

Uhh...Uhhh...Although I'm not certain of the spelling, do know that these are common utterances in most situations where Americans speak English. I decided to study the phenomena of the way college students use these (for lack of a better term) words. I listened to people friends, family, acquaintances, strangers, myself speaking in different settings (study, social, work-related and kept track of when they used "uhh" or "uhmm." I then tried to categorize patterns and reasons for usage. The results lead me to split the usage of "uhh" and "uhmm" because it seemed as though the reasons, in general, for choosing one as opposed to the other were defined enough to deal with each as a separate part.

"Uhh" is more often used when searching for a word or a way of saying something, whereas, "uhmm" is used when searching for something to say. Often when people know what they want to say and are aware of what it is they want to express, but they are unable to figure out how they want to say it, they will interrupt themselves with "uhh." The following are examples of this.

"I "uhh" was wondering if you "uhh" would like to go to the play with me Wednesday."

"Do you remember the day when "uhh" you told me "uhh" that thing about the situation with Doug?"

These examples demonstrate the concern for how you say things when dealing with people. Reasons for being

concerned range from nervousness to sensitivity about subjects. "Uhh" also works interchangeably (for some with "uhmm."

"Uhmm" and its reasons for being used can be divided into the following categories: as a starter, as a staller, as a place saver

As a starter is one of the most common usages for "uhmm." Saying "uhhm" works to achieve recognition. Before speaking, if someone audibly utters "uhmm," they have attracted attention to themselves so people are ready to listen to them, but if they haven't lost any of what they were going to say in drawing attention. For example, if I wanted to tell a group of friends about a party and I merely said, "Dan's having a party Friday," by the time they realized I was speaking to them they would most likely have missed part of what I said, probably only retaining, "party Friday," and having no idea who's having it or where it is. On the other hand if I had prefaced my remarks by saying "uhmm," I would have already attracted their attention and by the time I told them, they would know to be listening and they would be able to catch all of what I said. Although it is not necessarily considered a proper way of speaking, "uhmm" can be effectively used as a starter

"Uhmm" also is uttered as a place saver. My sister identified this particular usage of "uhmm." When speaking in groups of people my sister has the habit of interjecting "uhmm" into the middle of a conversation and often not

following it immediately with any profound remarks as one might have expected. Finally, one of her friends who had picked up on this habit of hers asked why she did it. She immediately (and humorously) responded that she was merely saving her place in the conversation. In my observations, I noticed that she's not the only one who does that, though she likely is one of the few that are aware of doing it. Most people who do use this technique don't necessarily realize it. To employ this technique, one simply has to say "uhmm" at any open spot in a conversation. If someone else has something to share they usually won't let a simple "uhmm" stop them from sharing it at that moment, but when they are finished it is not uncommon to recognize whoever uttered the "uhmm" with a "What were you going to say?" or "weren't you going to say something?" Again this sound, as common as it is, usually is not considered proper, but because of effectiveness, is often employed as a place saver.

"Uhhh" is most commonly found as a staller. "Uhhh" gives the speaker a chance to think. Whether it's because they don't know what to say or they are reluctant to say it prefacing their remarks with "uhmm" allows for a few added moments of thought. Not exclusive to formal or informal settings, people, for different reasons, often feel pressure to speak. Based on our societies' tendencies to prejudge people, there exists a large amount of pressure to speak clearly and not stumble over your thoughts or words when trying to express yourself. Therefore, the time gained by

saying "uhmm" proves to help maintain an overall fluency in speech at least for some) I noticed as I myself (because of this study became more aware of my own usage of "uhmm," I tried to stop, but I found myself stumbling more over what I wanted to express than if I had taken a moment with "uhmm." I observed that when people have to share news that is anything less than good it usually starts with "uhmm."

"Uhhh"..I don't know how to tell you, but "uhmm"..Cleo died.

"Uhhh"..Did you read the article on your desk?"

"Uhhh"..I'm not gonna be able to make your party."

Although these "words" are not found in the dictionary or taught to us through English grammar manuals, we do learn them. They are important and effective parts of American English. Used to save a place in a conversation, to start a conversation, or only to buy time, "uhh" and "uhmm" are common and well-understood elements in interpersonal communication and expression.