

Supporting communication



How to

... choose the right tone and style

Tone and style refer to the way you put your message across. It's not just about the words you use but also the way you say or write them. The same words can mean different things, depending on the context, style and tone of voice used. You might say, for example, 'You look well', which could mean:

- 'You look healthy'
- 'You look as if you've put on weight/had a face-lift' or
- 'You look better than you did yesterday when you were covered in bandages'

It all depends on the situation, and how you express yourself. The tone and style you adopt will depend on your purpose and audience.

PURPOSE

- What is it you need to achieve?
- How important is it?
- Do you need to persuade?

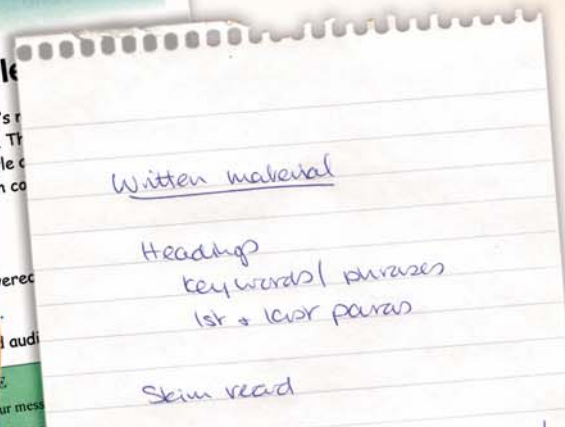
AUDIENCE

- Who'll be receiving your message?
- What is their relationship to you?
- How will your message affect them?
- What is their understanding of the topic and language?

Style

Once you are clear about your purpose and audience, you need to think about what form of language and format would be most appropriate. It could be formal or informal, simple or complex, technical or not. Try this! Match the communication type with the most appropriate style.

type	style
a. factual and formal	



Guide to good practice



Supporting communication

Guide to good practice



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About the Key Skills Support Programme

This guide has been produced as part of the Key Skills Support Programme (KSSP). The other guides in this series are:

- *Improving initial assessment*
- *Introducing key skills to apprentices*
- *Preparing for the key skills tests*
- *Supporting application of number*
- *Supporting improving own learning and performance*
- *Supporting information technology*
- *Supporting problem solving*
- *Supporting working with others*
- *Using and developing key skills assignments*
- *Working with employers*

The Key Skills Support Programme is funded by the Department for Education and Skills. Its main purpose is to help practitioners in training providers, schools and colleges to improve the quality of key skills provision and to support the preparation of young people for the key skills qualifications.

DfES has appointed Learning for Work to manage the programme in the work-based route and to work with those actively involved in the field to:

- raise the confidence and competence of training providers and employers, particularly in terms of their ability to manage and deliver key skills programmes and to develop and assess key skills
- establish and promote the value of all six key skills units
- act as a national focus for the development and dissemination of effective practice throughout the work-based route.

Acknowledgements

The Key Skills Support Programme would like to thank the following people and organisations for their help:

Andrew Collinge Hairdressing	Falmouth Marine School	South West Durham Training
Bakery Training Council	Intuitions	Training West Lancashire
Broadland District Council	Lunn Poly	YMCA Training
Clarkson Evans		

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Graphic design by Eatcake Design, Bristol

Photography by James Barke, Bristol

Printed in England by Portishead Press, Bristol

To order additional copies of this guide telephone 0117 971 9583

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Why support communication?

The focus of this guide is on your role in helping people to learn and develop communication skills, so that they can read, write and speak effectively in their work and in other aspects of their lives.

This is an important challenge, and one that will have an important impact on your work with all learners. It is especially true for your work with learners who have basic skills problems – for example, difficulties with spelling or reading. A Basic Skills Agency report, *It doesn't get any better* (BSA 1997), describes the impact of basic skills problems on a cohort of people who have taken part in the National Child Development Study over a number of years and who are now 38 years old. The report concludes:

As they reach the heart of adult life it is clear that problems with basic skills have a continuing, adverse effect on their lives. Critically the research shows a widening gap. As jobs require more skills, those with limited skills are increasingly marginalised.

Indeed, the research shows that adults with poor basic skills are more likely to be unemployed or homeless, less likely to own their own home, less likely to be in good health and more likely to have children who also struggle with basic skills. So, if you succeed in helping your learners now, you will do far more than enable them to achieve their key skill units – you will help them in a way that will make a real difference to their lives.

Helping learners with communication skills calls for a thorough approach. You need to :

- identify areas to work on
- plan and undertake learning activities with the learner
- review progress and give feedback.

This guide will help you with these skills.

Using this guide

This guide is primarily intended for practitioners in training organisations who are experienced in working with learners. You may work in any one of a variety of vocational areas but it is not expected that you are a communication specialist.

The guide is also likely to be of use to managers and coordinators in planning strategies to support communication. And it may also be useful for supervisors who support and train learners in the workplace.

Scope of this guide

What this guide cannot do is detail every method of teaching every aspect of communication, nor can it provide all of the resources that you might need to support your work with learners. However, it is intended to help in several ways:

- It will help you to support your learners in developing and applying the skills and knowledge specified in the communication key skill.
- It will also help you extend your own skills, knowledge and confidence in a range of valuable teaching and coaching skills that can usefully be applied to any number of different topics.
- And it will also illustrate how effective coordination of efforts between training providers and employers can deliver real benefits for all concerned.

The information about approaches to teaching will also be valuable for other topics; any increase in the variety of teaching and learning strategies we use makes our work more interesting, effective and rewarding.

Note: A parallel guide in this series looks at **Supporting application of number**. Some of the guidance in the sections on **Getting to know the learner** and **Helping people to learn** is repeated in this guide. Bear this in mind if you are using both guides.



You will find additional resources on the CD that comes with this guide. You can use and adapt these with your learners. These and other resources are also available on the KSSP website at www.keyskillssupport.net.

Starting with you

Every trainer is different. You and your colleagues will all have individual strengths, and you should aim to make the most of these – you will each be able to help learners in different ways. But to do this effectively you need a clear picture of where you are now. This section asks you to reflect on your own role in supporting the development of learners' communication skills. It looks at:

- Your own communication skills
- What you feel about teaching communication skills
- What you need to know about teaching communication
- Your role in supporting communication.

The section concludes by looking at how this guide can help.

Your own communication skills

Everyone has their own unique blend of communication skills. You will have your own strengths in speaking, reading and writing. You bring your own experience of using communication skills, at work and in all aspects of your life.

Your communication strengths are central to your work with learners. Being a good communicator is at the heart of teaching and coaching, and your skills will also enable you to act as a role model for learners. At the same time, you always have to be conscious that some learners may find these aspects of communication difficult – it can be hard to understand why people find difficult the things that you find second nature.

On the other hand, taking steps to develop aspects of your own communication skills can itself be valuable to you in supporting learners – you are more likely to understand the problems they have and you will find ways of working through the topic which can be a real help to learners.

Your own communication skills

Consider this . . .

A good starting point is to spend a couple of minutes reflecting on how you feel about your own communication skills. Ask yourself these questions:

- What are your strengths in:
 - taking part in discussions?
 - giving talks and presentations?
 - reading and summarising information?
 - writing reports and other documents?
- Are there areas you would like to develop? Which are these?
- What aspects of your experience of using communication skills at work are likely to be relevant to your learners?

What you feel about teaching communication skills

In recent years many training providers have primarily seen themselves as providers of assessment services. Today the emphasis is swinging back towards learning. As training providers we are (quite reasonably) expected to support our clients to develop occupational skills and the associated range of key skills that enable them to do their job effectively and build their potential.

We do not all need to turn into communication teachers overnight. But it is hoped that, with a little help (for example, through using this guide), trainers who are not specialists in communication will be able to provide valuable support and encouragement for learners.

We examine the main activities involved in the section *Helping people to learn*. These activities are not specific to communication – you are probably already doing at least some of them in your work. The following activity asks you to think about them in relation to developing learners in a vocational area with which you are familiar.

How you feel about teaching communication skills

Consider this . . .

Reflect on how you feel about helping learners develop new skills.

- What skills do you already have in **identifying areas to work on?** For example:
 - Do you observe learners to find out what they can and cannot do?
 - Do you draw conclusions from learners' work about which aspects of the necessary skill or knowledge are causing problems?

- What skills do you already have in **planning learning activities?** For example:
 - Do you take time with your learners to demonstrate the correct way of doing a job?
 - Do you make use of learners' experience or existing knowledge to help them take on new skills or knowledge?
 - Do you create opportunities for learners to practise their skills and to broaden their experience of applying them?
- What skills do you already have in **reviewing progress?** For example:
 - Do you monitor learner progress and confidence in their new skills and knowledge?
 - Do you praise learners when they do things right, in order to reinforce such performance?
- What skills do you already have in **making links to assessment?** For example:
 - Do you advise learners on the sort of evidence that would help them demonstrate their skills and knowledge for NVQ or key skill assessment?
 - Do you provide feedback on learners' performance and knowledge so that they can decide when they are ready for assessment?

All these activities are relevant to helping learners with their communication skills. The section on *Helping people to learn* looks at this in more detail.

What you need to know about teaching communication

In order to help people develop communication skills you need a certain level of knowledge. You need to understand the factors that make communication effective, and this guide should help. You also need to be familiar with:

- the communication key skill unit
- the differences between the levels and how these affect planning for individual learners.

What you need to know

Consider this . . .

- What do you already know about:
 - what makes communication effective?
 - the communication key skill unit?
 - the differences between the levels?
- What do you need to find out?

The section of this guide on *Practical techniques* looks at approaches to teaching specific communication skills.

Your role in supporting communication

This section has introduced some of the teaching and coaching skills which will help you to provide valuable support to learners. It is likely that you already possess some of these skills, although you may feel more confident using them in the vocational areas in which you normally work. You may even be unaware that you have certain other skills. Becoming explicitly aware of the skills you possess will help you communicate them to learners. You may need to develop other skills – or it may make more sense within the organisation for other people to do these things.

Your role in supporting learners is likely to involve:

- helping them recognise the relevance of communication to their chosen vocation
- helping them overcome anxieties with their communication skills
- identifying their learning needs in communication
- making the essential techniques accessible and explicit by explaining, coaching and encouraging them in a way that makes sense to them
- providing opportunities for learners to practise their skills in real-life situations, perhaps directly or by making arrangements with employers, workplace supervisors or your own colleagues
- helping learners and those they work with to identify opportunities to capture sound evidence, in significant activities, for assessment.

Building roles at Andrew Collinge Hairdressing

Example

Andrew Collinge Hairdressing recognised that, with the increasing demand for key skills support, they would need more staff who could teach and assess key skills. They developed a programme for staff which includes workshops, training, mentoring and portfolio building. Staff reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and select a key skills unit which they feel comfortable with and can specialise in within the organisation. This means that staff are not expected to be experts on all the key skills, but can go to each other for support and advice when they need it.

How this guide can help

The rest of this guide will help you to tackle the issues raised in this section:

- The next section – *Getting to know the learner* – looks at how you can start your work with learners by exploring where they are in terms of their strengths, experience, context and interests.
- *Helping people to learn* helps you consider what learning is about and how the principles can be applied to communication skills. It also helps you make good use of the workplace in developing skills.
- *Practical techniques* gives practical guidance on a range of approaches to teaching specific communication skills.
- The section on *Organisational issues* looks at the wider implications of supporting learners in communication – in particular, creating time and resources.
- The final section – *Where next?* – helps you to reflect on your role in supporting communication and to plan your next steps with confidence.

Getting to know the learner

If you are to help learners effectively with their communication skills, you need to get to know them. Every learner is an individual – they have their own set of communication strengths and weaknesses, as we all do.

So it is vital to see each learner as a whole person. The more you know about them – their strengths, their experiences, their interests, their hopes, their anxieties – the better you will be able to help them with their communication skills. In particular:

- Their feelings about their communication skills will be influenced by their past experiences – their school, their family and social life, their previous work experience. If people have told them they have poor communication skills, they may have believed this – and may continue to believe it now.
- Many learners will possess different communication skills at different levels. For example, someone who works well in small teams may be less good at making a presentation to a larger group, or may find writing difficult.
- Their current communication skills are not necessarily a full indication of their potential. People can make quite startling progress with their communication skills. Each person has their own potential to improve and your organisation has a duty to help them maximise this potential.

Training West Lancashire

Example

Training West Lancashire recognises that individuals have 'spiky' key skills profiles, i.e. they are always better at some things than others. They therefore identify who needs support with which aspects of the key skills, and set about providing support either individually or in small groups.

Talking with the learner

The best way to get to know your learner is to talk to them. Talking with your learner involves them communicating with you and vice versa, so this is a chance to add to your picture of their skills. It will also help you to identify opportunities for practising and applying communication skills at work and elsewhere.

We tend to learn better when we are motivated to learn – when we see that what we are learning is relevant or interesting. So if you can find out what interests and motivates a learner, you can identify ways of learning which they will enjoy.

These are some of the things you might talk about in your early discussions with a learner:

- Talk about their hopes and aspirations. What do they want to get out of their training and their work? How will developing their communication skills improve their chances of achieving this?
- Talk about their work – where they are working, what work they do, what they like about it, who they work with. What opportunities are there for them to practise and apply communication skills? How can their supervisor help them develop their communication skills?
- Talk about their interests. What clues do these give you about the learner's strengths? They may also offer opportunities for learning and practising skills in ways that they find relevant.
- Talk about their past experiences of learning. What have they enjoyed learning? What have they found difficult? Do they prefer learning in groups or on their own? Do they prefer to learn by trying things out or by thinking about things? What kind of support do they find helpful?
- Explore their understanding of the value of communication skills. Ask them how they feel about their communication skills. What do they think are their strengths and weaknesses? Where would they welcome help?
- Talk about the communication key skill with them. Look through the specifications together as part of your planning. For more on this, see the good practice guide *Introducing key skills to apprentices*.

You should also make the most of the information about the learner obtained through your organisation's initial assessment system. This might include information from school certificates, careers interviews and assessments, their application and interview, examples of work they have done, and so forth. For more on this, see the good practice guide *Improving initial assessment*.

Finding a starting point

A crucial part of your early work with the learner is to find a starting point. If you can identify something where the learner can make progress quickly and easily, this is a good place to begin – early wins help to build confidence.

Helping people to learn

At the start of this guide we highlighted the need for trainers to be able to help learners with aspects of the key skills. This section looks in general terms at how you can do this, while the later section on techniques gives some specific examples you may find helpful.

If you do not have a background in teaching, this may sound daunting at first. In practice, much of this work is about facilitating learning rather than ‘teaching’ in a traditional sense. You will be:

- identifying an area to work on
- planning learning activities with the learner(s)
- reviewing progress and giving feedback
- looking for assessment opportunities at the appropriate time.

These are skills that most people can develop – though this calls for regular and frequent opportunities to work with your learners. We will look at each in turn.

Identifying an area to work on

The first step is to identify the skills your learners need to work on.

- **Identify each learner’s difficulties.** First find out what difficulties individual learners have with communication. Such difficulties may involve both basic skills – such as spelling or punctuation – as well as more complex skills such as knowing how to structure a piece of writing or participate constructively in a discussion. The next section (*Practical techniques*) looks in more detail at some of the difficulties learners may have and ways of identifying these.
- **Explore the reasons why they have these difficulties.** It is equally important to find out why learners have difficulties. For example, if a learner confuses the spelling of ‘there’ and ‘their’, is this because they do not know that the two words are spelt differently, because they do not understand why the two words have different meanings, because they are careless, or because they do not check their writing?

Both these activities have to involve some individual work. Above all, you need to spend time with each learner:

- talking about their skills
- observing them or looking at examples of their work.

Bear in mind that some learners with basic skill difficulties – particularly with reading and writing – may feel uncomfortable about admitting this. Our culture places great importance on these skills, and it can be embarrassing to own up to difficulties with them. This can also mean that a learner may present you with a problem that actually covers a deeper underlying problem.

Two aspects of developing communication skills

It is possible to distinguish two aspects of developing communication skills:

- **Learning the basic techniques** which underpin performance in a particular aspect of communication. Such techniques include reading skills; writing skills such as spelling, punctuation and grammar; and knowing how to contribute to discussions or how to structure a talk. While such development work can take place at work, it is legitimate to do some away from work.
- **Practising and applying the techniques.** Once a learner has learnt the basic techniques they then need to learn how to apply them in their work and other aspects of their lives. Wherever possible, practising and applying techniques should take place at work.

There is interplay between these two aspects. However, when you are identifying areas to work on with learners it is useful to know the difference. For example, if a learner is not confident in a group, is this because they do not know the appropriate ways of making contributions to discussions, or because they have not had enough opportunities to practise them?

Planning learning

The second step is to plan appropriate strategies for developing the skills you have identified. You need to consider the following questions:

- **How will you approach learning?** You could:
 - individually using **one-to-one coaching or tutoring** skills – the checklist in Appendix 1 highlights these
 - run **small group sessions** including group discussions, teaching sessions or demonstrations which are likely to bring together between three and six learners – the checklist in Appendix 2 highlights some key points
 - structure **work experience** – when a learner needs to practise a skill at work, you can help them to plan how they will do this so that they get the most out of it
 - use **project or assignment work** – you can also use projects and assignments as ways of encouraging the learner to learn independently.

Intuitions gives its hairdressing learners a combination of group and individual work. For example, small groups of learners research together for presentation topics. Each member of the group has a role in the eventual five-minute presentation of their findings. In this way, they have the support of a team, learning about the process of communication as they work towards and complete their assignments.

- **Where will learning take place?** It could be:
 - on the job – especially for structured work experience or some project work
 - near the job – for example, you might hold a short coaching session with the learner when you visit their workplace
 - off the job – it may be easier to arrange some group sessions away from work, especially if you want to bring together learners from different workplaces.
- **Who will support learning?** It could be you and/or someone else:
 - the learner’s supervisor/manager who may be able to provide support
 - one of your colleagues who may have a specialism you can draw on
 - another specialist – for example, a basic skills tutor from a college.
- **What resources will you use?** You may be able to use materials such as resource sheets (which introduce specific communication topics), worksheets (which give learners the opportunity to practise their skills), assignments (which help learners apply skills – and sometimes gather evidence), articles, case studies, workbooks, CD-ROMs or videos to supplement individual and group learning.

Resources for learners

A number of publishers provide resources for use with learners. Some of the main publishers in the field include the National Extension College, Stanley Thornes, Longman and Heinemann. You will find some of these resources reviewed on the KSSP website at www.keyskillssupport.net.

You may also be able to obtain resources from other training providers, possibly via local networks including internal verifiers’ forum, key skills development groups and LSC networks. The checklist in Appendix 3 will help you to review materials produced by other organisations.

There are also some resources on the Key Skills Support Programme website at www.keyskillssupport.net. These are Crown copyright and you do not have to seek permission to use them. However, you must acknowledge the organisation that produced them and you must acknowledge Crown copyright and include the following wording: ‘Produced with assistance from the DfES Key Skills Support Programme’.

Some training organisations prefer to develop their own materials as this can increase ownership of the materials and ensure they are tailored to local needs. You will need to decide whether you will develop your own resources for learners or use/adapt those that other people have produced. See the guide in this series *Using and developing key skills assignments* for more on these issues.

South West Durham Training

Example

South West Durham Training, who work in engineering, asked workplace supervisors to do a mapping exercise. As a result, the supervisors now know where they can deliver key skills within their workshops. This helps learners to see the key skills in context.

It is crucial to think of the learner's preferences and balance these alongside how the employer and your own organisation do things.

Making the most of the workplace

The overall focus of the communication key skill is on application. So while you may need to tackle some of the basic techniques with learners off or near the job, when identifying opportunities for application you need to find ways of using the workplace effectively. Here are some examples from a number of sectors:

- Lunn Poly identified a number of ways of applying level 2 communication skills in a travel agency. These included talking or writing to customers, colleagues and travel operators; taking part in training sessions, team talks and shop briefings; and passing on information to customers or colleagues.
- The Bakery Training Council identified a number of ways of applying level 3 communication skills in a bakery. These included project and weekly team meetings, reading the trade press and relevant text books and writing to customers and suppliers.
- Falmouth Marine School identified a number of ways of applying level 2 communication skills in boat building. These included discussing stock needs with suppliers and reading catalogues, specifications and technical data sheets.
- Staff from YMCA Training visited employers to discuss the kinds of work learners could do and to identify the scope for key skills in their activities. They found that there was a wide range of opportunities for applying communication skills in the majority of work placements.

Integrating key skills

Work-based learners need to develop three set of skills together: job skills, NVQ skills and key skills. The three sets of skills are closely linked – communication is a vital job skill. It is also a key skill and may well be part of an NVQ as well. Because of the close links, it makes sense to help people learn their key skills in the context of the job they do. It also helps with motivation – learners are more likely to see the value of key skills if they see how they relate to their work.

Integration is about including key skills development in all training programmes, as opposed to teaching key skills in isolation. Integrating the key skills means that activities are not duplicated, and the programme is a more coherent experience for the learner.

Your own audit of key skills

Aim to carry out an audit of your own workplace(s) to identify opportunities for learners to practise and apply key skills. You may wish to involve learners in this since it will help to reinforce the practical purpose of each communication skill. Ask yourself these questions: Which activities might give learners the opportunity to use key skills? Could the learner do other activities to practise other skills?

Reviewing progress

Planning and identifying opportunities for learning are vital to success – but you also need to check that learning actually takes place. So you need to agree with the learner when and how you will review progress. For example, if a learner is working on a three-month project, you may want to discuss progress every two or three weeks or so.

When you review progress, you will want to give the learner reassurance about how they are getting on. And you will want to give feedback on how they are doing.

Giving feedback

Checklist

- Look for strengths and seek to build confidence by highlighting the positive things before picking up on possible improvements.
- Give praise and encouragement where appropriate.
- Ask the learner's views – they may well be aware of areas which they could improve. Bear in mind that an important part of communication is checking their own work – particularly proof-reading what they write.
- Own your feedback – say 'I think'.
- Be specific – comment on specific parts of their work and give examples.
- Ask open questions to generate discussion.
- Try to find ways forward together – the learner is more likely to do things if they feel they own them.

One of the most important things you can do is to help the learner develop their own learning skills. In the process of checking learning and giving feedback you can help them to get better at reflecting on what they do.

The importance of reflection

The key skills are all about being able to apply skills in the real world. And while learners will have support from you, their supervisor and their team, they will increasingly need to get better at learning independently from their experiences. Being good at the key skills means being able to reflect on what we do.

You can help learners get better at reflecting on their experiences by encouraging them to talk things through with you, or by asking them to keep a diary to record their experiences.

Links to assessment

The focus of this guide is on helping learners to develop communication skills. However, assessment is an absolutely essential part of this ongoing process of identifying needs, planning learning opportunities and reviewing progress.

It is important to realise that assessment is not only about judging learners' work. Formative assessment is, in itself, an opportunity for learning. When people are learning and practising the basic techniques, formative assessment helps them see how they are progressing and what they still need to work on. When you give feedback to learners, you are assessing what they do and helping them to assess their own work. Once a learner is confidently applying an aspect of their communication skills, you can start to look for opportunities to assess how well their work meets the performance requirements and level of the key skills units.

- Bear in mind the links between communication and their NVQ portfolio. Most NVQs have at least some units which ask learners to demonstrate communication skills.
- Also consider the links to the other key skills. A specific piece of work may be relevant to several key skills.
- Make sure you have a clear grasp of level. There are some important differences between the levels of the communication key skill. In particular:
 - At level 1 learners need to communicate clearly and with a clear sense of purpose in the context of straightforward tasks. These include taking part in discussions, identifying the main points in their reading and writing short documents using uncomplicated language.
 - At level 2, while the emphasis is still on straightforward tasks, learners need to use more advanced communication skills. These include helping to move a group discussion forward, giving a short talk, using more advanced reading techniques such as skim reading reports or books, and writing reports or essays using a suitable structure and style.
 - At level 3 learners need to communicate about more complex subjects, balancing and evaluating ideas and handling specialist vocabulary. This includes actively encouraging others to contribute in discussions, making a presentation, reading detailed and complex documents and writing coherent, reasoned and well-crafted reports or essays.

- You need to make sure you are assessing at the learner's target level. At the same time, it is clearly desirable to support learners to reach their full potential.

The next section goes on to look in more detail at specific aspects of teaching communication skills and will pick up on some of these issues.

Practical techniques

This section introduces a range of techniques and methods for teaching communication skills. It is not comprehensive, but does give some practical starting points. The topics covered are as follows:

Taking part in discussions	19
Talks and presentations	25
Reading and understanding	27
Spelling	31
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Writing documents	45

Each topic is divided into four main parts:

- What is the problem?
- Initial assessment
- Helping learners
- Practice.

Taking part in discussions

What is the problem?

Learners have three main things to concentrate on when taking part in any discussion:

- how aware they are of the situation and the purpose of the discussion
- how they listen and respond to others and help the discussion to go well
- the effectiveness of their own contributions – the relevance of what they say, how articulate they are, their manner of speaking.

A common problem is for learners to focus more on what they want to say than on what others are saying and, while this is natural, it is one of the reasons why discussions do not always go well – if everyone is too focused on their own contribution, there probably is not much communication going on!

Learners may need help in learning how to work out what they are going to say and saying it in a clear and confident way, especially if they are not very confident. But you will almost certainly find that their confidence grows – and their own contributions are better – if they understand the kind of discussion they are in and listen carefully to the other people involved.

Discussion skills are required at all levels of the communication key skill. Level 1 candidates need to judge when to speak and how much to say, speak clearly and listen carefully to others. Level 2 candidates need to adapt what they say to suit different situations, identify the speaker's intentions and move the discussion forward. Level 3 candidates need to listen and respond sensitively, develop ideas and encourage others to contribute.

Initial assessment

In all the *Practical techniques* sections we suggest that you discuss things with your learners in order to find out more about them. These discussions are a good way of finding out how skilled your learner is at taking part in discussions!

But you should also make a few opportunities to watch what happens when learners take part in discussions with other people. Vary the situations so you see them in different contexts. For example, you will probably learn different things if you observe how a group of learners talk among themselves than if you observe them in a more formal situation such as an interview.

Helping learners improve their discussion skills

Here are some ways of helping learners with three aspects of discussions.

Awareness of the situation and purpose

There are two main things that learners need to look out for:

- **Whether the situation is formal or informal.** How formal or informal a situation is depends mainly on who else is taking part. A discussion with a colleague at work may be very informal but may be more formal if a supervisor or manager is involved. In situations like team meetings there are often formal rules which people need to be aware of and respect – such as catching the eye of the chairperson if you have something to say, rather than just saying it.
- **The purpose of the discussion.** Discussions always have at least one purpose, and sometimes several. At work, they are very often a medium for getting things done. Learners need to know what any discussion is aiming to do. For example, is it to pass on information about clients in a care home from one shift to another? Or is it to work in a group to plan a way of scheduling a particular job so that it gets done efficiently?

Once the purpose of a discussion is clear it is much easier for an individual to see how they can participate. For example, if they are the person passing on information, they will contribute best by organising what they need to say, speaking clearly and making sure that other people have understood. If they're planning a task together, they'll need to recognise the importance of listening carefully so that they can act on what has been agreed.

Helping learners act appropriately

Checklist

- Give examples of formal and informal situations they are likely to be in.
- Point out how people adapt the way they say things – for example, 'toning down' the language in a review meeting or addressing people by their proper name rather than a nickname.
- Let them know when their tone of voice, expressions or manner are inappropriate, and explain why.
- Point out which skills they and others have been using in a discussion, and why these skills were necessary for the purpose.

One way of helping learners to understand how discussions work is by allowing them to observe a discussion! Sitting in on a management or other meeting can really help them to see how discussion skills are relevant to work and to get an idea of what makes for good or bad discussion.

Listen to other people

Usually much more time is spent in a discussion listening to what other people say than speaking. Listening is obviously a way of finding things out: a good listener works out what the speaker wants to say and the purpose of their contribution. Good listening involves both:

- **Listening closely – and showing it.** Paying attention and listening closely means tuning in to what the other person thinks or feels (which may mean tuning out your own thoughts and feelings). An active listener shows they are listening in the way they sit or stand in relation to the other person. They are likely to ask questions to check out what they've heard, and to summarise what has been said.
- **Identifying the speaker's intentions – and responding appropriately.** What does the speaker want to happen as a result of what they have said? Intentions may be expressed by the speaker's tone of voice or manner rather than their words. It is important to be able to recognise when someone is signalling that they feel irritated or upset, so that the response can be appropriate – an apology, or a sympathetic manner. In some cases – for example, when dealing with a complaint – this can be difficult.

Helping learners improve their listening skills

Checklist

- Give them reasons to be attentive – for example, by giving verbal instructions only. Or, in a group, you could ask each listener to report back on a particular aspect of someone else's talk or presentation.
- Encourage them to ask questions or make comments – do not be afraid to 'let the silence hang' during a discussion: it might make the listeners think back to what someone else has said.
- Ask them to tell you what they think the speaker's intentions are when they are listening – and what their own intentions are when they are speaking.
- Use less straightforward, and even difficult, situations as an opportunity for learning – how to recognise signals and respond to them sensitively.

What to say and how to say it

When learners are actually speaking themselves, they need to focus on:

- **Saying things that are relevant and timely.** The value of a contribution depends on how relevant it is to the purpose of the discussion and whether it is said at the right time. People should ask themselves, first: 'What do I know or think about the subject that is relevant to the purpose of this discussion?' and second: 'Is this the right moment in the discussion to say it?' It is also important to be clear about the purpose of their own contributions.
- **Saying the right amount.** 'The right amount' is always a judgement, based on your understanding of a situation. Learners should be aware of what others may want the discussion to do as well as what they themselves want to say. Learners should ask themselves: 'Have I said enough to make the point?', 'Am I going on too long?' and 'How are other people reacting?' to remind them to look around and notice what is going on in the discussion.

- **Saying things in an appropriate way.** Learners need to speak clearly, at the right volume and in an appropriate tone of voice. Some people find one or more of these difficult, and while they can all be practised, improvements can take time and may be closely bound up with a person's self-confidence. Mumbling or speaking too loudly are often a sign of anxiety or lack of confidence. If someone 'strikes the wrong note', it may be because they lack the experience to judge a more suitable one.

Some of the most useful contributions to discussion are more to do with the process than the content: for example, moving it forward by summarising what has been said, or bringing in someone else who may have something useful to say.

Helping learners make useful contributions to discussions

Checklist

- Prepare them in advance for a discussion so that they have something relevant to say, e.g. by talking about a topic with them, or getting them to read about it.
- Ask them to say what they know or think at an appropriate time during a discussion.
- Listen to the contributions of individual learners and give feedback about how relevant and timely they were.
- Ask one or two learners to focus on the process skills, of keeping the discussion moving and making sure that everyone has a chance to contribute.
- Encourage unconfident learners to speak up and enunciate their words clearly in one-to-one discussions, where they are more likely to feel safe; in groups, invite them to talk about things which you know interest them.
- Show learners how using different tones of voice – e.g. raising or lowering the pitch of their voice – helps to keep up people's interest.

You may find it useful to intervene in a discussion – either by encouraging someone to say more or to speak more loudly, or by suggesting that they may have said enough. You could also ask someone to keep a record of who contributes to a discussion, as well as giving learners feedback individually.

Learners also need to choose their words and expressions carefully. This is not a wholly conscious or logical procedure. People who talk fluently and well do not usually think about which words and expressions best match their meaning.

Give learners chances to practise, for example by providing opportunities for them to talk about things in different contexts, so that they get used to describing things, explaining the reasons for them or how they work, expressing their own ideas, etc. You can suggest ways of extending vocabulary, for example by trying out words and expressions they've heard other people use or building up lists of technical words.

We have suggested a lot of ways in which learners can think or plan before making a contribution to a discussion. You would not want to try all these approaches with an individual learner – select those that are appropriate for the individual.

Opportunities for practice

There is no shortage of opportunities for learners to practise taking part in discussions. The challenge for you is to make these opportunities useful. This is best done by focusing on one or at most two learning points at a time. For example, you might decide to focus on helping your learner identify the purpose of a discussion. So you could arrange to observe this person in a range of different discussions – with customers, colleagues and their supervisor, for instance – and talk to them after each one. Together, you could make a list of the different purposes. Then you could ask your learner to add two or three more examples of each to the list over the next week.

And remember that whatever skills your learners are practising, they will learn best when they are taking part in real, meaningful discussions.

Talks and presentations

What is the problem?

People may have difficulties with talks and presentations for several reasons:

- They may find it hard to organise and structure material.
- They may be nervous.

Level 1 candidates are not required to give a talk or presentation. Level 2 candidates need to give a short talk of at least 4 minutes. Level 3 candidates need to give a formal presentation.

Initial assessment

Your work with learners around discussion skills will give you a good initial idea about how well they present information. Bear in mind that learners may be nervous about even a short talk, and may need to start practising in safe situations.

Helping learners improve their presentation skills

The strategies for helping learners with discussions will also help learners with their presentation skills. In particular:

- Being aware of the situation is as important for talks and presentations as it is for discussion. In preparing and making a presentation, learners will need to be aware of:
 - the level of formality of the talk or presentation
 - the main purpose of the talk or presentation.
- Focusing on what they will say becomes even more important for a talk or presentation. Choosing appropriate language and speaking clearly will be especially important.

You can refer back to the previous section for more specific guidance on these aspects. In addition, you can help learners to focus on further aspects of their presentation skills including being clear about the audience, structuring what they will say and using visual aids.

Being clear about the audience

Being clear about audience is central to many aspects of communication, but is particularly relevant to talks and to writing skills. Learners will need to be able to judge:

- who their audience will be – for example, what interests them?
- what the audience may already know about the topic
- what language will be appropriate and, in particular, which technical terms the audience will understand.

You can help learners to do this by discussing different audiences with them and asking them to think about the characteristics of their own audience – this could be an item for group discussion.

Structuring what to say

A talk or presentation must have a clear structure which will usually begin with an introduction and end with a summary of the main points. Once a learner has a clear idea of how to structure a talk and has identified its main sections, planning the content will be much easier.

- Encourage them to develop good note-making skills (see the next section).
- Ask them to think about other things that they plan – a day at work, for example – and how they use structuring skills in this.
- Give them chances to practise structuring and organising material under headings.

Using visual aids

It is often good practice to use visual aids as part of a talk or presentation and the key skill standards require candidates to ‘use images’. You can help learners by:

- discussing the range of visual aids available – including handouts, flip charts, OHP slides, objects and even computer-based presentations
- discussing what makes for effective visual aids – for example, the number of words on an OHT, clear labels on diagrams, etc.

Opportunities for practice

In planning practice opportunities, aim to build self-confidence by moving in a supported way from one-to-one discussions through to more formal talks.

Reading and understanding

What is the problem?

People may need help in developing their reading skills for any of several reasons:

- They may not spend enough time reading – or lack confidence in their reading.
- They may not know that there are different techniques for reading, note-taking and summarising, each suited to a different purpose.
- They may not understand some of the vocabulary – particularly in reports with technical jargon.
- They may have difficulty following the argument, particularly in books with advanced concepts.

Reading is required at all levels of the communication key skill. Level 1 candidates need to identify the main points and ideas in different types of documents. Level 2 candidates need to use techniques such as skim reading for longer documents, and to summarise their reading. Level 3 readers have to recognise opinion and bias, to present their own interpretation of things they have read, and to synthesise what they read.

Initial assessment

Before you start you need to explore with your learner their reading. You need to find out how much they read, how they feel about reading, what reading techniques they use, and what sort of difficulties they have. You can do this by:

- discussing how they feel generally about their reading – what they read, whether they enjoy it, what they find difficult, how they approach different types of reading
- discussing a specific item they are reading for their work or elsewhere. Ask them to tell you what the main points are. If they are reading reports, manuals or instructions, check that they can follow the argument by asking them to list the main steps or sequences. Talk about the vocabulary used, any illustrations, and so forth.

They may possess some reading techniques that they are not conscious of – it may all be ‘just reading’ to them. You can discuss and explain these issues as you talk.

Helping learners improve their reading

You cannot teach someone to read from scratch. But you can draw on a number of strategies to help your learners improve their reading.

Using written sources

Find opportunities for learners to practise identifying and using written sources in the course of their work. Ask them to look at different types of sources, including databases and the internet as well as reference books, textbooks, manuals, journals, etc. Focus on why they are reading a particular source – is it to obtain new information, check something they have read in another place, or get a second point of view?

- Ask your learner to investigate a subject related to their work. Give them clear instructions for carrying out the investigation and a timescale.
- Encourage them to ask other people at work what they might read.

Encourage questioning

An important aspect of reading is to approach a source with questions that you want answered. Discuss with your learner the kinds of questions they might ask and encourage them to formulate their own questions prior to reading. Consider both:

- **Closed questions** which require a yes or no answer. Is this fact correct? Is this evidence for or against something I've read elsewhere?
- **Open questions** which require a more complex answer. What does this writer say which is new or different? What is the line of reasoning?

Different types of writing

Look at different types of work-related text – explanatory texts (e.g. manuals, instructions, procedures), persuasive texts (e.g. sales brochures, adverts) and texts with an argument (e.g. reports, articles).

- Ask learners to identify the purpose in each case and discuss how the tone, vocabulary and structure help them to recognise this.
- Ask them to explain the sequence of information and ideas and, if necessary, explain how the sequence works.
- Ask them to identify points of view – if necessary, explain how to recognise different points of view.

Note-making skills

Making notes can help learners to understand and remember what they read. It is also a first step towards summarising information they read. Learners can try a variety of note-making techniques including:

- **Linear notes.** These are lists of notes, written in order and (ideally) organised under headings. Notes like this can be helpful when the learner already has a reasonably clear picture of the structure of what they are reading.
- **Spray notes.** These are more visual notes where the topic is written in the centre of the page, and other words and phrases are written elsewhere on the page with lines showing links between ideas. Notes like these are easy to add to and can help encourage creative thinking.

- **Annotating the source itself.** In some cases (e.g. a photocopy of a work report or memo) it may be enough to highlight key phrases in the document or to write brief notes beside them.

Encourage learners to keep their notes short, use their own words and always include the details of the source – and to use and review the notes they make.

Different reading techniques

Learners may think you have to start reading at the beginning and go right through to the end. In fact, there are three main reading techniques:

- **Skimming.** This involves looking quickly over a text to become familiar with its contents. You use the contents page, index, headings and introductions. It is often the first stage of reading when you want to get to know a text and check whether it contains the information you need.
- **Scanning.** This involves looking for a specific piece of information. You go page by page but ignore everything irrelevant to your search. Examples include looking for a phone number or finding a relevant diagram in a manual.
- **Detailed reading.** This involves reading to understand part of the text. You look for information, ideas and arguments. You might also be on the look-out for things which reveal the writer's personal opinions or bias. This careful reading also involves thinking about what you read – and perhaps making notes as well.

Explain the differences between the techniques and the most appropriate circumstances in which to use them. Make opportunities when your learner has done some reading to ask them which strategies they used. Discuss the points at which they skimmed and scanned text, and why they chose to do it at these points.

Summarising

Summarising is the important skill of finding the most important information or ideas in what learners read – in effect, getting to 'the gist' of a document – and then using this in their own speaking or writing. You can help learners to improve this skill in the following ways:

- Help them to recognise what is important in their reading. Ask them to highlight the relevant information from the notes they made. Get them to tell you why they selected these particular bits of information for their purpose and rejected other bits.
- Give them regular chances to summarise what they are doing in their work. Ask them to present the main points of what they have selected – for example, by talking it through. Check that they are presenting the essence of the matter.
- Use other aspects of their learning programme – for example, planning a portfolio can involve summary skills.

Note that level 3 also requires learners to synthesise information.

Using a dictionary

Ask your learner to highlight words whose meaning they are not sure about in a piece they are reading. Get them to look the words up in a dictionary and tell you what the words mean, in the context in which they are used. Check that they have the right meaning. Ask them to use the words themselves by describing a situation in which they are relevant.

You could suggest that learners make their own dictionaries by writing in a notebook words they need to remember (such as technical words) with their own definition and an example.

Opportunities for practice

Employers generally value reading skills and may be willing to help. Talk with them about opportunities for learners to practise reading skills which are directly relevant to their work or their other interests. Remember that reading does not have to be continuous or take very long! Just looking something up in a manual is a good way of practising. Even if the learner only concentrates on a particular aspect of reading once a day, that still gives them useful practice.

Bear in mind that reading and summarising helps the learner with other aspects of communication such as spelling and writing.

Spelling

What is the problem?

The main reason that people have difficulties with spelling is that they are not aware of the strategies and techniques which can be used to improve spelling. For example, many people approach learning to spell a word by simply staring at it, believing that it will ‘go through their eyes and into their brain’. Spelling does not work like that – it is also a very individual process and teaching will be most effective when it is approached on an individual basis, selecting from the whole range of techniques available.

Some of your learners will have a problem with spelling. They may have a strong sense of failure and you will need to work hard to restore their confidence. Poor spellers may also have an unrealistic attitude to spelling – lack of confidence can create misconceptions such as that:

- making drafts and correcting them is a sign of stupidity
- good spellers never have to look anything up or ask for help
- perfect spelling is always important whatever you are writing.

A crucial aspect of restoring confidence is to make the learning different from the learner’s experience at school. Materials and content must be adult and relevant and relating writing to work is particularly valuable.

Spelling is required at all levels of the communication key skill. For example, at level 2 candidates need to spell correctly words used most often in work or studies, while level 3 candidates need to spell accurately complex, irregular or technical words.

Initial assessment

Before you start you need to help your learner to understand their spelling strengths and needs. You need to find out their past learning experiences, how they feel about spelling, their spelling strengths, what spelling strategies they already use, what sort of spelling difficulties they have and whether they recognise their own errors.

One of the best ways of finding out what a learner can or cannot do is through discussion. You will find that the learner may have a pretty clear idea of their areas of difficulty and where they need to improve. Bear in mind, however, that lack of confidence can lead them to feel particularly negative and to believe that their spelling is worse than it actually is.

You should follow up this discussion with an analysis of writing which contains spelling mistakes. There may be a piece of writing already available or you may ask the learner to write about something specific, such as their first day at work or a part-time hobby. The subject doesn’t matter as long as it is something they can write about easily without having to work too hard at the ideas. When the writing is completed, you should:

- ask them to read it to you if they can (this avoids having to ask about misspelt words you cannot understand)
- read it yourself – reacting to the content and meaning positively

- ask the student to see if they can spot any words they think might be misspelt (give praise for good proof-reading)
- record and analyse incorrect spellings – look for patterns, types of error, etc.
- praise correct spelling of some words.

Use your analysis to build spelling into the learner's programme. Integrate writing and spelling activities with other aspects of the learner's overall programme. Do not see this as a one-off exercise though – carry on analysing learners' writing regularly.

Helping learners improve their spelling

You do not teach people to spell – rather, you show them how to learn to spell. There are a whole range of techniques which a learner can use and your role is to explain these to them and give them a chance to try them out. What works will be appropriate to the individual and to types and patterns of words.

This means that a learner will learn best if you have a planned programme to improve spelling. If you only tackle words on a one-off basis by correcting errors or supplying individual words, they may see spelling as random and unpredictable. You need to help them to recognise the logic and patterns. When you ask them to learn a word, always:

- show them a way to learn it
- explain why the word is spelt like that
- help them to recognise other words with the same pattern.

Above all, after learning individual words you should always ask learners to use them in a sentence. Checking and correcting work is also a vital aspect of improving spelling. Learners should get into the habit of producing first drafts, critically reviewing for errors and making corrections.

There is no one way to learn spelling

You probably do not remember learning to spell but the chances are that you used a whole range of methods. Below are just some of the strategies you may have used:

- shutting your eyes to remember what it looks like
- sounding it out to identify different parts
- writing several versions to see which looks right
- thinking of other, similar words
- looking it up in a dictionary
- thinking about the origins of the word.

You should encourage your learners to use a wide range of methods, and the rest of this section explains in more detail the methods that are available. You should be aware that the learner needs to see and feel the patterns of the English language. Above all, encourage learners to write frequently. Every day is good, several times a day is more likely to lead to success, once a week isn't enough.

Visual approaches

Many learners find visual approaches particularly helpful. A visual approach does not mean simply staring at words; it means actively noticing them. Here are some ways you can help a learner to recognise the features of word.

- **Look, see, cover, imagine, write, check.** This well-known method is now commonly used in schools – however, your learners may not have been taught in this way.

Look at a good, clear copy of the word.

See Look at the word for a short time, concentrating on actively noticing the word and remembering it. Say the word aloud.

Cover and imagine the word by trying to visualise it and say the word again.

Write the word, preferably in one flowing movement.

Check the word by proof-reading to see if it looks right.

Do not use capitals either for whole words or for initial letters.

- **Looking carefully at words.** Learners sometimes have a tendency to panic when faced with long words and it is worth pointing out that it is often the small words that cause more problems! Help your learners to see how words are made up of separate units like building bricks which can be put in different positions. Encourage your learners to get into the habit of looking at words in this way – including words they can already spell. For example:

un interest ing

con struct ion

- **Word jigsaws** are another way of reinforcing this ability. Provide bits of words that can be put together in different combinations.

be	day
in	port
re	fore
Mon	sert
trans	form

- **Word columns** provide columns of words with a common letter string. This acts as a memory aid and helps to sort them visually. For example: finish, finger, final, fine, finding.
- **Words within words.** Once learners have realised that words are composed of smaller units, they need to be on the look-out for this all the time. Encourage them to look for similar combinations in a newspaper or a work document.
- **Spot the problem.** There is often only a small part of a word that is likely to cause a problem. Ask learners to look at a word and to identify the bit that they are most likely to get wrong. For example, in spelling ‘communication’ one learner might say that the double ‘m’ would be their weakness while another might identify the ‘tion’ ending. This saves people wasting mental effort in learning parts of a word they can already spell.
- **How do you spell this?** If a learner asks you how to spell a word, you should write it down, not give it verbally. Spellings given verbally can result in errors. Saying a spelling does not help learning, while writing it down gives visual reinforcement.

Auditory approaches

Some learners have a more highly developed auditory sense and they can benefit from techniques which use this strength. Below are some ways to do this.

- **The links between sounds and letters.** Although English is not always written the way it sounds, some words do follow pronunciation and learners can be encouraged to spell a word by sounding it out. You should be aware that different accents change how some words are pronounced and that this can affect spelling.
- **Double letters.** You will see plenty of evidence of learners who are unsure when to double a letter in the middle of a word. It can help to tell them the following convention:

A long vowel will normally be followed by a single consonant

e.g. hating, rated, biting, hoped, ladle, sloping

A short vowel will normally be followed by a double consonant:

e.g. batting, getting, sitting, bottle, cutting, hopped

Examples like this help show the difference between a long and a short vowel.

- **Spelling pronunciation.** This means having a special pronunciation of a word so that you remember to spell it. Nearly all of us will have done this to spell ‘Wed-nes-day’ but it can also be applied to other words, especially those with silent letters.
- **Groups of words.** This involves teaching words in groups which share a visual and sound pattern. For example:

late, mate, rate, state

hear, gear, dear, near

feed, need, greed, seed

This should be used with care, however, because otherwise learners will not be prepared for words that do not follow the pattern, such as ‘wear’.

- **Mnemonics.** A mnemonic is a memory aid – for example, big elephants aren’t ugly, they’re *beautiful*. It is only worth going to this trouble for words that cannot be learnt in a simpler way.
- **A word of caution.** A frequent error people make is to confuse words that sound the same but are spelt differently (homophones). The most common mistakes are with words such as ‘their’ and ‘there’, ‘here’ and ‘hear’, ‘meet’ and ‘meat’. There are often good reasons why these words are spelt in a particular way, and you can help the learner by discussing these words together. However, never give a learner a whole list of these words to learn. This is more likely to confuse than to help.

Multisensory approaches

The ‘feel’ of writing words can also help to remember them. This is the ‘motor’ part of the skill and is another reason why you need to encourage learners to do as much writing as possible. Maximise the benefits by encouraging learners to write words in a single, flowing movement wherever possible.

Grammatical approaches

Knowledge of the structure of the English spelling system also helps learners to see that spelling is not just random but that there are logical reasons for the way words are spelt. This can help those learners who want to make sense of why words are spelt as they are.

As with any other skill, there are technical terms associated with spelling. While you do not want to put learners off with unnecessary jargon, you should not patronise them by avoiding these terms. After all, they will be learning technical terms associated with their occupation. Words which it may be helpful to explain are: vowel, consonant, verb, noun, syllable, prefix, suffix, stem.

Do not treat these as a grammar lesson, though. Introduce them in relation to particular aspects of spelling and other aspects of communication such as sentence structure.

- **Using a dictionary.** Show learners how to use a dictionary to check spellings.
- **Spelling rules.** There are a few spelling rules which can prove useful as long as you explain the rule carefully and give plenty of examples. Most of us will be familiar with ‘i’ before ‘e’ except after ‘c’, when the sound is ‘ee’. Other rules include:
 - You usually drop the final silent ‘e’ at the end of a word when you add a suffix beginning with a vowel, e.g. ‘make’ to ‘making’.
 - Most plurals are made by adding ‘s’. Words ending in ‘s’, ‘ss’, ‘ch’, ‘sh’ and ‘x’ add ‘es’ to make the plural.
 - Adding a prefix never changes the spelling of the root word, e.g. ‘uncommon’.

Some rules, however, can be very complex or have a large number of exceptions and this will confuse, rather than help, the learner. So any rules should apply to a large number of words, have few exceptions and be easy to understand.

Practise, practise, practise

A learner’s progress will depend a great deal on the amount of writing they do. They may be reluctant to write because of their spelling, but you should stress that this is the only way they will be able to improve. Create ‘safe’ situations initially so that you can help check and correct writing. Find as many opportunities as you can for learners to practise through work-related tasks, making notes, worksheets, exercises and so on.

Punctuation

What is the problem?

Many people have difficulties with punctuation – for example, the unnecessary apostrophes in a greengrocer’s shop in words like ‘potatoe’s’ or ‘potato’s’. Problems with punctuation may arise for different reasons:

- Learners may not know how punctuation makes writing clear. They may see punctuation as ‘the icing on the cake’ and not realise that practical problems or misunderstandings can occur if punctuation is not precise.
- Learners may not be aware of the full range of punctuation available to them. For example, learners who are confident and accurate in their use of full stops and commas may have less explicit knowledge of semicolons or colons.
- Even if they are aware of the range and purpose of punctuation, they may have difficulty putting it into practice.

Punctuation skills are required at all levels of the communication skill. At level 1 punctuation needs to be accurate, with sentences marked correctly by capital letters, full stops or question marks. At level 2 sentences must be formed correctly with appropriate punctuation, e.g. commas, apostrophes and inverted commas. At level 3 appropriate punctuation may also include bullet points, semicolons and colons.

Initial assessment

It can be very useful to talk through an example of the learner’s writing, asking them to identify types of punctuation they have used and explain to you why they have used them. This can help you both to reinforce existing accuracy and to identify any misconceptions or gaps in knowledge. It also offers an opportunity for the learner to acquire and develop skills such as proof-reading.

If the learner is particularly self-critical or if a draft of their work is not available, you could ask them to read something written by someone else and discuss with you what they notice about the use of punctuation. This can be a powerful strategy since it moves the focus away from the learner’s anxieties towards one which plans for the learner’s development.

Helping learners improve their punctuation

You can start by thinking about the function and purpose of punctuation – for example, how it helps us understand a piece of writing. You can also talk about how different punctuation may be appropriate to an informal e-mail or a business letter.

Using full stops

If a learner does not use full stops at the end of sentences, this may be because they do not know the conventions for ending written sentences. You could help this learner as follows:

- Explain the conventions for sentences and show examples in practice.
- Provide opportunities for the learner to apply the rules in a simulated exercise.
- Look for opportunities to apply these rules in their own writing.

Another learner may use a comma in place of a full stop. This may suggest that they need more help in understanding the nature of sentences and why a full stop rather than a comma is required. You could help this learner in the following ways:

- Introduce the learner to different types of sentence: statements, questions, exclamations and commands.
- Ask the learner to read their work aloud. This can help the learner to think about the ‘sound’ of a sentence and where a full stop is appropriate.
- Explain that sentences usually include a subject and a verb and ask them to identify complete and incomplete sentences in their own and other people’s writing.
- Ask the learner to reread and amend their first drafts, with your support, with the focus on sentence punctuation. They can then move to ‘unsupported’ redrafting.

Apostrophes

You can help show a learner that apostrophes may be used for different purposes:

- to show the ‘omission’ of a letter (e.g. don’t for do not)
- to indicate ‘possession’ (e.g. the chef’s hat).

This can help learners to understand why a particular type of punctuation is required.

Apostrophes is one area where examples of mistakes and misuse can be helpful. You could set the learner the challenge of finding as many as possible in a week – and asking them to explain the mistake and how they would correct it.

Show that punctuation makes sense!

Help learners to see that punctuation is not just about using grammatical rules – it can have a practical impact on the meaning of a sentence. Compare these two examples:

The manager said the learner was excellent.

‘The manager’, said the learner, ‘was excellent.’

This can help learners to see that punctuation is about making sure written communication is clear and precise. Ask them to find examples from their workplace where confused punctuation could cause real problems.

Helping learners with lists: commas, semicolons and bullet points

Wherever possible, use workplace examples as a basis for punctuation work. For example, the learner may produce written texts which include 'lists' of items. This will provide an excellent opportunity to consider approaches to punctuation.

For example, one use of the comma is to demarcate items in a list:

We would like to order paper, pens, a stapler and files.

The semicolon can be used to separate more detailed items in a list:

We would like to order six packets of white printer paper; three boxes of indelible pens; a stapler and three boxes of lever arch files.

You could ask the learner to consider when and why they might use bullet points. When would this be appropriate? How would it help to give a clear message?

We would like to order:

- six packets of white printer paper
- three boxes of indelible pens
- a stapler
- three boxes of lever arch files.

Practise, practise, practise

Seeing the importance of accurate punctuation at work can help learners to improve. It can also help their self-confidence in using punctuation rules.

Sentence structure

What is the problem?

We all use sentences throughout our everyday lives. Your learners use them whenever they speak. But when it comes to writing, they may have difficulties forming clear, correct sentences. There can be several reasons for this:

- Problems may arise because of differences between spoken and written language or between informal and formal writing.
- Some learners may not know the rules and conventions of sentence structure – even the word ‘grammar’ can trigger negative responses.
- Others may be aware of the rules and conventions but need support and development in learning how and when to apply them.
- Local dialects may also raise issues. For example, at all levels of the key skill learners are expected to ensure ‘subject–verb agreement’ – in other words using constructions such as ‘she was’ or ‘we were’ – and some local dialects may ‘break’ these rules.

Learners are expected to write using sentences at all levels of the communication skill. At level 1 they need to be able to form sentences correctly. At level 2 they need to be able to use conjunctions. At level 3 learners are expected to use a wider variety of sentences – for example, using the conditional and passive voice.

Initial assessment

A useful approach is to work with a learner, looking at a piece of their work. Discussing the writing together can help you both identify:

- strengths in sentence structure – for example, the learner’s use of tense
- errors – for example, occasional errors in subject–verb agreement
- areas for development – for example, the need to use complex, rather than simple, sentences.

This joint approach helps the learner acquire skills to review and check their own work – proof-reading and redrafting documents is an important aspect of the communication key skill. Try to look at more than one piece of writing because issues may vary according to the style, purpose and audience for the writing. This may provide you with an opportunity to discuss how different types of writing, for different purposes, will be written in different ways.

Helping learners improve their sentences

Firstly you need to make sure that learners are familiar with what a sentence is and when it is appropriate to write in complete sentences. A good way to do this is to gather together a whole range of materials – don't only use printed documents, include notes, shopping lists, e-mails, informal messages, etc. Identify which ones use sentences and which do not and discuss when writing in incomplete sentences *is* appropriate, such as in note-taking, text messaging or some e-mails.

For example:

How is a business letter saying:

I am writing to confirm my reservation of twenty people for lunch on Friday 13th May 2005.

different from a Post-it note:

Booked table for 1pm. See ya.

Look for links between different aspects of communication skills and topics. For example, at level 1 you could look at how writing in complete sentences links with sentence punctuation.

Complex sentences

You can move on to look at complex sentences. At level 2 evidence must show that:

Sentences are formed correctly with accurate use of conjunctions.

This means that, in their writing, learners must go beyond simple, one clause sentences such as 'I am applying for this job. I have got the skills required.' To 'I am applying for this job because I have got the skills required.' It also implies that learners have to do more than simply join two sentences together using 'and'.

If this is an area of development for a learner, you may want to talk to them about the nature of complex sentences. You could also:

- Give examples of conjunctions or 'joining words' and ask them to seek out opportunities in their own writing to use them.
- Ask the learner to find examples in documents and to discuss these.
- Give the learner a range of openings to sentences and ask them to complete them using a range of different conjunctions.
- Ask the learner, either from their own work or from examples provided, to build an argument linking simple sentences.

For example:

- I believe that health and safety regulations are important.
- New staff need to be told about the rules on their first day.
- The rules help to prevent accidents.

Could become . . .

I believe that health and safety regulations are important because they help to prevent accidents and it is important to tell new staff about them on their first day.

OR

New staff need to be told about health and safety regulations on their first day because they are important in helping to prevent accidents.

Developing use of complex sentences

Example

At level 2 learners are required to show evidence of writing in more complex sentences, using conjunctions such as although, but, when and because.

Step 1

Discuss the term 'complex sentence'. Contrast with simple (one clause) sentences such as:

The manager walked into the shop. She asked to speak to me.

Step 2

Explain how you can 'join' sentences together using a range of conjunctions (i.e. 'joining' words).

The manager walked into the shop in order to speak to me.

Step 3

Look for examples together such as:

- I came to work although I feel ill.
- I completed the work while I was in the office.

Step 4

Show how complex sentences can form a basis for effective communication:

- They can convey a wider range of meanings.
- They help express ideas more succinctly.
- They can help in the clear presentation of ideas.

Planning teaching and learning

- Select a specific topic – for example, the correct tense, using conjunctions.
- Find everyday examples. It can be helpful to look at examples of other people’s writing, either as models of good practice or work requiring redrafting. You can provide these yourself or, better still, ask the learner to look and collect examples.
- Make learning relevant – for example, by showing how correct sentence structure can help in writing letters or developing a clear argument.
- Balance direct teaching about the skill with opportunities for the learner to investigate examples of the skill in practice. For example:
 - you provide summaries of the conventions and rules and worksheets to practise the skill
 - the learner collects examples of work-based writing to discuss with you.
- Look for opportunities with the learner to use the new knowledge and skills in work-based tasks.

Make sure that you aim to develop and widen a learner’s understanding of the range of rules and conventions in writing. Focus on level of formality, purpose and audience, rather than making general evaluations about ‘correctness’. Think about ‘appropriate’ language rather than ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

A note about grammatical terms

Think about whether or not you will use grammatical terms with learners. If you do so in a purposeful and meaningful way, it can build confidence and clarity of understanding for the learner and give you shared vocabulary. If terminology is used as an end in itself, this can be off-putting.

For example, discussing subject–verb agreement can be difficult without a shared understanding of a verb and its function within a sentence. In the desire to simplify, verbs are often described as ‘doing’ words – but remember that some of the most common verbs ‘to be’ and ‘to have’ do not fit this definition.

You may like to think about a balanced approach to terminology. Terms should *support* learning rather than *becoming* the learning.

Practise, practise, practise

The learner will make most progress if you are able to help them build their confidence in writing and help them put their learning into practice.

In planning for opportunities to practise these skills, both you and the learner will need to think about identifying ‘safe’ steps so that the challenge provided by the written task builds on the learner’s current levels of knowledge, skills and understanding. Start from where they are; early successes and shared recognition of improvements will build confidence and embed learning.

Writing documents

What is the problem?

When writing, people need to think about:

- the kind of document they are writing – and who will read it
- how to organise what they want to write
- what style they are writing in.

One of the main reasons why learners can find writing hard is that they start writing too soon. It is much better to plan writing first.

Good writers are probably good readers as well. Learners can learn a lot about organisation and style by reading.

Writing documents is part of the communication key skill at all three levels, but the length and complexity of the writing increases with the levels. At level 1 candidates write business letters, memos, forms and short reports; at levels 2 and 3 they write essays, reports and articles. The ability to write in different styles also goes up with the levels.

Initial assessment

One of the starting points for writing is knowing what different kinds of documents are for. As a start, you should find out whether your learners can identify a range of documents and their purpose – they do not even have to do any writing yet!

But you should also look at examples of their writing to see how they organise their material and whether they can write in different styles.

Helping learners improve their writing

Becoming aware of the kinds of documents they are writing

Examine a range of documents used at work including business letters, memos, notes and reports, and any specific to their own job such as job cards or rotas. Discuss what the documents are for, who writes them, who reads them, and the conventions used.

Encourage learners to get into the habit of asking two basic questions:

- What am I writing, and who's going to read it?
- What is the best kind of document for the things I want to write?

The more familiar learners are with different kinds of documents, the better they will answer these questions. As you examine documents together:

- Ask them to tell you what the purpose of the documents is and discuss this.
- Point out the conventions used – for example, layout of business letters, paragraphs and headings in reports, abbreviations in memos.
- Ask them to look out for other kinds of documents at work.

Organising writing

The basic questions here are:

- **What should I put in?** What is relevant? How much detail is needed? Good writing says what needs to be said in the shortest way. Planning helps. There are two more ways in which you can help:
 - Show learners ways of deciding what is relevant – things like making a list, drawing a diagram and talking the subject through with someone.
 - Give examples – it is good to read well-written examples. If your learner is writing a business letter, get them to read a clear, concise one first.
- **How do I structure what I write?** There is often a logical sequence to ideas, but it may take some thought for this to become clear in a writer's mind. This is the hardest bit – and the one that often gets missed. Once the order is clear, the writer is free to think about technical things like where paragraph breaks should go, what headings to use and how to link ideas together.
 - Encourage learners to spend time finding the right order for what they want to say before they start writing.
 - Show them ways to work out sequences – like reordering a list, numbering the points on a diagram, drawing a flow chart or imagining they are giving someone step-by-step instructions.
 - Give examples of documents which include headings, sub-headings, highlighting and other features of layout – and get them to use these features on their wordprocessing package.

There are important links between this and planning talks and presentations.

Writing in an appropriate style

This is not about individual writing styles. People have their own 'voice' in writing just as they do in speaking.

Learners should, however, know that certain ways of writing are suitable for particular situations. For example, if they write a leaflet to advertise a service or product, it might be appropriate to use persuasive techniques such as rhetorical questions ('Why don't you try it out for yourself?'), loaded terms ('Better value', 'Top quality') and vivid punctuation ('It's a winner!'). In a factual report such devices would be inappropriate.

Show learners how a style can be built up at the level of individual words, sentences and whole texts:

- At the **word** level, choice of vocabulary is part of style: a report may use technical words and avoid words with ambiguous or imprecise meanings.
- At the **sentence** level, style is conveyed by the choice of structure: persuasive texts may address the reader directly ('You') whereas factual reports will use indirect forms of address and more complex sentences.
- At the **whole text** level, business letters and reports will be highly structured and use layout to signify structure. In informal letters, notes and e-mails, structure can be looser and layout conventions are less important.

You can also help learners become aware of and develop appropriate styles in the following ways:

- Give examples which use different ways of writing to suit a range of purposes – for example, adverts, factual reports, formal and informal letters, e-mails, opinion columns in newspapers.
- Give them plenty of opportunities to practise writing different kinds of documents – and check that the style is appropriate.

Opportunities for practice

Start with workplace examples to help your learners become familiar with the range of document types, from instructions, memos, letters and order forms through to telephone directories, newspapers, product brochures and catalogues. And spend time on documents which learners write themselves.

Encourage learners to use 'pre-writing' techniques such as making lists, diagrams and flow charts, so that the actual business of writing comes later. This kind of practice can build people's confidence in writing by breaking it down into manageable steps.

Organisational issues

So far this guide has focused on your individual work with learners in helping them to develop their communication skills. However, we are aware that there is only so much that you, as an individual trainer, can do. We all have to work under pressure and this places limitations on our time. If you are to support your learners effectively, you will in turn need support from your organisation.

Managing roles

In many training organisations individual trainers have limited time to spend with learners. For example, they may just meet up once a month at the learner's workplace. It can be difficult to fit in the time they need to work on communication skills. However, if trainers are to support learners effectively, they will need time and support.

- **Using a team approach.** Individual trainers within the organisation will all have their own personal strengths. If work is organised in a rigid way, this may not allow the flexibility to use these strengths to the full. Using a team approach can ensure that people's skills are maximised.
- **Balancing teaching and assessing.** As we stressed at the start of this guide, the role of training providers is changing. Where in the past it may have been common practice to concentrate on assessment, this is no longer sufficient. And this means that organisations need to find ways of balancing teaching and assessment so that enough time is available to help learners develop skills.
- **Making appropriate use of specialists.** There is no point trying to turn everyone in the organisation into a communication teacher. Individual trainers will be able to offer certain help, but in some cases you may need more specialist help. This may be provided:
 - **From within the organisation.** You may have staff who have particularly good skills in this area, or who are keen to develop them. Where this is the case, it clearly makes sense to make use of these skills – though this may have a knock-on effect on the amount of other work they can take on, and this needs to be scheduled in.
 - **From outside the organisation.** You may also be able to bring in help from, for example, the basic skills staff in a local college. This may be particularly appropriate for learners who have significant difficulties with basic skills, where specialist help can sometimes make a real difference.

Clarkson Evans

Example

Clarkson Evans recognises that, while much key skills learning should happen on the job, some may be catered for best near the job. They have recruited a part-time tutor to cover the underpinning knowledge elements of application of number and communication. The tutor analyses apprentices' responses to the questions on practice tests. From this analysis, the tutor provides individual programmes of support as well as whole-group activities. She seeks to relate the learning to the work of the apprentices. Teaching is a mixture of traditional 'lessons', combined with more informal approaches to learning, such as quizzes, as well as individual tuition.

All these issues may raise the wider need for **staff development**. Don't forget that training support is available through the Key Skills Support Programme.

Staff development at Broadland District Council

Example

Staff development is key to Broadland District Council's approach to apprentice learning. All staff keep a rolling competency log and a performance-related pay system targets and rewards the achievement of qualifications. All staff involved in the key skills process have achieved their own key skills, sometimes with learners signing witness testimonies for their training officers when evidence can be generated from discussions which have taken place.

Staff use Individual Learning Accounts to fund IT qualifications, and there is a great deal of ongoing training and development work including training and development units and qualifications and even Open University study in relevant disciplines. All staff are currently undertaking the new national guidance qualification, as this is seen as a vital part of their work with young people.

Much of the staff's key skills training is supported through a 'buddying' system where, for example, an equestrian tutor is partnered with a TDLB specialist or the senior training officer with a maths tutor. They identify strengths and weaknesses and mentor their partner as required.

Moving the organisation forward

You will need to consider how you take the organisation forward.

Quality assurance

As with all aspects of training and assessment, it is important to quality assure what you do. This includes:

- having a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve – and in particular standards that everyone in the organisation is committed to
- having clear procedures that everyone can follow to meet these standards
- monitoring what you do to ensure it is to standard.

Creating a development plan

The issues raised in this section may suggest the need for an organisational development plan. The following checklist summarises the main steps that your organisation may need to take.

A development plan for the organisation

Checklist

- How will you ensure that individual trainers have enough time to support learners with their communication skills?
- How will you support trainers? What further resources might you obtain?
- How much use will you make of group sessions? Where and when might these take place?
- How will you identify staff expertise? What staff development will you need to provide? What form will this take?
- Which resources for learners produced by other organisations will you consider? How will you review these?
- Will you develop any resources yourselves? If so, who will do this, and when?
- How will you quality assure the process?

Where next?

This guide has highlighted some of the most important issues in helping learners with communication skills – above all, the need to treat the learner as a whole person and to adopt a thorough approach where you:

- identify areas to work on
- plan learning activities with the learner
- review progress and give feedback.

The guide has also introduced a range of techniques that you may be able to use in your work with some learners. However, this guide is only a starting point. It should have helped you to reflect on your own role and how you would like to develop it.

You may wish to take a little time now to plan your next steps. Reflect in particular on what you did in the section on *Starting with you* and consider:

- how you would like to develop your skills further in this area
- ways in which you and your colleagues might go about developing your skills.

You may like to draw on some of the further resources below to support your own development.

Further resources for trainers

You may find the following publications useful:

Teaching Adults to Spell, Basic Skills Agency

Rediscover Grammar, David Crystal, Longman

A Guide to Better Spelling, Angela Burt, Stanley Thornes (2nd edition)

A Guide to Better Punctuation, Angela Burt, Stanley Thornes (2nd edition)

Appendix 1:

Coaching skills

Checklist

These are some of the most important things you can do when coaching a learner:

- **Value the learner.** The most important thing you can do is to demonstrate to the learner that you value them. You can do this by making time for them, doing the things you say you will do and, above all, genuinely caring about them.
- **Establish a relationship of trust.** The learner will learn best in an atmosphere where they feel at ease and able to talk openly. Set an example in your own behaviour – be relaxed, open and honest yourself.
- **Explain things clearly.** When you need to tell or show the learner something, take care to explain it clearly in language they will understand. Give the reasons for things as well. This is an important part of the communication key skill.
- **Ask questions.** You can use questions to encourage the learner to talk, to check their understanding. Again, this is part of the communication key skill.
- **Listen carefully.** Make sure you listen actively to what the learner says – and that you show you are listening by looking at them, nodding your head, etc.
- **Give feedback and encouragement.** You also need to encourage the learner as they learn.
- **Reassure the learner.** Learners may be anxious about aspects of their key skills. Help them feel they are not alone, that other people share their worries and that everyone makes mistakes.
- **Set challenges.** At the same time, the learner will only learn by pushing themselves beyond what they have already achieved. When you plan learning, try to set targets that are both achievable and challenging.
- **Encourage independence.** Your overall goal must be to help the learner become a better, more independent learner who is able to take increasing responsibility for their own learning.

Appendix 2:

Planning a group session

Checklist

When you need to plan a group session, bear these points in mind:

- **Set clear aims.** Be clear about what you want to achieve in the session, bearing in mind your previous discussions with the learners. Make sure that learners are ready to tackle this topic, i.e. that they have any prior knowledge required.
- **Tackle manageable chunks.** We all have limits to our concentration span and many people find it hard to concentrate on a single activity for more than 20 minutes. So do not do too much at once – break things down into manageable chunks that you can cover in, say, a half-hour session.
- **Structure the session.** Plan how you will divide up the time between introduction, presentation, activities, discussion, next steps, etc. You may find it helpful to prepare a session plan.
- **Make learning active.** Make sure that there is a variety of things for the learners to do. These could include individual work (such as worksheets), group activities, discussions, etc.
- **Prepare resources.** Get any materials such as worksheets ready and copied. Make sure you have any equipment you need (which could include pens and paper).
- **Do the basics.** Arrange a time and place and make sure the learners know about it.

Appendix 3:

Evaluating resources

Checklist

Relevance

- Is it pitched at the right level for your learners?
- Is it clear to the learners what they are going to achieve?
- Are examples relevant to your learners?
- Is it directly linked to the key skills standards?
- Is it up to date and authoritative?
- Can you adapt it to your own context?

Writing style

- Are the tone and style friendly and informal?
- Is it written in an adult, non-patronising way?
- Are introductions stimulating and welcoming?

Diagrams

- Are diagrams appropriate and relevant?
- Are there enough illustrations to make the materials visually interesting?
- Are captions complete and informative?

Study skills

- Is there clear advice on how best to use the materials?
- Will you need to supplement the guidance given on how to use the materials?
- Will you have to provide tutor support to help users who have problems when using the materials?

Interaction with learners

- Will your learners be kept active as they work through the material – are there enough questions and exercises?
- Will you need to devise additional exercises and activities to supplement the material?
- Will learners have a realistic idea of how well their learning is going?

Tutor support

- Is the material designed for tutor support?
- Are tutor-assessed activities built into the material at appropriate places?
- Are tutors given guidance on how to assess activities?

**Copies of this publication
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