

COMMUNICATING ON THE JOB



AGENDA

- Starter
- The Phone Call
- The Write Stuff
- Customer Service
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

Objectives

Students will learn guidelines for answering the phone at work.

Students will recognize the importance of good writing skills in a work environment.

Students will demonstrate the importance of good customer service and learn techniques for dealing with customers.

Materials Needed

- A sponge ball, rolled-up socks, or similar soft item to throw (Starter)
- One copy of the “Writing for the Workplace” activity sheet for each student (Part II)
- A transparency of the “Whoops” activity sheet or one copy for each student (Part II)

Starter (3 minutes)

Tell students that they are going to conduct an experiment on ways to answer the phone. Hold up a sponge ball, rolled-up socks, or a similar soft item. Explain to students that the sponge ball represents a phone call. They will pretend to answer the phone when the ball is thrown to them.

Explain to students that while the ball is in flight, you are going to say “home” or “work.” If you say “home,” students are to answer the call as if they are at home. If you say “work,” they are to answer as if they are clerks at a company called Ajax Graphics.

Toss the ball to several students, with equal numbers of home and work calls. Ask students to discuss what they noticed about the differences between the ways they answered the calls at home and the calls at work.

Explain to students that there are some guidelines that are used in business communications—both written and on the telephone. As a new employee, it is important to understand what these guidelines are.

Part I The Phone Call (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students learn guidelines for answering the phone at work.

1. Students learn how to find out about a company’s rules for answering the telephone.

Ask students to imagine that it’s their first day at a new job. Explain that many companies have guidelines that detail how employees should answer the phone. Ask students to consider how they might find out about these guidelines. Lead students to understand that they can ask the boss, ask a coworker, or listen to coworkers answering the phone.

2. Students explore the basics of answering phone calls at work.

Ask students to imagine that there are no explicit company guidelines about phone calls at their job. Elicit suggestions from them about what to say when answering the phone in this situation. Write student responses on the board. (Students might respond: greet the caller with “good afternoon” or “good morning,” followed by your company’s name and your name; ask how you may assist the caller.)

3. Students discuss using a proper tone during a business call.

Ask students, “When you answered your home phone during the starter, how do you think you might have sounded to a caller? Were you friendly? How was it different from the way you answered the work call? How do you feel when you call an organization and the person who answers is gruff and sounds unfriendly?”

Ask students how the following sounds: (in a friendly voice) “Thank you for calling Ajax Graphics. Bill speaking. How may I help you?”

Point out to students that they can also be too casual; they shouldn’t confuse being casual with being friendly. Being friendly can put the caller at ease, but being casual can be unprofessional. It is possible to be professional and friendly at the same time.

4. Students practice answering phone calls in a professional manner.

Ask students to form pairs. Tell students to alternate between caller and employee as they role-play answering the phone for Ajax Graphics. Remind the class to use the list of guidelines about how to answer the phone.

5. Students learn the importance of taking messages.

When students have finished, ask, “Suppose the phone rings during your shift. You answer it, but the caller wants someone who is not available. How can you make sure to tell the person about the phone call they missed?”

Lead students to understand that if a voicemail system is not in use, they should always write down phone messages.

Ask students to identify the information that they should write when taking a phone message. Write students’ responses on the board. Explain that the most important parts of a phone message are: (a) the name of the person the message is for, (b) the name of the person who called, (c) the caller’s company or business, (d) the caller’s phone number, (e) the date and time they called, and (f) the message the caller would like to leave.

Point out to students that writing a complete message with all of the above information will prevent confusion in the future.

Part II The Write Stuff (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students recognize the importance of good writing skills in a work environment.

1. Students identify writing tasks they might have in the workplace.

Explain to students that all businesses, whether big or small, need employees who not only speak well but also write well. Tell students that good writing skills will help them get and keep a job. Businesses need people who can express ideas clearly and communicate information effectively.

Ask students to identify the kinds of things they might write in a business situation. (Students might respond: letters, emails, reports, memos, project notes, proposals, pamphlets or brochures, newsletters, speeches.)

2. Students learn common elements of business writing.

Remind students that they learned about business letters when they wrote their cover letters and thank-you letters.

Distribute the “Writing for the Workplace” activity sheet and discuss it with the class. Remind students to remember the big picture—they want to share information and ideas. They want the reader to know why they are writing and what the reader needs to understand or do. Tell students to always consider the impact of their writing on the reader.

3. Students identify language that should be avoided in the workplace.

Ask students to identify language that should be avoided in business communications. Elicit the following from students and ask them to provide examples of each: slang, cliches, and insensitive or inappropriate language. Write student responses and examples on the board.

Show the transparency or distribute copies of the “Whoops” activity sheet to each student. As a class or in small groups, identify and correct the poor phrasing and inappropriate expressions.

Summarize this activity by pointing out that workplace writing should be clear and should use effective, honest language. Writing should be direct, concise, tactful, and sensitive to all genders, races, and religions.

Part III Customer Service (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students demonstrate the importance of good customer service and learn constructive ways to deal with customers.

1. Students role-play to show the difference between good and bad customer service.

Ask for four volunteers.

Tell the volunteers that they are going to role-play two restaurant scenes. Two of the volunteers will be servers, and the other two will be customers. The two servers will each take a turn receiving the customers’ orders. Quietly tell one server to behave in a friendly, cheerful, and polite manner. Then, quietly tell the other server to act disinterested, bored, and even rude. Have the two customers sit facing each other at the front of the room, as if they are in a restaurant.

Instruct the rest of the class to carefully watch the interactions between the two servers and the customers. Tell the volunteers to begin, allowing the volunteer playing the polite server to take the orders first.

2. Students analyze the differences in service shown in the role play.

When the volunteers have finished role-playing, ask, “Which server would you rather have in a restaurant?” Have students describe why they would prefer one server over the other.

Explain that many people will pay more or travel farther to get good service. Others will forgo buying an item if they have had a bad service experience with the company selling it.

Point out that employees are on the front line of customer service. Suggest to students that many of their first jobs will involve direct dealings with customers and that much of their success will be tied to the customer service they provide.

3. Students discuss the benefits of good customer service.

Ask students to identify jobs in which an employee can directly benefit from providing good customer service. Students may suggest that in the restaurant business, for example, income—through tips—can be directly tied to the service that employees provide their customers. In retail, employees are often given a commission based on their sales.

Point out that even in other jobs, good customer service can benefit employees. For example, if an employee provides good customer service, their employer may notice. Also, a customer who has been treated well may make a favorable comment to the supervisor, which could lead to a raise or promotion for the employee. Good customer service has a positive impact on the company and is an important part of being a good employee.

4. Students learn how to handle an unhappy customer.

Ask students, “How would you handle a situation in which a customer is upset with you no matter what you try to do?” Write student responses on the board.

Explain that there are a few guidelines that students can use to help them in these situations. Give them the following guidelines:

- Keep a positive, friendly attitude.
- Keep calm. If you stay calm, the customer will often calm down, too.
- If you cannot get the customer to calm down, tell them that you think they should speak with your supervisor. Get your supervisor and ask them to speak with the customer.

5. Students list ways to show good customer service.

Ask students to identify some of the ways that they can demonstrate good service to a customer. (Students might respond: smile, make eye contact, good attitude, be polite, calling customers “sir” or “ma’am.”)

Conclusion *(2 minutes)*

Review with students the ways in which they will have to communicate on the job. Ask, “Which communication skills do you need to develop?” Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- Business phone calls should be friendly enough to put the caller at ease, but also be professional.
- It is important to remember to take thorough messages if a caller wants to speak with someone who is not available.
- Workplace writing should be clear and businesslike and should use effective and appropriate language.

Student Assessment

1. Describe the difference between how you talk on the phone at home and how you should talk on the phone at work.
2. List three things someone can do to provide good customer service.
3. List three positive ways to handle an unhappy customer.

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Using Quotations

“Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Have students create a list of guidelines for making excellence on the job a habit.

Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

Practice telephone etiquette with students. Callers should always identify themselves: “Hello, this is _____. May I speak with _____?” Stress the importance of identifying yourself on the phone. It’s polite and saves people from asking who is calling. When answering, a pleasant hello and “May I take a message?” are effective.

Have students practice answering the phone. Have them assess each other’s performances.

Writing in Your Journal

Have students practice their handwriting in their journals.

Have students critique and examine their own handwriting by identifying numbers, letters, and words that they can write more legibly. Discuss the importance of legible handwriting to workplace communication.

Using Technology

Have students practice and record outgoing messages that would be appropriate for voice mail systems at work. (For example, “You have reached the voice mailbox of _____. I am unable to answer your call at the moment. Please leave a message, and I will get back to you as soon as possible.”) Have students practice good articulation and tone in class, ensuring that they speak clearly and slowly.

Have students assess each other’s recordings or performances.

Homework

Have students create a list of the different forms of communication they might use on the job.

Discuss the various forms of communication used in the business world and why it is beneficial to be an effective communicator at work.

Additional Resources

Read or hand out excerpts from *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie.

Ask students if they think Carnegie's advice is valuable or not. Have them describe ways they can utilize his advice in the workplace.

WRITING FOR THE WORKPLACE

Characteristic	Explanation	Example
Starting point	Think about the need your letter addresses.	I'm writing to apply... As you requested...
Purpose	You'll be solving problems, completing work, or asking for action through sharing ideas and information.	A possible solution to the problem is... We may need to modify our procedures for...
Audience	Think about your reader. Know your reader's position, needs, and knowledge. Craft the message accordingly.	The staff at Three Oaks Day Camp appreciated the honor of the mayor's presence at our benefit dinner last week. On behalf of the Hawks Little League team, I wish to thank you for the tickets you sent. We had a great time at the Lakers game.
Form	Most workplace writing has a standard format: (1) three-part structure explaining purpose, giving details, and suggesting action, and (2) data, including strategies, numbers, and visuals.	I'm writing for information about your new photocopy machine. Our company is small but makes at least 100 copies per day. Please call (969) 555-1756 Monday through Thursday and ask for me, Julio Vaca. We offer the following services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Window washing • Carpet cleaning • Floor waxing
Voice	Be conversational but direct. Do not be too formal or too personal.	We welcome you to the Pasadena business community. I could set up a news conference that will give us good publicity.

WHOOPS

1. That was a cool presentation.
2. I don't mean to rock the boat.
3. Our product will appeal to the lower class.
4. All persons employed by this company should make certain to schedule their commutes to ensure that their arrivals are in compliance with their agreed-upon start times.
5. Our department will have to go back to square one.
6. Ms. Herman is burned out, so I suggested she take her vacation early.
7. Contractor may not assign or delegate their duties hereunder.
8. Chicks will be allowed to play on the company softball team.
9. I put the stuff you asked for in this envelope.
10. In consideration of your payment of \$1,000.00, receipt is hereby acknowledged.