

Creating Drama by [Insert Pause here] Creating Silence

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In *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, there is a climactic confrontation between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, in which Vader corners Luke and tells him, “*Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father.*” Luke shouts back that Obi-Wan told him Vader killed his father. Then, Vader pauses.

A long, deliberate silence.

This silence builds immense tension and emotional weight. After the pause, Vader delivers the iconic line revealing his true identity. This pause achieves several important things: creates suspense; signals that something important is coming; and gives emotional and narrative impact to an important part of the story.

The pause announces something is coming. It allows the interested audience to get ready and invite them to concentrate on the message. *It creates drama without being melodramatic.*

Ever since I was a little kid, my mother told me what I’m sure everyone is told as a growing child: it’s polite to wait in silence while other people speak, and to listen before responding. It’s essential for a conversation.¹ The same is true in a debate: letting the opposing party finish their thoughts allows you to come back stronger in your response. Interruptions give away control and make you lose credibility. In other words, silences help in a conversation and in debates.

But more relevant to a trial attorney, silences help in other ways. A pause lets the jury know something important is about to be revealed, while letting them take in what’s been said. It shows control over the facts and delivers an aura of confidence. A good pause makes for a stronger delivery and a more interesting story. The audience feels compelled to listen. Simply said, strategically placing pauses before or after important words or phrases can also be a powerful device for conveying or amplifying a speaker’s message.²

Little did my mom know that there are actual scientific reasons for her advice. Interestingly, the communicative functions of pauses have been studied in psychology and sociology.

¹ Pauses in human speech serve numerous functions, including marking syntactic or phonological boundaries, providing time for the speaker to plan or to take a breath, and signaling to the receiver that it is their turn to speak. Federico Pedraja and Nathaniel B. Sawtell, “Neurobiology: The power of pauses in electrocommunication” (2021), citing Rochester, S.R., “The significance of pauses in spontaneous speech.” (1973).

² Federico Pedraja and Nathaniel B. Sawtell, “Neurobiology: The power of pauses in electrocommunication” (2021).

More recently, this is true in neurology. In fact, how pauses work in the brain has been studied in a variety of animal species, including grasshoppers, frogs, birds (nightingales) and more recently, fish (the weakly electric fish).³ These fish emit electric signals that allow them to have “private conversations” among themselves.⁴ During studies, it has been possible to create artificial pauses in the electric “conversations” of the fish, creating “synaptic depression” in the animals.⁵ The results suggest a simple physiological explanation for the behavioral significance of pauses: by providing relief from synaptic depression, pauses enhance neural responses in the brain of the receiver.⁶

This scientific mumble-jumble is important to a storyteller. Pauses have a neurological reaction in the listener, because it stimulates the neurons in the brain. In other words, the audience is actually “feeling” the pause. It causes the brain to react.

Psychology has also stepped up with a variety of studies on pauses. For example, studies show that employees who pause more frequently are seen as more helpful;⁷ that pauses increases the audience attention; helps the listener’s brain to process information;⁸ creates a sense of suspense and anticipation, particularly before a punchline or a critical statement;⁹ builds a desire to know what comes next; creates an emotional connection and empathy of the listener, which could lead to visceral, shared emotional experiences, such as a pounding heart.¹⁰ At same time, pauses allow the speaker to have a more controlled breathing, which helps lower stress hormones, such as cortisol, while allows for a more

³ There are two types of electric fish: the weakly, with a weak electric signal; and the strongly, with a strong electric signal, such as an electric eel, that can seriously hurt a human. Harold H. Zakon, G. Troy Smith “Weakly Electric Fish: Behavior, Neurobiology, and Neuroendocrinology” (2001).

⁴ “It is well known from past studies that [weakly electric fish] vary their [electric outputs] during social encounters, including courtship, territorial aggression, and group hunting.” Pedraja and Sawtell, “Neurobiology: The power of pauses in electrocommunication” (2021).

⁵ A synaptic depression is a temporary decrease in synaptic strength, where a synapse becomes less effective at transmitting signals after repeated activation. It weakens the connection between neurons in the brain. Marc Dingman, “Your Brain, Explained: What Neuroscience Reveals About Your Brain and its Quirk” (2022).

⁶ Pedraja and Sawtell, “Neurobiology: The power of pauses in electrocommunication” (2021).

⁷ Clark, H. H. & Wilkes-Gibbs, D., “Referring as a collaborative process; Cognition” (1986). This perception might have tangible consequences, such as increasing chances of reaping valued organizational rewards, including promotions and pay raises. Podsakoff, N. P., Whiting, S. W., Podsakoff, P. M. & Blume, B. D., “Individual- and organizational-level consequences of organizational citizenship behaviors: A meta-Analysis” (2009).

⁸ Steinhauer, K, “Electrophysiological correlates of prosody and speech segmentation” (2003).

⁹ Nobre, A. C., Correa, A. & Coull, J. T., “The hazards of time: Temporal expectations and attention” (2007); Coull, J. T., & Nobre, A. C., “Dissociating explicit timing from temporal anticipation” (1998).

¹⁰ Lehne, M., Engel, P., Rohrmeier, M., & Koelsch, S., “Suspense in music and narrative: An fMRI study” (2014); Lehne & Koelsch, “Toward a general psychological model of suspense” (2015).

controlled delivery that in turn makes the audience feel more comfortable with the speaker.¹¹

Studies, however, show that a long pause could be counterproductive. These pauses are known as awkward pauses because, well... because they make the audience feel awkward towards the speaker. The key element to make it an awkward pause is its *duration*. It takes approximately 0.3 seconds for an audience to perceive and react to a silence.¹² Those short silences are interpreted by audiences as moments in which the speaker is either thinking or concentrated in the story. However, if the silences are too long, the audience tend to believe that the speaker forgot what was supposed to be said.¹³ That means that silences that go on too long signal a speaker's discomfort or inability to articulate coherent thoughts.

According to studies, it takes an average of 3 seconds for silences to become uncomfortably long to the point that the audience feels compelled to have the speech move to a different direction.¹⁴ Thus, "scholars typically operationalize silences of 3 seconds or longer as long enough to be perceived as awkward or disrupting the natural flow of conversation".¹⁵

This all means that a good 2-second pause right before starting an Opening Statement or a Closing Argument announces that something meaningful is about to happen. Another pause right after a crucial event or right before an important part of the narrative will allow the audience to get emotionally involved in the story. However, there is one more element to be considered when adding a strategic pause in a speech: context.

There have been several important studies that support the idea that the effectiveness of a pause in a speech is dependent on the narrative *context*.¹⁶ In fact, studies show that pauses **only** work as a speech tool when the context or narrative, be it linguistic, emotional or conversational, gives them meaning.

¹¹ *Human Stress Detection: Cortisol Levels in Stressed Speakers Predict Voice-Based Judgments of Stress* (2020)

¹² Goldman-Eister, F., "Psycholinguistics: Experiments in spontaneous speech" (1968); M. Heldner, J. Edlund, "Pauses, gaps and overlaps in conversations" (2010).

¹³ T.T. Kircher, M.J. Brammer, W. Levelt, M. Bartels, P.K. McGuire, "Pausing for thought: Engagement of left temporal cortex during pauses in speech" (2004).

¹⁴ M.L. McLaughlin, M.J. Cody, "Awkward silences: Behavioral antecedents and consequences of the conversational lapse" (1982).

¹⁵ Id. H. Arkowitz, E. Lichtenstein, K. McGovern, P. Hines, "The behavioral assessment of social competence in male" (1978).

¹⁶ This has been demonstrated across linguistics, cognitive neuroscience, communication studies, and narrative psychology. See, Steinhauer, K. & Friederici, A., "Prosodic boundaries, pausing, and the brain: Evidence from the Closure Positive Shift (CPS)" (2001); Lehne, M. & Koelsch, S., "Towards a general psychological model of suspense" (2015).

The storyteller, hence, has the responsibility to create a good, coherent and emotional story that will allow the pause to have the desired effect on the brain, creating an emotional connection with the jury.

Because in the courtroom, a pause is not empty space—it is a signal. It is the quiet before truth arrives. And when you master that silence, the jury doesn't just hear your story.

They feel it, just like we all did in Star Wars.