

SPEAKING RESPONSIBLY



AGENDA

- Starter
- Can You Handle the Truth?
- Tell Me about Yourself
- Every Word Counts
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

Objectives

Students will discover the power of words.

Students will recognize that people are responsible for what they say.

Students will discover that people have the ability to control what they say and how they say it.

Students will recognize that using words responsibly is part of being an effective communicator.

Materials Needed

- A clip of the courtroom scene from the movie *A Few Good Men*, in which Jack Nicholson explodes with the famous line, “You can’t handle the truth!” (Part I)
- One copy of the “Tell Me About Yourself” activity sheet for each student (Part II)

Starter (3 minutes)

Begin class today by writing “speaker + listener = communication” where everyone can see. Have a volunteer read the equation out loud. Then, write “responsible speaker + critical listener = effective communication” below it. Review key points from the previous lesson about being a critical listener.

Circle the word “speaker” in the first equation as you say, “Today, we are going to focus on this part of the equation and the importance it has in communication.” Leave the equation for use throughout the session.

Part I Can You Handle the Truth? (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students recognize the power of words and learn that people are responsible for what they say.

1. Students observe a scene from a movie to consider the power of words.

Before class, set up the clip of the famous courtroom confrontation scene from *A Few Good Men* between Tom Cruise, playing a lawyer sent to investigate the death of a marine, and Jack Nicholson, playing the head of the military base where the marine died.

To give students background, explain that at this point in the film, Cruise suspects that there’s been a cover-up in the death of the marine. He suspects that Nicholson’s character gave an order that resulted in the death. In this climactic scene, Cruise—in his frustration—demands the truth, to which Nicholson replies, “You can’t handle the truth!”

After viewing the clip, discuss the power of words. Ask questions such as the following:

- What power do words have for Cruise in this movie? (Words will provide information that can help him determine whether or not a cover-up has taken place.)
- How did Nicholson and his staff use words in this movie? (They used them to lie and cover up what really happened.)
- What was the “truth” that Nicholson thought a civilian couldn’t handle? (In his mind, the military has to toughen up its soldiers to face the horrors of war by any means necessary. He views these methods as needed, and says that the death, though tragic, was beneficial.)

2. Students discuss and identify responsibility.

Circle the words “responsible speaker” in the second equation on the board. Ask, “What do you think it means to be a responsible speaker?” Elicit from students that one meaning is to speak honestly based on one’s own experience.

Ask these questions to prompt a discussion:

- How did Nicholson use words in the courtroom scene in this particular speech? (He used them to rationalize, or justify, his unjustifiable behavior.)
- Is this an example of speaking responsibly? (Absolutely not; covering up the truth is a manipulation of words in order to deceive someone.)
- Does Nicholson take responsibility for his use of words? (Yes; he believes he is doing a great service to his country by “toughening up” the military. He has thought things through and believes that what he is doing is right.)
- What are the consequences of his words? (He’s now been exposed.)
- What will be the consequences of his actions? (He will likely receive a dishonorable discharge from the military, face a court martial, and go to jail.)

Conclude the discussion by saying, “Words are powerful, so be careful and think about the consequences of your words, since you must take responsibility for them. Remember, if the words come out of your mouth, they are yours.”

Part II Tell Me about Yourself (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students learn that people have the ability to control what they say and how they say it.

1. Students analyze two interviews.

Tell students that our words create an impression, so it is important to use words in ways that show respect for ourselves and for the people around us. In a job interview, for example, a prospective employer can learn a lot about you based on what you say and how you say it.

Distribute copies of the “Tell Me about Yourself” activity sheet to each student. Have volunteers act out the roles of the interviewer, candidate 1, and candidate 2, improvising actions as they speak. Ask students to listen carefully to these interviews, thinking about what the candidates say and how they say it.

2. Students distinguish effective speaking from ineffective speaking.

Have students list the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate. Write their responses on the board. (Candidate 1 is fast, strong, and athletic but is boastful and has no related experience. He treats the job lightly and makes promises he may not be able to keep, such as using his bike for deliveries. Candidate 2 is a problem solver—he’s already figured out how to fit the job into his schedule. He also provides examples of comparable work he’s done and skills/knowledge that would make him successful. However, candidate 2 has no direct experience.)

Ask students to tell, by a show of hands, which candidate they would hire for the job. Have a student who supports candidate 2 summarize how this person was able to use words responsibly. (Candidate 2 used words to make a good impression, showing respect for himself and the position. He communicated his interest in and showed that he is qualified for the job.)

Underline the words “responsible speaker” on the board. Ask, “What else does it mean to be a responsible speaker?” Elicit from students that responsible speakers speak not only truthfully, but also respectfully. They use words to make a positive impression. Ask how using words responsibly might benefit candidate 2. (He will probably get the job.)

3. Students recognize the connection between nonverbal communication and effective speaking.

Point out to students that the “Tell Me about Yourself” activity sheet has no stage directions except “lounging across the chair.” Ask them to reread each interview, trying to envision how each candidate might speak or behave as he says the words. Have students provide their own stage directions based on their visualizations. If time permits, allow volunteers to act out the scenes with stage directions.

Part III Every Word Counts (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students learn that using words responsibly is part of being an effective communicator.

1. Students recognize the role that effective communication plays in persuasion.

Remind students that you must choose your words carefully in an interview—not only to make a good impression, but also to persuade someone to hire you. You want to convince a prospective employer that you are the right person for the job.

Explain that one purpose of effective speaking is to persuade—to try to sway someone’s thoughts or feelings. Ask students to think of other times when words are used to persuade. (Students may respond: in advertisements, in sales, in political speeches, in fund-raising efforts.) Then, ask students to think of situations in which they have used words to try to persuade or convince someone of something. (Students may suggest that they have tried to convince a teacher to give them an extension on a paper, tried to convince their parents to allow them to stay out late, tried to convince their employer to give them a raise or a day off.)

Have volunteers act out a few of the situations above, as the class critiques the effectiveness of their words. Ask, “What kind of impression did (student’s name) make? Were their arguments compelling? If not, what might they have said to convince the other person to honor that request?”

2. Students recognize the importance of effective communication in conveying messages clearly.

Point out that clarity is another reason for using words responsibly. When you communicate simply and clearly, you are more likely to get your point across. Ask students to briefly write a set of directions from your classroom to the cafeteria. Have volunteers read their directions. Ask students which set of directions would most effectively get a new student from this classroom to the cafeteria.

3. Students recognize the role that effective communication plays in diplomacy.

Finally, explain that diplomacy is yet another reason to choose words carefully and speak responsibly. Being honest and tactful, rather than blunt, can give people a gentle push in the right direction.

Encourage discussion on how to be diplomatic in the following situations:

- A friend is planning to wear casual clothes to a formal party.
- A friend is commenting on every scene in a movie, and it's annoying.
- A friend is considering applying for a job that requires skills you know this person does not have.

Conclude that words are powerful agents of change when they are used responsibly.

Conclusion (2 minutes)

End this session by referring to the equation that you wrote on the board to begin class. Ask, "Who do you think has the most power in this equation—the speaker or the listener?" Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- Words are powerful, so use them wisely.
- You must take responsibility for your words because they belong to you.
- Using words responsibly is part of being an effective communicator.
- Speak responsibly for persuasion, clarity, and diplomacy.

Student Assessment

1. List four things that you can do to be a responsible speaker.
2. Without naming them, describe someone you know who is a responsible speaker and someone who is not a responsible speaker. Which one do you trust more? Why?

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Using Quotations

“Words have a magical power. They can bring either the greatest happiness or deepest despair; they can transfer knowledge from teacher to student; words enable the orator to sway his audience and dictate its decisions. Words are capable of arousing the strongest emotions and prompting all men’s actions.”

Ask students if they agree or disagree with this quote. Discuss the quote.

Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

Have each student write a short story in which a character must communicate a difficult truth to someone else. Students should show this character speaking without tact and include the consequences of this blunt conversation.

Have students share their stories. As a class, discuss the importance of being tactful.

Writing in Your Journal

Have students write about a time when they said something they didn’t mean to say and wanted to take it back.

Allow students to take back what they wish they had never said.

Using Technology

Have students visit www.youtube.com and search for examples of effective and ineffective communication. Tell students to share the videos they find with a partner and discuss their content.

Homework

Have students read the “My Friend is Mad at Me” activity sheet.

Have students write a reply to this letter.

Additional Resources

Time magazine has a section in each issue titled “Verbatim.” This section contains quotes and their sources. Have students analyze an issue’s quotes and determine precautions that people should take to ensure that they are being responsible with the words they choose to speak. If copies of *Time* are not readily available, access some of these quotes online.

Discuss why *Time* might include this section in its magazine.

MY FRIEND IS MAD AT ME

My friend is mad at me for saying things about her. I did say stuff when I was with other friends, but somehow she thinks it was just me and is ignoring me. I'm getting blamed for something that was part of a group conversation! How do I fix this?

C.T., 15, Hawaii

Find a way to tell your friend how sorry you are, even if you have to write a note and stick it in her locker. Even though you weren't alone, you have to take responsibility for what you said. Don't expect your other friends to confess to their part

in the conversation if they've already skated, but do enlist their help to get her to accept your apology. The next time you feel like joining the gossip session about someone you care for, remember this and stop yourself.

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TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF

CANDIDATE #1:

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about yourself.

CANDIDATE: (lounging across the chair) Well, I'm probably the top athlete in my school. I'm fast as anything, and I can bench press 250 pounds.

INTERVIEWER: So, loading and unloading boxes...

CANDIDATE: ...would be a piece of cake! And I just got a new 10-speed bike that I could use to make deliveries FAST. I really don't think my twin brother would mind, even though the bike belongs to both of us.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever done this kind of work before?

CANDIDATE: Nah, but it's no big deal. I can handle it.

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES**CANDIDATE #2:**

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about yourself.

CANDIDATE: Well, I just moved here about a month ago. I'm a pretty good student. My classes don't seem too tough, so I think I can handle an after-school job.

INTERVIEWER: So, the hours won't interfere with your schedule or homework?

CANDIDATE: No. They work out fine for this semester.

INTERVIEWER: You know that the job involves lifting some heavy boxes...

CANDIDATE: ...I know. I'm stronger than I look! When we moved here, I had to lift some really heavy boxes. I did okay with them.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever done anything else that's similar to this kind of work?

CANDIDATE: No, but I'm really well organized. And I've been to this store a lot, so I know where things are. I know the neighborhood, too. So I won't get lost making deliveries. I think I can do the job.