalent about receiving a standing ovation.

Michael believes speakers should walk their talk. Yet this was one gig where, though he spoke on change, he himself was unwilling to change. In this case, he was happy to be over-dressed.

Speakers certainly aren't immune to making mistakes, and one source for continuous humor comes from pronunciations and mispronunciations. For example, there was the speaker who was discussing the prevalence of stressed-out, type-A workers, stating unequivocally that in Silicon Valley they were "You-Be-Qweeshious." Ubiquitous or not, the laughter swelled from her mispronunciation.

Some of the funnier mispronunciations I've heard from the platform:

LASH-a-Vicious (lascivious)

Deeter-Mined (determined)

Ana-THEEMA (anathema)

BAYnal (banal).

And my all-time favorite: Pair-ah-DIG'em! (for paradigm)

So remember, perfect makes practice. I mean... Well, you know what I mean.

