Guides to Professional English

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Telephone and Helpdesk Skills

A Guide to Professional English

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Introduction for the reader

Who is this book for?

If you make telephone calls as part of your work, then this book is for you. Whether you work on reception, on a helpdesk, or simply telephone colleagues and clients, by applying the suggested guidelines, you will stand a much greater chance of making an effective telephone call.

The book is aimed at non-native English speakers, with an intermediate level and above.

I hope that other trainers like myself in Business English will also find the book a source of useful ideas to pass on to students.

This book is NOT for academics. Instead, read Parts III and IV of *English for Academic Correspondence and Socializing* (Springer Science), from which some of the subsections in this book are taken or adapted.

What chapters should I read?

Receptionists / Switchboard Operators and Secretaries: Chapters 1-9, 14-18

Helpdesk / Technical: 1, 5, 8-12, 14-18

Sales and Marketing: 1-4, 6-9, 13-18

If you use the telephone for video conferences and audio conferences, read Chapter 16 of this book plus Chapter 6 (video conference calls) in the companion book *Meetings, Negotiations, and Socializing*, and Chapter 12 (audio conference calls) in *Presentations, Demos, and Training Sessions*.

Video conference calls - Chapter 6 in *Meetings, Negotiations and Socializing*

Audio conference calls - Chapter 12 in *Presentations, Demos and Training Sessions*

How should I use the table of contents?

The table of contents lists each subsection contained within a chapter. You can use the titles of these subsections not only to find what you want but also as a summary for each chapter.

Other books in this series

There are currently five other books in this *Guides to Professional English* series.

CVs, Resumes, and LinkedIn

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4939-0646-8/>

Email and Commercial Correspondence

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4939-0634-5/>

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<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4939-0643-7/>

All the above books are intended for people working in industry rather than academia. The only exception is *CVs, Resumes, Cover Letters and LinkedIn*, which is aimed at both people in industry and academia.

There is also a parallel series of books covering similar skills for those in academia:

English for Presentations at International Conferences

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4419-6590-5/>

English for Writing Research Papers

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4419-7921-6/>

English for Academic Correspondence and Socializing

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4419-9400-4/>

English for Research: Usage, Style, and Grammar

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4614-1592-3/>

INTRODUCTION FOR THE TEACHER

Teaching Business English

I had two main targets when writing this book:

- non-native speakers (business, sales technical)
- Business English teachers and trainers

My teaching career initially started in general English but I soon moved into Business English, which I found was much more focused and where I could quickly see real results. The strategies I teach are almost totally language-independent, and many of my 'students' follow my guidelines when making phone calls (writing emails, presenting etc) in their own language. I am sure you will have found the same in your lessons too.

Typically, my lessons cover how to:

1. make phone calls
2. write emails
3. make presentations and demos
4. participate in meetings
5. socialize

This book is a personal collection of ideas picked up over the last 25 years. It is not intended as a course book; there are plenty of these already. It is more like a reference manual.

I also teach academics how to interact with colleagues around the world. In fact, a couple of the chapters in this book are based on chapters from *English for Academic Correspondence and Socializing* (Springer).

How to teach telephone calls

I suggest you adopt the following strategy.

In your first lesson on telephoning, have a general discussion on:

- how much time your students spend on the telephone
- what their main fears are and how they manage to overcome them
- what typical calls they have to make / receive
- what useful phrases (Chapter 16) they know, and whether they have made their own personal collections of such phrases
- what preparation, if any, they make before making / receiving phone calls

Use ideas from Chapter 1 to help you guide the last part of the discussion.

In my experience the basic problems are:

1. lack of preparation
2. not knowing the right phrases to use
3. inability to understand the caller
4. nerves

Nerves are caused by points 1 - 3.

To resolve POINT 1, you need to help your students learn how to simulate a call in advance (see Chapter 1.5). The best way to do this is to choose two students who do a similar job e.g. they both work on reception, or both work on the helpdesk. Get them to think of the typical calls they make (in English and in their own language). Then ask them to simulate the call in their own language. Make notes of the structure of the call, while the two students are talking. Then gradually build up the same dialog in English (either on your laptop or the whiteboard) - refer to your notes to make sure that you don't forget to include something. On the basis of this dialog, they can then practise what to say. It makes sense at this stage of your telephoning course to have very small groups of people all of whom do the same job, otherwise some of the dialogs will be totally irrelevant for other students.

Resolving POINT 1 goes some way to resolving POINT 2 at the same time. While building up the dialogs, introduce useful phrases from Chapter 16. Encourage students to learn the phrases that they find the easiest to remember and easiest to say. But they need to be aware of the other phrases in case their interlocutor uses them.

POINT 3 - inability to understand the caller - is certainly the biggest problem. Firstly, students need to understand that a conversation is two way. If they don't understand something the responsibility is not entirely their own, but also rests with their interlocutor. It is worth stressing this concept many times to ensure that your students do not feel stupid or humiliated when they don't understand the caller. Instead, they should remain calm and adopt a series of strategies (Chapter 11) to help them try and understand the caller better. Chapter 12 (on pronunciation and word stress) and Chapter 13 (using the web to improve listening skills), will also help them understand better. You can also use the listening exercises contained in the many telephone skills books produced by ELT publishers such as CUP, OUP, Macmillan and Longman.

If you work in-house, then you can help your students massively if you listen in on their calls. When you debrief them after the call, you can then help them to improve their technique. So get involved with the company / companies where you teach. You will find it much more satisfying!

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