

# How to.. uh.. be an.. um.. Ah Counter

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That title is hard to read, right? When people use those same filler words (“um”, “uh”, etc) in a speech, it can be distracting and hard to understand their content. This is why the role of Ah Counter in Toastmasters is so important.

Have you signed up to be an Ah Counter without knowing exactly what you will be doing? Have you filled that role before, but would like to brush up on your skills? This crash course is for you!

The main function of the Ah Counter is to keep track of the filler words and sounds people use while they speak. The most common of these are: *ah/uh, um, er, like, okay, so, but, and well*. Speakers tend to use these while they are thinking of what to say next or while they are nervous. This causes a problem because these filler words can be very distracting to the audience. If someone is extremely focused and enjoying your speech, but you throw in a “*um so*” while transitioning thoughts, this can throw off the listener and they won’t be able to appreciate what you said next. Usually, the speaker isn’t even aware they are using those words! Helping our fellow Toastmasters be aware of their filler words is the first step in them being able to speak without them.

As the Ah Counter, you will either use a form similar to the one below or take notes on your own paper.

## “Ah Counter” Worksheet Tally

Listen for filler words that may detract from our Communication

Name	“ah”	“um”	“so”	“but”	“well”	“ok”	False Start	Word Repetition	Other

### Ah Counter Worksheet Tally

Write down everyone’s names, then try to pay attention to the words they are using when they speak. Every time you notice a filler word or sound being used, mark it on the worksheet beside their name. This process takes some time to get used to. Sometimes the Ah Counter will be so engrossed in the speech, they forget to keep track! Don’t worry if that happens, just try your best to catch all that you can.

You will also have to pay attention to the context in which the filler word is being used. “Ah” and “Um” are essentially always unnecessary. Other words like “and”, “but”, “so”, and “well” can be used without being distracting, as long as they are not used in

excess. Sometimes they are needed, sometimes they are not, it depends on the sentence. Whether or not each usage will count as a filler word is up to you. Was it distracting? If they removed that one word, would the sentence still make sense? Did they start the sentence with that word? If you answer yes to any of those questions, it's probably a filler word. If they are using the word to transition between thoughts, it might not be a filler.

Besides filler words, the ah counter also checks for other distracting speech patterns, such as false starts and word repetition. A false start is when the speaker starts one sentence or thought, and then changes direction without finishing what they were saying. An example of a false start is "Knowing that.. With that in mind". Thoughts that are incomplete are usually false starts. Word repetition is usually due to nervousness or forgetting what to say next. Examples are "that that", "I I", etc.

You want to pay attention and keep track during the whole meeting, for every person that speaks. If you have a speaking role (table topics or educational speaker, for example), someone else might mark your filler words while you are speaking. It's very hard to keep track of these for yourself!

Speaking of speaking roles (does that count as word repetition?), the Ah Counter has a few times in the meeting they have to present. It wouldn't be Toastmasters without making everyone have a speaking opportunity!

The first time is at the beginning of the meeting. The Toastmaster will call upon you, the Ah Counter, to explain what you will be doing. All you have to do is say a sentence or two, something like "I will be keeping track of the filler words used by all speakers during the meeting" (followed by a few examples of filler words) is enough.

Near the end of the meeting, the General Evaluator will call upon you to give your final report. This is when you will tell everyone how they did. Start by saying "*Thank you, Mister/Madame General Evaluator*". Go through your list of names, and tell each person their count for each filler word. If anyone has 5 or more of a certain word, those are called Bingo's, and you don't say the actual count. For example if Sally had seven um's, you would say, "*Sally, you had a bingo of um's, three ah's, and one but*". Don't forget to look at your camera while giving your report. When you are done, you can say something like "*Back to you, Mister/Madame General Evaluator*" or you can just stop talking and they will get the hint.

After giving your report, you are done with your role. Great job! This is a simple role to fill, but it makes all the difference for the speakers. Once they learn about the filler words they use, they are better able to catch themselves doing so and clean up their speech. Paying attention for those filler words can be hard at first, but once you get used to it, you might start noticing them everywhere, in the news or at work. Some people, after filling the Ah Counter role, have said they can't help but keep track of everyone's filler words. It really reprograms your brain to pay attention!