



Skills 360 – Communicating Clearly in English (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of situations do you think require especially careful or diplomatic language?
2. How do you feel when people use very difficult, complex, or academic words?
3. What expressions do you use to help organize your ideas when you're giving a presentation or speech?

Vocabulary

Hot-shot: extremely talented and successful; "Have you seen what our new hot-shot marketer is doing? Amazing stuff!"

Countless: very many; "After receiving countless complaints about our website, we've decided to completely redesign it."

Verbal pyrotechnics: a demonstration of great skill with words; "All of the lawyer's verbal pyrotechnics couldn't fool me into accepting the deal as it was written."

To shoot for: to try to do or achieve something; "In salary negotiations, you should always shoot for about 10% more than you think you can get."

To string: to combine in a series; "If we can string together a few more great months, then I think we'll have a handle on our money problems."

Forecast: a prediction about the future based on information, especially related to weather or economy; "Given the rather negative economic forecasts, I'm not so sure now is the time to invest in real estate."

Cashflow: the regular movement of money into and out of a business; "Improving our cashflow is pretty simple: pay as late as possible, and collect as quickly as possible."

Chunk: pieces of something larger; "Most of the presentation is great, but I think there's a chunk of about four slides in the middle that doesn't need to be there."

Linking: connecting; "I don't really think there's good evidence linking our recent price increase to decreased sales."

Nevertheless: despite what has just been said; "Sure, the new building on Royal Avenue is beautiful. Nevertheless, we're just not in a position to move right now."

Consequently: as a result; "We're reducing the size of each department. Consequently, we'll have to lay some people off."

Academic: a person who teaches or does research at a college or university; "Is this consultant just an academic, or does he actually have some real-world experience in industry?"

Clutter: a mess created by having too many things in one place; "So, the first thing we'll need to do before our guests arrive from head office is clean up the clutter around here."

Diplomatic: done in a careful way that doesn't upset or offend people; "It's important for a manager to learn how to give negative feedback in a very diplomatic way."

Ridiculous: silly, unreasonable, and laughable; "Fifteen years ago, I would have told you that the idea of smartphones was ridiculous. But now look at how popular they are."

Tag question: a short phrase at the end of a statement that turns it into a question; "Tag questions can really be confusing, can't they?"

To structure: to plan or organize something; "Sorry Roger, but this report looks like just a bunch of random facts. You need to structure your ideas so they make sense."

Signposting: using special words or phrases to help people understand the logic of a piece of writing, a presentation, or a speech; "A simple way of signposting is to number your ideas with words like 'first,' 'second,' and 'third.'"

To summarize: to briefly explain the most important facts or ideas; "I don't have time to read all this Ted... could you just summarize it for me quickly before my meeting?"

Recap: to quickly explain what has been said or done, without giving details; "All right everyone, I'll open up to question right after I quickly recap what we've covered today."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to look at how to communicate clearly in English.

There are times when you want to impress people with your language abilities. Maybe you're in a job interview, or meeting with some **hot-shot** business people for the first time. Sure, these situations happen. But there are actually far more situations that require the *opposite* approach. I mean situations where you don't want to risk confusing people, so you want to make sure you're communicating clearly.

Maybe you're giving instructions, or helping someone with a technical problem, or giving a presentation, or talking with someone who doesn't have the same language skills as you... There are **countless** situations where your focus should be on simplicity and directness, rather than **verbal pyrotechnics**.

In our last lesson, I talked about clear pronunciation and word choice. Today I want to look at making clear sentences and organizing your message.

When it comes to sentences, **shoot for** simple and short. Rather than **stringing** a bunch of ideas into one long sentence, break it up into several short ones. For example, here's a sentence that might confuse some people: "Although the **forecasts** are positive, we've decided to cut costs due to current **cashflow** problems." There are three ideas there, in one sentence. If you break that up into smaller **chunks**, it might sound like this: "Forecasts are positive. But we have cashflow problems. So we've decided to cut costs."

Notice that I used the words "but" and "so?" Those simple **linking** words are really useful, and really clear. There's no need to use "**nevertheless**" and "**consequently**" if you're trying to make sure your point is clear. Yes, it's important to show the relationships between ideas. But you don't always have to sound like an **academic**.

There's something else that can add **clutter** to our sentences: the softening words and phrases we use to be **diplomatic**, polite, or careful. These expressions can be very important when the situation requires. But not all situations or audiences require such diplomacy.

I mean, if you're on the phone helping someone fix a computer problem, you don't need to say "Now, if it's not too much trouble, would you mind trying to restart the computer?" That's **ridiculous**, right? So instead, you can just use "now please restart your computer." Or if you're talking to your assistant, you don't need to say "I was wondering if you might be able to complete the paperwork sometime soon?" No, it's better just to say "could you finish the paperwork soon?"

Did you notice how direct and simple that question was? In fact, we have some very confusing ways of asking questions in English. And if you're trying to be clear, you should avoid some of these. That includes **tag questions**, such as "you're quite busy,

aren't you?" And negative questions, like "aren't you going to read my report?" Many people aren't sure how to answer a tag question or negative question. I mean, if you *are* going to read the report, do you say "yes" or "no?" Confusing, isn't it?

All right, the last thing I want to talk about is how we **structure** our messages. And I mean longer messages, like a set of instructions or something. First off, it's good to be clear about purpose. Tell people what you're going to tell them. That's exactly what I did when I said "the last thing I want to talk about is how we structure our messages." You see, when you heard that, you knew exactly what I was going to talk about next. You didn't have to just figure it out on your own.

Secondly, it's a good idea to use words like "secondly." We call this "**signposting**." Signposting is basically giving clear structure and logic to what you're saying. That means introducing things clearly. It means outlining, using words like "first, second, third" and "last." But it also means being clear about how your ideas fit together. That might mean using expressions like "there are several good reasons for this idea" and "let me give you one example of this situation." Signposting makes it a lot easier for people to follow what you're saying, and to remember it!

Lastly, it's a good idea to **summarize** what you've said. Just a little **recap** is good enough. And you can introduce your summary using signposting expressions like "to sum up" or "what I've been trying to say is..."

All right, now *I'd* like to quickly recap. Today I've talked about how to make clear sentences. Clear sentences are short and simple. And clear ideas are connected with simple linking words. Clear sentences are *not* full of softening words or diplomatic language. And clear questions are not tag questions or negative questions. Finally, remember to use signposting to help listeners follow what you're saying.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **BusinessEnglishPod.com** website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. Which of the following situations would require simple and direct language?
[Choose two.]
 - A Describing your skills in a job interview.
 - B Meeting with successful business people for the first time.
 - C Helping someone with a technical problem.
 - D Talking to someone with low language ability.

2. Which of the following sentences demonstrates linking with simple and clear words?
 - A Despite the fact that oil is getting cheaper, our shipping costs keep increasing.
 - B Oil is getting cheaper. But our shipping costs keep increasing.
 - C Oil is getting cheaper. Nevertheless, our shipping costs keep increasing.
 - D Shipping costs keep increasing regardless of decreasing oil prices.

3. Which of the following are NOT examples of clear and direct instructions?
[Select all that apply.]
 - A If you don't mind, please start by turning the computer off.
 - B First, turn the computer off.
 - C Do you think you could turn the computer off first?
 - D Start by turning your computer off.
 - E It might be wise to turn the computer off, mightn't it?

4. Choose the clearest way of asking a question?
 - A These problems have been going on for quite a while now, haven't they?
 - B I wonder if these problems have done on for a while or not...
 - C How long have these problems been going on?
 - D Haven't these problems been going on for a while?

5. What is "signposting?"
 - A Using careful and polite language to avoid upsetting people.
 - B Using academic language.
 - C Using words and phrases that help organize your ideas.
 - D Using questions to emphasize important ideas.

6. Which of the following should be avoided when attempting to communicate clearly? [Select all that apply.]

- A Summarizing ideas at the end of a talk.
- B Academic language.
- C Linking words.
- D Overly diplomatic language.
- E Tag questions.
- F Short sentences.
- G Negative questions.
- H Repetition of important ideas.

Review Answers

1. Which of the following situations would require simple and direct language?
[choose two]
C Helping someone with a technical problem.
D Talking to someone with low language ability.
2. Which of the following sentences demonstrates linking with simple and clear words?
B Oil is getting cheaper. But our shipping costs keep increasing.
3. Which of the following are NOT examples of clear and direct instructions?
[Select all that apply.]
A If you don't mind, please start by turning the computer off.
C Do you think you could turn the computer off first?
E It might be wise to turn the computer off, mightn't it?
4. Choose the clearest way of asking a question?
C How long have these problems been going on?
5. What is "signposting"?
C Using words and phrases that help organize your ideas.
6. Which of the following should be avoided when attempting to communicate clearly? [Select all that apply.]
B Academic language.
D Overly diplomatic language.
E Tag questions.
G Negative questions.