



Words Matter

Language, Listening and the Power of Professional Communication



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Remember when we used to say Absent Parent? As families evolve, so does the language we use to describe them. Terms like custodial and non-custodial parent may no longer reflect the values of dignity, inclusion, and clarity that we aim to uphold. But what should we say instead—and how do we get there together? This interactive session explores how the words and phrases we use shape our programs, perceptions, and relationships with the people we serve. We'll examine the impact of legacy terminology and discuss how to build momentum toward inclusive, accurate, and empathetic language.

In addition, the session will dive into practical communication techniques for frontline staff—especially those interacting with clients over the phone and by email. Whether you're a caseworker, supervisor, or policy leader, you will learn customer service best practices, including tone, clarity, empathy, and how to communicate effectively even when you don't have all the answers. Because in a service-focused environment, how we make people feel matters just as much as what we say.

Join us to reflect, learn, and equip yourself with tools for respectful, people-centered communication.





Words Matter- how we use them influences perception and understanding

- Language affects others' emotions and sense of self-worth.
- It's a matter of basic respect.
- Creates safe and welcoming workplaces.
- Allows people to be their authentic self.
- Reduces depersonalization and bias.
- What choices do you want to make?
- Disrupt patterns, choose compassion!





Words Matter- how we use them influences perception and understanding

- Person Centered Communication
- Pronouns, why it matters
- Violent Language
- Offensive Language and Microaggressions
- Idioms and Metaphors
- Child Support Terms





Person Centered Language

- Emphasizes a person's humanity.
- Places the person before their condition or circumstances.
- Examples-
 - She uses a wheelchair vs. she's in a wheelchair.
 - They are autistic vs. they have autism.
 - She's demented vs. she's a person living with dementia.
 - He's an addict vs. he's a person with a substance abuse disorder.





Pronouns

- Nonbinary gender is not a new phenomenon, but a longstanding part of human experience.
- We make assumptions based on a person's appearance or name.
- They/them is correct grammar and commonly used.
- Normalize stating preferred pronouns.
- Correct gently and respectfully.
- Apologize without making a big deal.





Violent Language

- Desensitizes violence, making it appear normal.
- Words and phrases used to control others.
- View problems through an aggressive or adversarial lens.
- Uncompromising and polarized opinions.
- Shifting toward hostility.
- Impact on survivors of violence.
- Impact on refugees, generational trauma.





Violent Language

Saying	Original Meaning
Pay through the nose	9 th Century poll tax- those who refused to pay were threatened to have their noses slit from the tip to the eyebrow.
Raked over the coals	Middle Ages- people accused of witchcraft were dragged over hot coals.
Diehard	1700s- refers to those who struggled the longest when they were hanged.
Deadline	American Civil War- line that was drawn to stop prisoners from escaping, those who crossed would be shot.





Evolving from Violent Language

(Anna Taylor- revised)

Instead of-

We're going to pull the trigger.

I'll take a stab at it.

Did we jump the gun?

What's the deadline?

Can you shoot me an email?

I bombed the presentation.

Let's just roll with the punches.

Let's not beat a dead horse.

Try this-

We're going to launch it.

I'll take the first pass at it.

Did we start too early?

What's the due date?

Can you send me an email?

I didn't do my best.

Let's be flexible.

Let's not focus on that anymore.





Offensive Language and Microaggressions

Definition from Oxford Languages

noun: **microaggression**; plural

a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.





Offensive Language and Microaggressions

- “I own you” may be used to mean that you have authority or dominance over someone else, sometimes in a joking or gloating manner.
- “Slave driver” or “works like a slave” may be used to describe a boss who expects too much, or someone who works too hard.
- These phrases trivialize the trauma of slavery, and are offensive, and hurtful, especially to people whose ancestors experienced slavery.





Offensive Language and Microaggressions

- “Let’s have a powwow” may be used to suggest a meeting to discuss something important.
- “Low man on the totem pole” may be used to describe a person with little experience or seniority.
- The phrases misinterpret and belittle the cultural, social and spiritual celebrations of Native American communities.





Offensive Language and Microaggressions

- “Long time no see”
- “No can do”
- “Chop chop”
- These phrases were developed to mock 19th century Chinese immigrants’ limited use of English.





Metaphors and Idioms

- “Treated like a red-headed stepchild” may be used to refer to a project or program that is underfunded or neglected.
- The phrase originated with the idea that a red haired child’s parentage was suspect, resulting in the child being treated less favorably.





Metaphors and Idioms

- Off the reservation
- Grandfathered in
- Going postal
- Blacklist or whitelist
- Lynch mob
- Just got off the banana boat





Metaphors and Idioms, huh?

- Under the weather
- Break a leg
- Cold turkey
- Nip it in the bud (or is it butt?)
- Bite the dust





Child Support and Related Terms

- Absent parent
- Deadbeat dad
- Welfare queen
- Baby mama or baby daddy
- Using gender to describe roles
- Non-custodial parent and custodial parent
- Abbreviations and acronyms





Your stories and examples.
How can we do better?
Calling in vs. calling out



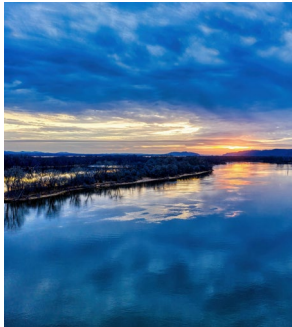


Links to References

- [U of MN Center for Practice_Person Centered Language](#)
- [Tava Health_Why Pronouns Matter](#)
- [National Library of Medicine_Chosen Name Use is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms](#)
- [Nimdzi_How Language an Influence Violence](#)
- [Mastering Cultural Differences_The Power of Words](#)
- [linkedin Pulse_Psychological Impact of Violent Metaphors](#)



WELCOME



Annette Frank

Yamhill County, Oregon

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

**Discovering your Professional
Identity**

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Generally, we categorize communication into the four main mediums of communication: verbal, nonverbal, written, and visual.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication refers to any form of communication that is not transmitted through spoken word.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Verbal communication is any form of communication that occurs through spoken word.

VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Visual communication means the transfer of information to a person in a format that can be read or viewed.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Written communication involves the use of words, sentences, and paragraphs in order to communicate.



Effective Communication

<https://www.coursera.org/articles/communication-effectiveness>

Effective communication is the process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, opinions, knowledge, and data so that the message is received and understood with clarity and purpose.

When we communicate effectively, both the sender and receiver feel satisfied.



Effective Communication

<https://www.coursera.org/articles/strategies-in-communication?msockid=1316d55d983b698f0fdec36199c368d9>

Concise – Get to the point

Clear – Say/write exactly what you mean

Concrete – Known factual data

Courteous – Treat others how you expect to be treated

Complete – Provide all information

Coherent – Does it make sense

Correct – Rooted in “State and Federal rules and laws”



How do we communicate?





PHONE ETIQUETTE BASICS

<https://blog.hubspot.com/service/phone-etiquette#phone-etiquette>

Be available

**Immediately
introduce yourself**

Speak clearly

**Only use
speakerphone
when necessary**

**Actively listen
and take notes**

**Use proper
language**

Remain cheerful

**Ask before
putting someone
on hold or
transferring a call**

**Be honest if you
don't know the
answer**

**Be mindful of
your volume**

**Check for and
respond to
voicemails**

PHONE ETIQUETTE

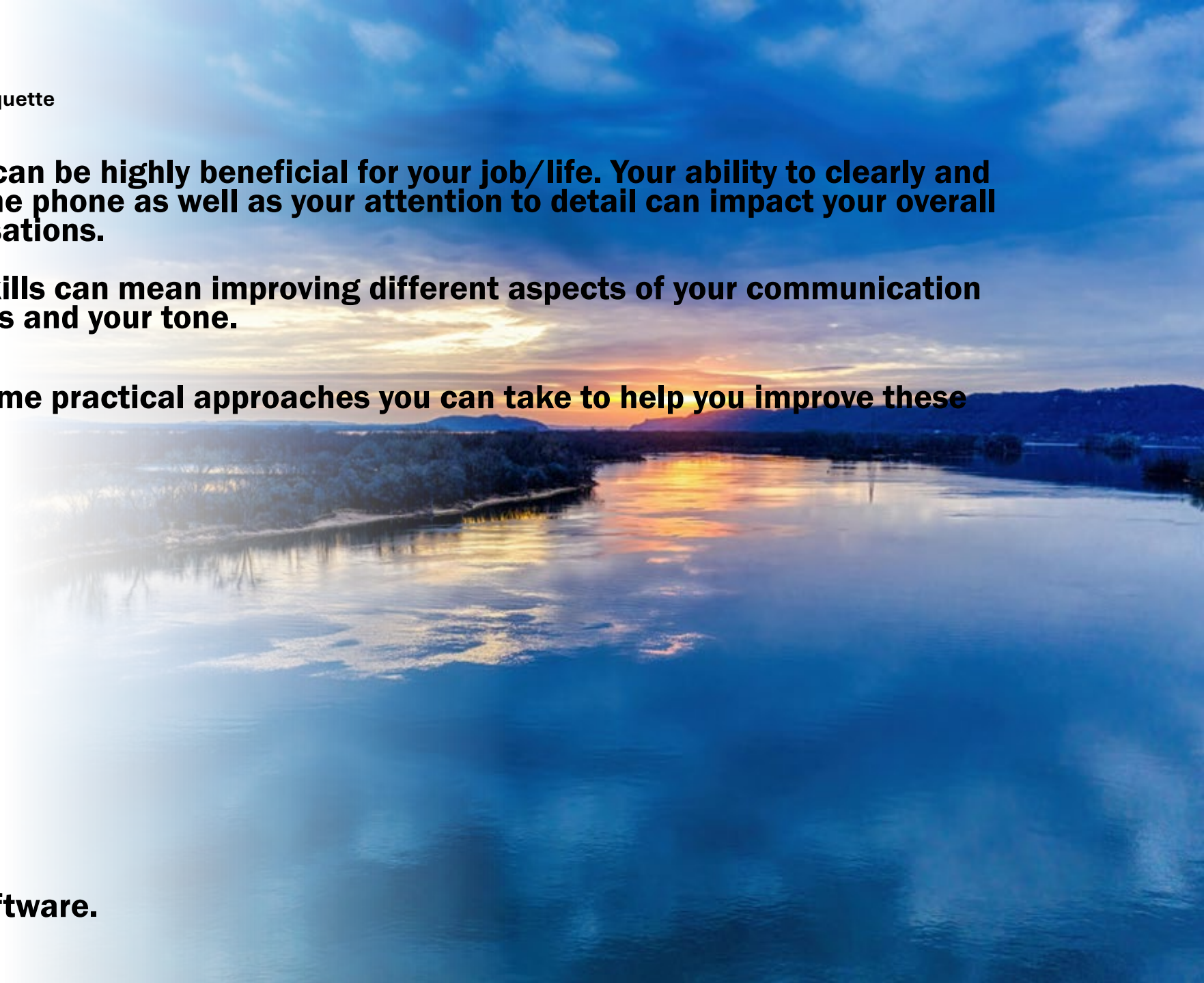
<https://blog.hubspot.com/service/phone-etiquette>

Having effective phone skills can be highly beneficial for your job/life. Your ability to clearly and effectively communicate on the phone as well as your attention to detail can impact your overall success during phone conversations.

Developing effective phone skills can mean improving different aspects of your communication skills, conversation techniques and your tone.

The following steps outline some practical approaches you can take to help you improve these skills:

- **Practice with a script.**
- **Record your voice.**
- **Focus on your tone.**
- **Work on clarity.**
- **Role play with a coworker**
- **Learn how to use calling software.**



EMAIL ETIQUETTE

<https://upjourney.com/why-is-email-etiquette-important>



What Is Email Etiquette?

Email etiquette is the rulebook for crafting the perfect email. It's a set of guidelines that helps us communicate smoothly and effectively without stepping on any digital toes.

Why is Email Etiquette Important?

Being considerate and mindful that your message lands right with the person on the other end.

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EMAIL ETIQUETTE

<https://upjourney.com/why-is-email-etiquette-importa>

Clarity and conciseness: Crafting messages that are easy to understand, straight to the point, and free from fluff or unnecessary jargon. Less is often more when it comes to email communication.

Tone and language: Striking the right balance between professional and friendly while also being mindful of the recipient's culture, background, and preferences.

Subject lines: Create informative, attention-grabbing subject lines that accurately convey the purpose or urgency of your email.

Formatting and organization: Use proper formatting, paragraphs, and bullet points to ensure your emails are visually appealing and easy to read.

Responsiveness: Provide timely replies and follow-ups, respect the recipient's time, and demonstrate effective communication skills.

Email Etiquette

Guidelines for sending emails to
Learner Mentors, faculty & staff

1

Include a clear, concise
subject line so I know what
your email is about

2

Address people
properly

3

A nice
greeting
sets the
tone

4

Identify why you
are sending the
email

5

If requesting
a meeting
include
availability

From: Coffey, Cathryn
Sent: Tuesday, September 08, 2015 3:26 PM
To: Smith, Jane
Subject: Advising Meeting

Dear Professor Smith,

Hope this message finds you well. My name is Megan, I am a first year student at Richard Bland. I was wondering if you would have time this week to meet with me to discuss courses for next semester. I am available any day this week after 2:00pm

Let me know what time is best or if I can provide any further information. Thank you in advance, looking forward to hearing from you.

Cathryn Coffey
ccoffey@RBC.edu, 804-862-6100 Ext 8556



Did I spell everything
correctly?



How is my grammar?



How is my tone?



Please and thank you
go a long way



What is virtual meeting etiquette?

<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/virtual-meeting-etiquette>

Virtual meeting etiquette is the set of rules and guidelines that participants follow during a virtual/video call.

Although you're not in the same physical space as your colleagues, it's still important to maintain professionalism and respect for everyone in the meeting.

For instance, you should still be on time for virtual meetings, just as you would for an onsite meeting.

Why is virtual meeting etiquette important?

Virtual meeting etiquette is critical to having a successful online meeting. It encourages team members to work punctually, respectfully, professionally, and cooperatively.



Proper etiquette during virtual meetings can achieve the following

- **Maintain respect for everyone:** Having guidelines that promote fairness during meetings will ensure everyone feels heard and valued. For example, not speaking over others.
- **Keep meeting focused:** Meetings that go off track can be unproductive and a waste of time. Proper rules can help keep presenters stick to relevant topics and prevent participants from veering away from the purpose of the meeting.
- **Ensuring professionalism:** Different employees may have different ideas about dress codes and meeting behaviors. Having rules for attire and mannerisms will ensure everyone's on the same page.





Before your virtual/video meeting starts:



Find a Quiet and Suitable Location



Know Your Meeting Platform



Test Your Meeting Devices & Equipment



Set Effective Background & Lights



Be mindful of time zones and cultural boundaries



Schedule Meetings and Send Links in Advance



Dress appropriately

Practice during
your virtual/video
meeting:

Be Punctual

Be professional

Come Prepared

Look at your
camera and speak
clearly

Start meeting with
greeting - Hi!

Introductions - if
needed

Be Patient and
Adaptable

Mute Your Mic
When You're Not
Talking

Avoid Distractions

Be Respectful and
Courteous

Avoid multitasking

Don't disrupt
speakers

Take notes (without
the clickety-clack
of your keyboard)

No munching on
snacks (unless a
lunch meeting)



RESOURCES:

<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/virtual-meeting-etiquette>

<https://virtualmeetingworld.com/guides/everything-you-need-to-know-about-virtual-meeting-etiquette/>

<https://upjourney.com/why-is-email-etiquette-important>

<https://www.coursera.org/articles/strategies-in-communication?msocid=1316d55d983b698f0fdec36199c368d9>

<https://www.coursera.org/articles/communication-effectiveness>

<https://helpfulprofessor.com/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/>

<https://www.indeed.com/>

THE END



Q & A - Words Matter

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